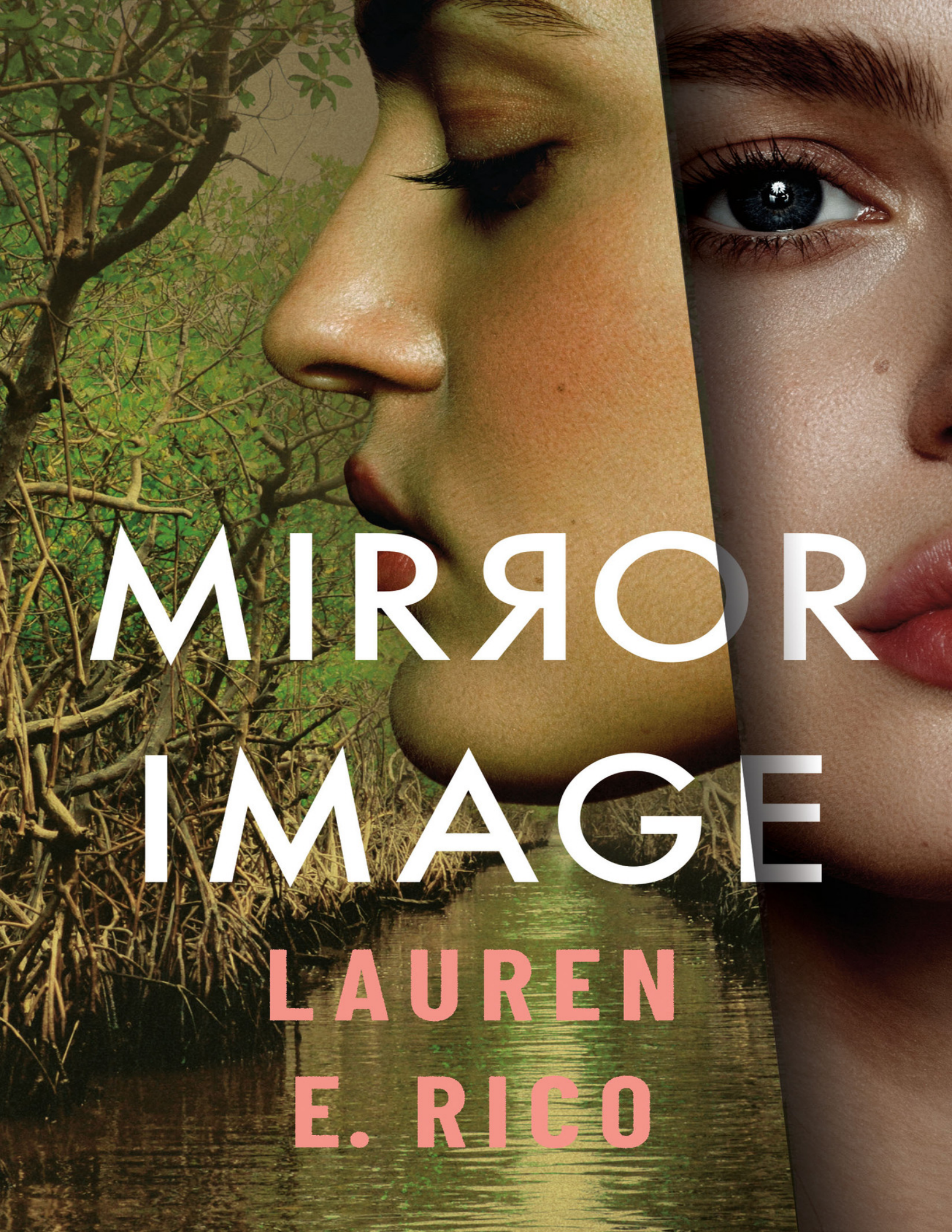




MIRROR IMAGE

LAUREN
E. RICO

**MIRROR
IMAGE**

ALSO BY LAUREN E. RICO

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MIRROR IMAGE

**LAUREN
E. RICO**

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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*For Jocelyn. Though we never met, I carry your name with
love—and to your family, who hold you in every heartbeat.*

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Prologue

JAMAL

Last Sunday afternoon

Jamal Nolan had never seen a dead body before—which, after twenty years as an Everglades ranger, made him something of an outlier. Nearly everyone he worked with had a story about a car accident, an airboat wreck, an alligator attack. There were suicides and drownings and even the occasional murder victim who'd been dumped in the swampy saw grass. He knew a few old-timers who'd been on the job in '96 when the ValuJet plane went down. They didn't talk about it often, and on the rare occasions when they did, he tried to make himself scarce.

No, save for one time when an idiot tourist lost a chunk of his ass to a gator because he didn't realize the damn things could run upwards of thirty-five miles an hour, he really hadn't come across anything especially disturbing to speak of. Until now. He'd been out in his patrol boat on the main channels when the call came in from dispatch. A concerned canoer on a predawn paddle had noticed some floating gear and supplies along the Nightmare. The eight-mile stretch of waterway connecting the north and south Everglades was a narrow, overgrown tunnel of mangroves, roots, and vines. It was impassible by powerboat, so he dropped his kayak and set out on the arduous trek.

People were often ill prepared for the amount of time—and work—it took to get from one end to the other. Even a well-experienced outdoorsman such as himself found it tough going at times. This afternoon, he encountered more than the usual number of large branches and, in a couple of instances, entire trees that had come down during a storm, blocking his way. At some points the fallen debris was angled high enough that he could duck and float underneath, but others required him to actually get out of the boat and climb onto and over the tree trunk while pushing the kayak underneath before rejoining it on the other side. What he couldn't navigate

over or under, he hacked his way through, the occasional alligator watching with disinterest.

He was about three miles in when he started to spot items tangled up in the roots—a life jacket, a paddle, a tank for holding fresh water. He called out several times, announcing himself and listening carefully for any signs of life other than the bugs, snakes, and gators. But there was nothing. It was, of course, possible that whoever these items belonged to was somewhere in the water beneath his boat, but there would be no telling that until low tide.

A small side channel caught his attention, and he maneuvered his way in. It was common for boaters to end up over here only to find it was a dead end. The place was strangely quiet considering the amount of wildlife.

“Hello?” he called out loudly. “Anyone out here?”

A few more feet in and he spotted it: a canoe tethered to a fallen tree trunk. It appeared to be draped in material—a tent, perhaps?

“Hello?” he called out again, making his way toward it. “Anyone there? I’m a ranger. Anyone need help?”

Still no response. The sound of the paddle in the water and his breath seemed to be the only sounds for miles as he edged closer. It wasn’t until he was right up on the boat that he saw the material-covered shape inside—yes, definitely a tent, from the looks of it, covering something. He took a deep breath, reached out, and lifted the nylon to see what was under it.

And just like that, his life changed. He had, at last, come across his first fatality. He was grateful only that it wasn’t exactly gruesome—at least not in the ways he’d been warned about. While the skin seemed a little mottled and ashy, she wasn’t bloated. There were no missing limbs or, God forbid, head, for which he was very grateful. But just because it wasn’t gory didn’t mean it wasn’t creepy. The girl looked to be in her early to mid-twenties, with long golden-blond hair. She was wearing khaki shorts and a blue collared shirt with a tour company logo on it. Pale, slightly parted lips hinted at a row of perfect white teeth. Her head rested on a faded orange life jacket, as if someone had taken it off and tucked it beneath her like a pillow. He peered at the woman closely—if she weren’t so still, he might have thought she was only sleeping. But she wasn’t.

He could see she had on pink nail polish, and it struck him that it was the same shade his own daughter wore. The comparison unsettled him more than he wanted to admit. It wasn’t that they looked alike; they didn’t. His

Ashleigh was younger, all long legs and track-runner confidence, her curls usually pulled into two high poofs that bounced when she walked. This woman was smaller, her coloring different, her hair long and straight. Still, something about her—some echo of youth or vulnerability—hit the same protective nerve. She wasn't his child, but she was somebody's, and that was enough to make him all kinds of uneasy.

The tree canopy was so thick in this spot that even the satellite phone wouldn't work—he'd need to paddle back out a bit to be able to call out or radio for assistance. About a quarter of a mile downstream, he finally found a clear spot near a very rare, slightly elevated patch of land that allowed him to actually get out of the boat and stand. He had the radio in his hand and was about to transmit when a rustle nearby caught his attention. Mindful of the fact that he might have just wandered up on an alligator nest, he pulled the Glock from his holster and proceeded cautiously, picking his way through the razor-edged saw grass and palmetto until he was able to identify the location of the sound. With finger poised near the trigger, he used his free hand to pull the greenery aside. And then he stopped in his tracks, blood running cold as he looked down upon the source of the noise.

It was the dead girl. Again.

He glanced over his shoulder, as if she might have somehow snuck past him when he wasn't looking.

"What the—"

Jamal never finished the sentence because when he turned back around, pale-blue eyes met his. And then they blinked.

"Please . . ." she whispered hoarsely. "Please, help me."

Chapter One

JENN

Wednesday afternoon

The girl is watching me through a thick curtain of blue hair. I sit across from her, relaxed, welcoming, waiting. But not expecting. She'll talk when she's ready to talk. We've spent the entire session like this, without so much as a single word passing between us. Anyone watching would think I'm a crap psychiatrist, but this isn't my first rodeo. Very few of the clients I see are ready to share anything of themselves in the beginning—that requires trust. And to these kids, I'm a stranger—just another adult who expects something from them. Just another person to potentially screw them over or break their heart. These teenagers don't give away their trust. Not anymore. They make you earn it. And that takes as long as it takes.

This is the first time in three weeks that she's agreed to come inside my office. That, in and of itself, is huge progress. The fact that she's sizing me up is just icing on the therapeutic cake. Or would that be the cherry on the therapeutic sundae? An unexpected bonus either way, and it gives me hope that maybe next time she'll actually say something. Or she won't. It's up to her. I'll wait for as long as she needs me to. And today that's forty-five minutes.

"So, Renata, thank you for coming again," I say in the kind of calm, soothing tone one might reserve for coaxing a skittish animal. "You have my number if you want to speak to me anytime. If I don't pick up, just leave a message with the answering service, and they'll get in touch with me so I can call you right back. Okay?"

The teenager gives me an almost imperceptible nod—another first for us.

Yes, definitely progress.

Once she's gone, I go back to my desk and jot down a few notes for her file. Then I pull out my cell to call Gabriel. When he picks up on the

second ring, I can tell he's in the car with the windows down, classic rock on in the background. Ever since he splurged on the convertible for his fortieth, he finds any and every excuse to take it out on the road.

"Well, hello there, Dr. Flores. All done for the day?" he asks over the wind noise in the background.

"Almost. Sounds like you're out and about."

"Have you set foot outside your office at all this afternoon? It's gorgeous!" he announces a little too loudly.

I glance out the window wistfully. It does look beautiful. "Nope. I had a full schedule today—had to scarf down a sandwich at my desk while I was taking notes between patients."

"Well, tell you what, I just happen to be in the vicinity of Nunzio's. How about I get us a deep-dish—extra cow, extra pig, hold anything that might constitute plant life. We can eat it out on the back porch."

I drop into my desk chair with a weary sigh, allowing my head to fall back against the rest. "Throw in a glass of chilled white, and you're on."

"Already in the fridge, baby."

I smile. "I knew there was a reason I married you."

"Oh, well, just wait until later. I'll remind you of a few more reasons why," he murmurs in that low, sexy voice that makes me feel all kinds of tingly.

"Mmm. Promise?"

"Most definitely. The first thing I plan to do to you is [BEEP]—"

The sound of an incoming call lands at the exact moment he reveals his lascivious intention.

"Then I'm going to make my way over to your [BEEP]—"

And that one too.

"Gabriel . . ."

"Oh, but I'm not done yet. Just when you can't take it anymore, I'll [BEEP] your—"

"Gabe! Whoa! Hold up there, cowboy!" I break in. "Someone's calling through, and I'm losing all the good stuff. It might be the answering service; let me ring you right back. Better yet, hold that thought, and when I get home, you can show me. But after the pizza, okay? I'm starving."

He chuckles. "All right, but don't be late—dinner will be on the table in forty-five minutes."

“Right, love you. Bye!” I switch over before the caller can be exiled to voicemail, shifting my tone from playful to professional. “Hello. This is Dr. Flores.”

“Jennifer? Is that you? It’s been much too long since I heard that lovely voice of yours!”

Ten years, thirteen hundred miles, and about a million hours of therapy evaporate as tiny ice crystals form in my bloodstream. My pulse spikes; the air goes metallic. For an instant I’m twenty-eight again—sitting in a windowless room that smells of burnt coffee and disinfectant, waiting for him to walk in and defend me.

He never did.

The old nausea rises so fast, it steals my breath. My fingers go numb around the phone. I make my voice work anyway.

“I’m sorry, who is this?”

The question comes out only marginally louder than a whisper.

“This is Julian, Julian Braithwaite! How are you, my dear?”

And just like that I go from freezing to boiling.

His dear?

“Dr. Braithwaite,” I reply flatly. “This is unexpected.”

My chilly demeanor doesn’t appear to faze him in the least as he plunges headlong into pleasantries. “I understand you’re in private practice now?”

“I am.”

“And is it true that you got married?”

“I did.”

“How wonderful! Any little ones?”

“Dr. Braithwaite, why are you calling me?” I grit out.

There’s a sigh of resignation from the man who was my attending once upon a time. The man who was supposed to mentor me, guide me, and support me. The man who tried to end my career before it ever began.

I hate him.

I know it.

He knows it.

It is what it is.

“Jennifer, I know the way we left things—it wasn’t exactly . . . ideal
—”

“Pfft.” My scoff feels both childish and satisfying—though definitely more the latter than the former. “I won’t ask you again, Dr. Braithwaite. So, if you don’t want me to hang up this phone right now, you’d better tell me why it is, exactly, that you are calling me.”

There’s a long pause, and for just a second, I think maybe he’s regained his sanity and disconnected. But then he clears his throat and tries again.

“Jennifer, an interesting case has come to me at the hospital. One that made me think of you.”

I shift in my seat, crossing an arm over my chest and allowing myself to drop back against the rear of the chair. “Uh-huh.”

When I refuse to give him any more than the two syllables, he continues tentatively. “Well, I-I was rather hoping I might persuade you to come down here. As a consultant. You’d be well compensated, of course.”

I don’t know where the chuckle comes from, but it’s someplace dark and deep, and even I find it mildly disturbing. Maybe it’s time to revisit therapy.

“There are upwards of fifty thousand psychiatrists practicing in this country. What on earth would ever make you think to contact me before any one of them?”

“Because this could, potentially, become a criminal matter, and not one of those fifty thousand other doctors has the life experience necessary to truly understand this patient and give her a fair clinical assessment.”

Well, damn it! Now he’s got me curious.

“Who?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“No, you never did beg my pardon. That’s part of the problem between you and me, Dr. Braithwaite,” I hiss. “, Who is this person and what’s so special about my life experience? Did someone she trusted and adored throw her under the bus to save his own ass too?”

If I thought this would get a rise out of him, I was wrong. And his next question stops me in my tracks.

“Jennifer, are you familiar with a woman called Mary Langston?”

The name releases a torrent of unbidden images in my mind—newspaper articles, *People* magazine covers, *Dateline NBC*, *60 Minutes*. She was the quintessential “girl next door”—if you happened to live in a neighborhood where the girl next door was a golden-haired beauty with

cornflower blue eyes and a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

Five years ago, Mary went off to college as a freshman, where she came face-to-face with the twin she hadn't known she had—another student by the name of Samantha Kinski. Almost overnight, the world was entranced by the story of the twins who had obviously been separated at birth, unbeknownst to either of their families, only to stumble upon each other in a small private college in Central Florida eighteen years later.

Of course I followed this story—everyone did.

I ignore his question and ask one of my own. “What is she charged with?”

“Nothing yet . . .”

“Okay, what might they charge her with, then?” I rephrase.

“Murder.”

And there it is: the reason this man would contact me ten years after our relationship—and, very nearly, my career—imploded. My rage recedes into something colder, sharper. I realize he is absolutely right: I can relate to this woman better than the majority of practitioners out there.

Because I, too, know what it is to have a twin. And what it is to lose one and have the whole world watch the fallout.

Chapter Two

MARY

Five years ago

The day my life finally made sense was on a Monday in August. It was orientation week at South Central Florida College, and there must have been five hundred freshmen stuck in various queues under the vinyl tent city erected in the north parking lot. Seriously, they couldn't have done this inside? It was ninety degrees outside, and in the forty-five minutes it took me to reach the front of the line for a student ID, three people had passed out from heatstroke. I was a sweaty, sticky mess by then, but I just didn't care. Having my picture taken was the last thing I had to get done. Then I could go back to my new apartment and finish unpacking.

A disinterested-looking guy with dark curly hair took my paperwork without bothering to look up from the laptop monitor. He waved toward a gray backdrop just behind him.

"Stand up there in front of the screen," he directed, punching my info into the computer. A moment later he got up and came around to stand behind the digital camera. "Make sure your toes are on the line, and look straight ahead at the spot on—" He stopped mid-sentence, then straightened up from behind the lens to peer at me.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"Why are you here?"

"Umm . . . I'm getting my ID? Did I get it wrong? Do I need to be in a different line?"

I looked around, wondering if I'd missed a sign somewhere, dreading the possibility of yet another hour in yet another line.

"You were just here," he said, irritated.

"Um . . . no . . ."

He nodded. "Uh, yeah! Not twenty minutes ago! I already told you, no do-overs. If you don't like your picture, you can come back next week after

classes start. But for now you're just gonna have to live with it. Jeez, it wasn't even that bad!"

I stared at him blankly. "You kidding? I haven't been here before. I was just in that line for like an hour. You haven't taken my picture yet—"

"Really? Do you think I'm dim or something?"

I put my hands on my hips and tilted my head the way my mother did when she was irritated with me. "No, but I'm starting to think maybe you've been out here in the heat for too long."

"June nineteenth, right?"

"What about it?" I asked cautiously, unsure where he was going with this.

"Your birthday, it's June nineteenth."

"Well, yeah, it was on that paper I just handed you."

He shook his head. "Uh-uh. I know that because I just did your ID twenty minutes ago! I made a comment about it being my mother's birthday too. You said that made her a Gemini."

This guy was starting to creep me out. "Look, I have no idea what you're talking about . . ."

He came back out from behind the camera and returned to his computer, where he seemed to be searching for something. When he found it, he beckoned me closer to the screen. "Right there. Samantha Kay Kinski," he declared triumphantly as he tapped an image on the screen with his index finger.

I leaned over his shoulder to get a better look and stopped short.

Then he looked between me and the screen, then back again. "Oh, shit . . . Maybe that's not you. You have long hair. But you . . . And her . . ."

I reached past him to touch the screen—and the girl who shared my face.



It turned out Samantha Kay Kinski lived in the Kappa dorm. Getting inside wasn't hard. I just loitered near the side entrance, pretending to be looking for something in my backpack. Eventually one of the residents came along with a key card, and I trailed in behind her, slipping into the stairwell and up to the second floor. According to the sticky note the ID guy had given me, I was looking for 219, clear on the other side of the building. Much like

the Zeta dorm, where I was housed, there were corkboards affixed to each door, and many of them were already decorated with bumper stickers from the occupant's home state, cartoon drawings, and inspirational sayings.

When a tall brunette girl headed my way, I grabbed my phone from my pocket and pretended to be engrossed in something there so I wouldn't have to make eye contact.

"Oh, hi, Sam!" she said just as we crossed. "Hey, love your hair with the extensions!"

"Umm . . . thanks?" I muttered and kept walking.

I'd been hoping that I'd meet Sam and see, immediately, that we had only a vague resemblance to each other—one that, for some odd reason, was magnified on camera. We'd laugh about the confusion and wave whenever we spotted each other on campus. But if someone who lived down the hall from her could mistake me for her, then . . .

Then what? There was only one way to find out. Outside of Kappa 219, I raised my hand to knock at the exact same moment that she yanked the door open and came barreling out. Before I knew what was happening, I was flat on my butt.

"Oh! Oh, God, jeez, I'm so sorry! Are you—" Samantha Kinski stopped mid-sentence, staring down at me staring up at her.

This was no passing resemblance. Looking at her was like looking in a mirror. Or it would have been if my hair had been about six inches shorter. Aside from that, we could have been the same person: the blue eyes, the slightly upturned nose, the heart-shaped face. She even had the same slightly bent left ear.

"Yeah, hi . . ." I said, getting to my feet. "Samantha, right? I'm—"

"You're me," she murmured, brows drawing together in concentration, like her brain was trying to interpret the data her eyes were sending to it.

"Yeah. I think I might be."

Her head jerked up, and she glanced down the hall, presumably to see if anyone else was watching this bizarre scene play out. But, while there were a few other residents gathered at the other end of the hall, they didn't seem to take any notice of us.

"C-come inside," she said, stepping back into the room and holding the door for me to follow.

As soon as I was over the threshold, she closed and locked the door behind me, then spun around so that we were face-to-face. The same face

meeting its mirror image.

“Who the hell are you?” she demanded.

“Mary,” I told her simply. “Mary Langston.”

“I don’t understand. Why do you look like me? Are you . . . are you some creepy stalker or something?” she hissed.

A flash of irritation shot through me. “What? No! And, for the record, you look like me!” I spat back.

We surveyed each other for several long moments. She touched her left ear, noticing the resemblance to her own.

“Birthday?” she asked.

“June nineteenth,” I replied.

“Same,” she agreed. “Blood type?”

“AB negative.”

She nodded. “That’s super rare.”

“One percent of people have it,” I agreed. “Allergies?”

“Peanuts. You?”

I produced an EpiPen from my bag. “Same.”

“Are you . . . ? Were you . . . ?”

“Adopted?” I finished for her. “Yes. You?”

She took a few steps back before dropping onto the corner of her perfectly made bed and looking up at me. “No.”

I blinked hard, not expecting that answer. “No?”

She shook her head. “No. I grew up in the system.”

“The system?” I echoed, uncomprehending.

“The foster system. My parents gave me up, but I was never adopted.”

She considered me, tilting her head slightly. “Unlike you, apparently.”

The statement felt a little like an accusation, and I shifted from one foot to the other uncomfortably.

“Where did you grow up?” I asked finally.

She shrugged. “Here and there. Mainly Homestead. Mainly institutions. The occasional trailer park. What about you?”

Suddenly I regretted asking the question. “South Florida,” I said. “Not that far from Homestead.”

Samantha’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. She didn’t miss a thing. “How ‘not far’ from there? Exactly?”

“Coral Gables.”

Even her snort sounded just like mine.

“So let me get this straight . . . You and I—we’re identical twins, right? Are you thinking that? ’Cause I am.”

“Sure looks like it,” I responded softly.

“Right. So eighteen years ago, some knocked-up teenager was either too dim, too religious, or too broke to have an abortion, so she gave birth to twins. You and me.” She gestured between us as she said this. “Somehow I end up in one shithole after another, and you . . . you’re like the cute little puppy at the pound that gets picked out by the rich kid. The one whose parents are bleeding-heart liberals—all opposed to puppy mills and shit. That’s you, right? And your parents? Except they didn’t want your littermate.”

Somehow she’d twisted this entire bizarro situation into a judgment against my parents—birth and adoptive.

“How do you know she was a teenager? Or that she was dim?” I countered. “Maybe she was raped . . .”

“Yeah, because that’s better—bio dad is a rapist. Or hey, maybe he was her father, right? Then it could be incest—”

“Stop it!” The two words came out loud enough to startle us both. “I don’t know who you are or how this happened. But I don’t have to stand here and listen to this BS.”

I spun around to leave, my hand on the doorknob, when she jumped up.

“No, no, wait. Mary . . . please, wait.” When I turned to face her again, she looked totally different. She was softer, more vulnerable. “I’m sorry. I just . . . Yeah, you know, it’s a shock. And it’s not like anything good has ever just come knocking on my door. So you have to give me a minute.”

My hand dropped back down to my side, and I sighed. “I don’t know what happened or why. But I know one thing for certain—my parents wouldn’t have taken one sibling without the other, let alone a single identical twin. I don’t think they knew you even existed.”

She looked down at the floor. “If you say so.”

I straightened up. “I do. But, God, they’re gonna be thrilled to meet you!”

Samantha looked up tentatively. “Yeah? You think so?”

“I know so,” I told her confidently, picturing an extra place at the Thanksgiving table and another face on the family Christmas card.

I couldn’t have been more wrong.

Chapter Three

JENN

Wednesday evening

“So how did you leave it?” my husband asks, just before plowing the pointy end of a slice of pizza into his mouth.

“I said I’d think about it.”

“And are you? Thinking about it? Because I’m pretty sure you’ve said you’d never set foot in Miami again. Ever.”

I shrug, pushing an untouched slice around my plate. “Believe me, I hadn’t planned on it. But Braithwaite wasn’t wrong—there aren’t a lot of doctors who can relate to this woman the way I can.”

Gabe holds up a finger as he finishes chewing and swallows.

“Honey,” he begins, wiping his hands on a napkin, “just because you share an extremely tragic, incredibly random life event with this woman does not mean you’re the only doctor on the planet who can assess and treat her . . .”

He looks so damn steady sitting there across from me—tall and broad shouldered without ever seeming like he’s trying to be. His blond hair has started to go silver at the temples, the kind of shift you’d only notice if you were close enough to count the individual strands, and his green-gray eyes—calm, relentless, unblinking—are locked on me with that mix of concern and certainty he deploys only when he’s really worried.

This is what happens when two psychiatrists get together. The relationship becomes one long debate—an endless game of point/counterpoint with no clear winners, only concessions and agreements to disagree. There are no hard-and-fast rules in psychiatry because there are no hard-and-fast personalities. Every one is different because everyone is different.

“I haven’t made up my mind yet,” I inform him, but he knows me too well.

“Haven’t you? ’Cause from where I’m sitting, you’ve already got your to-pack list started up here.” He taps his temple with his right index finger.

I lean forward across the table, forearms straddling my paper plate as I move closer to him. “You’re right, Gabe: Being a twin isn’t such a unique thing. And I suppose losing one is fairly commonplace too. But to have it all play out in the public eye—to have people standing in the checkout line at the grocery store, skimming through the magazine with your face on the cover? I’d say we most definitely share something unique on that count.”

He shakes his head slowly, reaching across the glass-topped table to put a hand on my arm. “Okay, yeah, I get that. But, Jenn, this girl might have killed her twin. It’s not the same thing as what happened to you. At all.”

“Isn’t it, though?”

Gabe pulls back and straightens up abruptly, shaking his head. “What? No! Not in the least! And the fact that you would even say that makes me think this would be a big mistake.”

I hold up my palms in a gesture meant to signal both a truce and a warning. “I know you mean well, and I know you’re worried about me—”

“Worried about you?” he echoes incredulously. “Do you hear yourself right now? I ‘mean well’? I’m your husband, not your colleague!”

“Well, you’re kind of both, aren’t you?” I point out calmly. “And really, Gabe, would this be your opinion if you weren’t a psychiatrist?”

A cloud crosses his face, and it’s clear that he is not happy with me right now—which wasn’t my intention. But it can’t be helped. Or can it? I’m not sure what my motivations are for anything at this point.

“Yes! It absolutely would be my opinion!” he declares, his eyes steely as they pin me to my chair. “Because—and make no mistake about this, Jenn—I’m your husband first. Your well-being supersedes any of the psychological bullshit. You’re a person, not a case number.”

I jump on his statement. “Exactly!” I shoot back, stabbing at the air with my finger. “And what doctor is going to see Mary Langston as a person? Even the most well-meaning psychiatrist is going to have their interest piqued by her circumstances, her story. And the ones who maybe aren’t so well meaning? They’ll have their interest piqued by her as a case study or worse—a chance to be a part of the media attention around her. That’s why I have to be the one to help her, Gabe. Me.”

The corners of his mouth tighten, and he drops back against the chair cushion behind him, arms folded across his chest, considering me. Because this is also what can happen when two psychiatrists get together: They consider, they weigh, they balance. They reverse course if new information warrants it. They are reasonable.

When, at last, he sighs and his features soften, I know he gets it. “All right. I see your point.”

I let out my own sigh, shallow enough that he can’t see how relieved I am. I’m not sure what I planned to do if he’d objected to this idea as strenuously as he might have—as I might have, had the shoe been on the other foot.

“What’s your plan, then?” he asks. “You’ve got a decent patient load. Picking up and going won’t be the easiest thing right now.”

“Yeah, I’ve been giving that some thought, and the timing’s pretty good, actually—what with the Memorial Day weekend and all. I thought I’d see my two clients in the morning, then catch a flight tomorrow afternoon. That leaves me Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday to spend some time with Mary and, hopefully, be back here in time for my first patient Tuesday.”

He picks up the bottle of wine and holds it up, brows raised in a question. I nod and push my glass toward him for a refill.

“You really think you can get it done over a long weekend?” he asks without looking up as he pours first for me, then for himself.

“Depends on what you mean by ‘get it done.’ I’m not being brought in to treat her—just to evaluate her general mental fitness and her competency to stand trial, should it come to that.”

“And if it does come to that?”

“What do you mean?”

“If she’s tried, will you go back there to testify?”

I shrug as I take a sip, then reply. “I don’t know. I guess. I haven’t thought that far ahead yet.”

“You should,” he cautions. “You know I’ve done a few of these, and it’s not always what you think it’s going to be, Jenn. It might not be a get-in, get-out kind of situation.”

“I’ll figure it out,” I assure him. “I’ll fly back here for sessions if I have to. Or do more virtual therapy—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“What, then? Gabe, honey, please just spit it out because I don’t have the energy for any more of your loaded questions. What part of this is worrying you?”

“The ‘you’ part of it, Jenn. I don’t know Mary Langston, and quite frankly, she’s not my concern. But you are. And I don’t like this one bit. Not the part where you’re getting involved in a high-profile case. Not the part where you’ll be doing a deep psychological dive into a woman whose issues are bound to stir up some difficult memories for you. Not the part where you’re working with a man you trusted and adored right up until the moment he simultaneously threw you under the bus and to the wolves.”

“How does that work, exactly?” I snark. “Does the bus get me first, then the wolves? Or does the bus run me over after the wolves are finished picking the flesh from my bones? Or does the bus take out me and the wolves at the same time . . . ?”

“It’s not funny,” my husband replies, not buying into my sarcasm. “You’ve spent a lot of years trying to put that shit hospital and its shit doctors behind you. Hell, Jenn, you were still having nightmares up until a couple of years ago! Now you’ve finally made a good life for yourself, and you want to go back there? Do you think anything will have changed in that time? Do you think *he’ll* have changed in that time? Because you know as well as I do, people like that don’t change. So if you’re thinking you’ll go there for some closure or as part of some twisted sense of pride—to prove something to yourself or, worse, to someone else . . . Just don’t. Okay? Don’t. Because I met the woman who barely survived that shit show ten years ago, and I like this version of you much better.”

I take a long, slow sip to buy myself a few seconds, looking at him over the rim of the wineglass. Everyone thinks my husband is this happy-go-lucky, fun-loving guy. And he is. When he’s just . . . Gabe. But a lot of the time he’s not Gabe. A lot of the time, he’s Dr. Gabriel Slater. And that guy is a whole other kettle of fish. He’s serious and intense. Dr. Slater isn’t listening to the stuff people say but don’t mean. He’s listening for the stuff people mean but don’t say. And he’s got excellent hearing. It’s because of this that I don’t even bother trying to hide things from him.

“I don’t know. Hearing Braithwaite’s voice after all these years—it was jarring, for sure. But . . .”

“But?”

“But I didn’t, you know . . . I stayed calm.”

“You mean you didn’t have a panic attack.”

“Yeah, sure, no doubt the sound of his voice took me back there—but just for, like, a second. Then I remembered what you used to tell me whenever I had one of those awful dreams: He can’t hurt me anymore. None of them can. Not him, not any of those sons of bitches down there.” I pause a second to consider what I’ve just admitted to him and to myself before drawing a conclusion.

He waits.

“So I guess there is some of that in there. Of course I’d like to show him that I survived—that I thrived—in spite of what he did to me. I think it would be weird if there weren’t some of that, right? Isn’t that human nature? But honestly, Gabe, I was ready to hang up on him until he told me about the patient and the case. That’s what made me hear him out. And that’s what’s making me give this some serious thought.”

His eyes scour my face, looking for any hint that I might be lying. Not to him, but to myself. Once he’s finally satisfied, his face relaxes, and he nods once. “Right. Okay, then, I’ve got your back.”

I scoff. “Please, you’d have had my back even if I told you I was headed down there with a suitcase full of dynamite and a match.”

My husband grins and shrugs. “Yeah, probably,” he agrees and nods in the direction of my plate. “Now hurry up and eat that. I seem to recall you wanted me to show you something in the bedroom after dinner.”

I put down the wine and stand up, grabbing the slice of pizza so I can tear a chunk out of it with my teeth. Then I toss it back down onto the plate and dust the crumbs from my hands.

“Done,” I declare with an impish smile as I turn around and go deeper into the apartment.

He’s right there behind me.

Just like always.



Sleep comes, but peace doesn’t.

I’m on the beach. The light is softer here, pink on the water, the horizon blurring into haze. Jess runs ahead of me, bare feet kicking up sand, her laughter carried off by the wind. She’s chasing something—a gull, a wave, a dare—something I can’t see but that she’s certain she’ll catch.

“Slow down!” I call.

She glances back, grinning, hair plastered to her temples, the strap of her swimsuit slipping off one shoulder. “You’re so slow, Jenny! You’ll never keep up if you don’t move.”

She’s the only one who calls me Jenny.

She spins, arms out, fearless as always, the sun flashing off her teeth. “Race you!”

“You always win,” I tell her, but I start running anyway.

My twin came into this world under a lucky star. By the time I arrived seven minutes later, there was nothing left but a restless sky.

She was the favorite without trying—teachers adored her, neighbors praised her, grown-ups whispered how mature she was “for her age.” Jess remembered birthdays, helped lost kids find their classrooms, collected praise the way other girls collected seashells. Everything she touched turned gentle. Easy. Golden.

And I was the storm that trailed behind.

She was all sweetness and sunshine compared to my bitterness and shadows. Jess never once doubted that she could have anything, do anything, be anything.

The scene flickers. The sand darkens, the sound of the surf replaced by the faint buzz of electricity. When I look down again, I’m not running on sand anymore—it’s asphalt under my bare feet, painted with scuffed yellow lines.

The air is thicker here—hotter—and the breeze carries the smell of fried dough, powdered sugar, something burnt and sweet.

Jess is still in motion, darting ahead between shadowy shapes that shift too fast to identify. The world tilts around her. Neon smears across the sky, and a low mechanical hum vibrates through the soles of my feet.

“C’mon, scaredy-cat!” she calls, turning back, her ponytail swinging. “One more time. You’ll love it.”

“Every time you say that,” I mutter, “something terrible happens.”

She laughs—bright, careless, irresistible. “And every time, you survive. See? I’m good luck.”

That’s Jess: pure kinetic light. A little reckless. A lot fearless. The kind of girl who climbs rooftops to see fireworks and wades into storms just to feel the rain hit harder. She’s always first to jump, certain the ground will rise up to meet her.

I try to match her grin, but my stomach's already tight. The blurred shapes around us begin to move faster, the hum swelling into a roar. Wind lashes my face, stinging my eyes with grit and sand.

"Jess?"

She's still smiling, but her gaze flicks past me toward something unseen. She squeezes my hand. "Don't look down," she says lightly.

The words echo, stretching thin as the light bends and the ground drops away.

I wake with a sharp inhale, heart pounding, the sheets twisted tightly around my legs. Gabe is asleep beside me, his breathing slow and even.

The dream never plays the same way twice. Sometimes she's laughing; sometimes she's silent. Sometimes I see her fall; sometimes she just . . . disappears. But it always ends like this—with me awake and her gone.

I stare at the ceiling, willing my pulse to slow, grateful that Gabe's a heavy sleeper. If he'd heard me cry out, he'd have asked what it was about, and I'd have had to tell him. And then he'd tell me not to go.

And maybe he'd be right. Maybe I should stay far away from my hometown and everything buried there.

But I won't.

I reach for the band around my wrist—hers—and snap it once, just to feel something real.

Tomorrow, I'm going back to Miami.

To the place where she's been waiting all along.

Chapter Four

MARY

Five years ago

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” Sam said as she buckled herself into the passenger side of my car. “Maybe you should go see them alone first. Or just call them.”

“Oh, no, I want to see the look on my parents’ faces when the two of us show up at the door! Trust me, they’re going to be thrilled. Stunned, for sure, but thrilled too.”

It was obvious that she wasn’t convinced, but she didn’t push the topic. “Nice car,” she noted instead, twisting around to get a look in the back of my Camry.

“Oh, thanks. It’s used. I’ve never had a *new* new car,” I explained, navigating us out of the parking lot and along the surface streets near campus. “My parents are big on teaching me to be ‘fiscally responsible.’ What about you? What do you drive?”

She shook her head. “I don’t.”

“Don’t what, have a car?”

“I don’t drive.”

My head swiveled toward her. “You’re kidding, really?”

“Really. No one taught me. I can’t swim either.”

“What? How can you live in Florida and not swim?”

Sam shrugged. “Again, no one taught me. And it’s not like any of my foster placements had a swimming pool or anything. Well, that’s not entirely true. A couple of the trailer parks where I stayed had a community pool. But I wasn’t at any of them long enough.”

“How many different places did you live?”

She scoffed, letting out a little puff of air. “Ugh, God, let’s see . . .” She started counting on her fingers as she took a mental tally. “I’m gonna say five. No—no, six. Six different foster homes when I was young. But

then it was group homes and institutions when I was in my teens. I did spend a year living in the woods as part of a wilderness program for at-risk youth—I really liked that. I mean, it was a pain in the ass with all the rules and no privacy, but at least I didn't have anyone grabbing my ass or hitting me."

I jerked the wheel so sharply that I almost drove off the side of the road into a guardrail. "Are you saying that you were . . . you know . . . like abused? Physically? And . . . sexually?"

When I glanced in her direction, I was momentarily startled to find my own incredulity staring back at me. The resemblance was absolutely uncanny. And it was freaking me out. I felt like maybe I should be able to read her mind or some creepy twin thing like that. But reading her expression was about as close as I could get.

"What do you think?" she shot back at me, making it sound as if I were the dimmest person she'd ever met.

My cheeks grew warm along with my irritation.

"I think," I replied coolly, "that I've known you for, like, five minutes, and I don't want to assume anything."

I nearly jumped out of my seat when she snorted with laughter unexpectedly, pointing at my face. "You get salty too, huh? I can't hide that shit either. Sometimes I get so pissed that I turn this deep red—like scarlet."

My anger faded as quickly as it had come upon me. "Really? 'Cause I've never been able to control my temper. My mom even made me do this anger-management therapy group once."

"Did it help?" she asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"No," I told her with a disgusted huff. "Everyone in the group rubbed me the wrong way, and I left feeling grumpier than when I started."

Even as I said it, I realized how ridiculous it sounded. And I wasn't the only one—Sam began to chuckle too. In under a minute, I was laughing so hard, I was crying.

"You know, you're pretty funny," she said once we'd both calmed down.

A broad grin filled her face. Our face.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked.

"I was just thinking . . . it might be nice, this having-a-sister thing."

The words—and the way she said them—sent a wave of pleasure through me.

A real, honest-to-God blood relative.

A sister.

"I'll teach you," I blurted out impulsively.

My newfound twin looked perplexed. "You'll teach me what?"

"To drive. And to swim. I'll teach you how to do both."

"Yeah, right," she said, as if I were pulling her leg.

I wondered how many times she'd been lied to in her life, how many people had made promises they didn't keep. Just the thought of it made my heart squeeze with sympathy. I'd had so much. I'd probably had more stability, more options, more love in a single year than Sam Kinski had experienced in her entire life.

That was the moment I made my decision.

I might not be able to turn back the clock and give her a better past, but I could absolutely make sure she had a better future. One that included a family.



Watching my father's face when he opened the front door to our Coral Gables home was like watching one of those old silent movies—an over-the-top montage of expressions playing out over the course of a few seconds. First there was his surprise at finding me on the steps, followed in short order by delight. I hadn't told them I was coming. From there he registered curiosity that I'd brought someone home with me. At that point it became a blur of disbelief, shock, confusion, and one or two other emotions that I couldn't put a name to.

"Surprise!" I yelled as I threw my arms up in the air. "It's a girl!"

"Uh . . . Terry?" he called out over his shoulder, too softly at first. Then he shouted, "Terry!"

My mother's response came from the kitchen at the back of the house. "What is it, Doug? I'm going over the numbers for tomorrow's meeting."

Still dazed, still holding the door partially closed, my father tried again. "Can you please just . . . ? Can you come out here? Now? It's . . . it's Mary."

I could hear her bare feet pounding the hardwood floor of the hallway.

"Oh, dear God, did something happen to Mary?" she was asking even as she ran. By the time she reached the front door and pulled it the rest of

the way open, her panic was palpable. “What is it? What’s happened to Mary?”

The question was out of her mouth an instant before her eyes could process what they were seeing.

I launched myself into her arms. “Mom, I’m fine! I’m okay! I didn’t mean to scare you guys. I just . . . The most unbelievably incredible thing happened today at college. Look!”

I spun around, draping an arm across each of their shoulders so the three of us faced Sam, who peered back at us from the other side of the threshold.

“I don’t understand,” Mom said, her head swinging back and forth between the two of us like she was watching a rapid-fire round of the US Open.

Her confusion seemed genuine, which was, in a way, a relief. If they’d looked guilty or sheepish or if they’d had no reaction at all, then I’d have wondered if they’d already known of her existence. But they seemed to be just as stunned as I was.

“M-Mary?” Dad stammered, glancing over and down at me. “What is this? What’s going on?”

“Let’s go inside, and I’ll tell you all about it!” I suggested excitedly.

Suddenly it was as if my father remembered his manners. “Oh, yes—of course,” he murmured, stepping back and gesturing for my newfound twin to join us. “I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“Uh . . . Samantha,” she provided, walking forward a little tentatively, as if afraid to actually enter the house. “Samantha—Sam. Sam Kinski.”

When she was standing in the vestibule with us, I took her elbow, pulling her next to me so my parents could get the full effect of seeing us side by side.

“We think we’re twins,” I blurted. “Same birthday, both put up for adoption as babies. And look at us! We’re *identical*! It’s unbelievable, isn’t it? I mean, can you believe this? How could we not have known? All this time, all these years we could have been together!”

I was practically bouncing off the terracotta-tiled floor in my excitement. My parents, however, looked like one of those cartoons where the guy’s been hit on the head with a giant mallet and he’s just standing there in a stupor, little bluebirds circling his head.

I snapped my fingers in front of them. “Hello! Anyone in there? Mom! Dad! Are you listening to me?” I asked with an amused chuckle.

“Twins?” Mom echoed incredulously.

“Twins,” I confirmed. “Boy, you should see the look on your faces! Come on, let’s go sit inside.”

I gestured for Sam to follow me and then led the way toward the back of the house and the open-plan den adjacent to the kitchen. I sat on one of the overstuffed couches, patting the seat next to me so she’d join me. Mom and Dad perched on the edge of the love seat across from us. He took his glasses off with one hand and rubbed the bridge of his nose with the other.

“Okay, why don’t you just start at the beginning,” he said after replacing the frames. “How did this happen? I mean—where did you two meet?”

I explained my surreal interaction with the guy at the ID counter and my visit to Kappa 219, where I came face-to-face with my doppelganger.

“So this just happened?” Mom asked, pointing to the floor. “Today?”

“Like”—I paused to glance down at my watch—“six hours ago. I convinced Sam that we should just hop in the car and drive down here so I could tell you in person. There was no way you were going to believe it if you didn’t see us. Both of us. Together.”

They were staring at us, eyes moving between our faces. I could tell they were comparing every curve, every arch, every crease. But I already knew what they’d find. Give us the same hairstyle and clothing, and we could be the same person. The idea of it sent a little thrill of excitement through me, and I couldn’t hold back my smile.

I grabbed Sam’s hand in mine and gave it an excited squeeze. She smiled back a little uncomfortably.

“So, Sam,” my mother began, carefully polite, “why don’t you tell us about yourself? Where are you from?”

The question, while perfectly reasonable, struck me as faintly surreal. She was from where I was from in the most literal sense imaginable. But I doubted “the same uterus as your daughter” was going to be well received, so I kept quiet and let Sam answer.

“Um . . . I lived in Homestead with a series of foster families,” she said.

“Six,” I offered, remembering our conversation in the car.

She gave a small nod of acknowledgment. “Right. Six.”

“Six?” Dad repeated, startled. “Six?”

Sam’s shoulder lifted slightly. “A couple of those were when I was a baby. I don’t remember much about the early ones.”

“So how old were you when you were adopted?” my mother asked.

I felt Sam go still beside me.

“I wasn’t,” she said simply. “Adopted, I mean. I stayed with different foster families, but a permanent placement never really happened. When I was around fourteen, I was moved into group homes and different programs. One of them was this wilderness camp for teens.” She added, “Classes were indoors, but the rest of the time we lived in tents. Carried our own water and firewood. That sort of thing.”

Mom inhaled sharply. “Oh, my goodness. That sounds absolutely horrible!”

Sam shook her head. “It wasn’t all bad. Some parts were rough, sure, but . . . I liked being outside. You learn to make the best of whatever situation you’re in.”

Her voice wasn’t defensive—just matter of fact. A simple telling of what was.

“So that was my life for a while,” she finished. “Until I aged out.”

“Aged out?” I echoed, unfamiliar with the term.

She nodded and glanced my way. “Yeah. You’re on your own once you turn eighteen.”

“But what if you don’t have money to go to college or for an apartment or whatever? What do you do then?”

“Then I guess you’re outa luck,” she replied. “I was lucky, though. I really enjoyed the whole wilderness thing, and turns out I’m pretty good at it too. That’s how I was able to score a scholarship as an outdoor education major there at the college. I’m hoping to get a job as a tour guide, maybe even own my own company someday.”

“Oh. My. God!” I yelped loud enough to startle all three of them. “I love camping too! Right, Dad? Don’t I love camping?” I turned to my father so he could verify my love of the outdoors.

“Uh, yeah, you sure do,” he answered in a tone that was much less enthusiastic than my own.

“Isn’t that amazing?” I asked my parents. “We both love the outdoors! And we’re both allergic to peanuts. And can you believe we both hate strawberries? Oh, and—”

Dad held up his hands to stop me. “Mary, slow down, honey. A lot of people love the outdoors and are allergic to peanuts.”

“‘Slow down’? Are you kidding? I think we should be calling the newspapers! This is an amazing story. I mean, what are the odds of us reconnecting at some random liberal arts college in Nowhere, Florida? And how did we come to be separated in the first place? Maybe I was ripped from my mother’s arms, or there was a mix-up—”

“Mary!” Mom cut me off sharply.

“What? What’s wrong?” I demanded. “This is amazing! We should be celebrating, cracking open a bottle of champagne . . .”

“Mary, they’re not happy,” Sam muttered from next to me.

When I glanced over, she was staring at the floor. I elbowed her gently.

“What? No, don’t be silly,” I insisted, still grinning.

But when I looked back up at my parents, I saw it then too.

“Oh my God. She’s right. You’re not happy . . .” I murmured.

It was more than my eighteen-year-old brain could process. How could they not be as thrilled by all this as I was?

“Samantha, we’re going to step outside onto the patio to have a word with Mary. Would you please excuse us for just a moment?” Mom asked, forcing a polite smile.

By then my own expression had faded into a deep, confused frown. I shook my head.

“No, no. Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of her.”

“No, it’s okay,” Sam assured me, patting my leg.

My parents got to their feet and looked at me expectantly. Finally Mom nodded in the direction of the backyard. “Mary?”

Seething, I got up and followed them until we were outside, French doors shut firmly behind us.

“Well, that was a little rude, don’t you think?” I demanded.

“Rude was springing this on us,” Mom spit back. “Mary Louise Langston, what were you thinking?”

I threw up my hands. “I was thinking, ‘Oh my God! I have a twin sister I didn’t even know existed! My parents are going to be as thrilled as I am!’ That’s what I thought. I guess I was wrong about that.”

“Mary.” Dad stepped closer to put a hand on my shoulder. “Honey, you have to understand we’re as shocked as you are. But we’re just a little

. . . I don't know . . . suspicious?" He looked to my mom, who nodded in agreement with the feeling he chose.

"Suspicious of what? Of Sam?"

"You don't know she's your sister. Not for sure. Not without a DNA test," Mom said by way of justification.

I burst out laughing. "Are you blind? We don't just resemble each other—we're *identical*. No way someone didn't know they were separating twins . . ." My words petered out as a thought occurred to me. A disturbing thought. "Hey, you wouldn't—I mean, you didn't just, you know, pick me, right? You didn't just leave her there at the orphanage or whatever, did you?"

"No," my mother replied firmly for both of them. "We only ever saw you, Mary. And it wasn't an orphanage. You know this story—you came from a small private adoption agency. And believe me, after so many miscarriages, we would have been thrilled to have two babies. If that had been an option."

I breathed a silent sigh of relief. At least they hadn't been the ones to separate us.

"Okay, well, better late than never, right?" I coaxed, deciding righteous indignation was getting me nowhere.

They looked at me like I'd just sprouted another head.

"What do you mean?" Dad asked slowly.

"I mean now we know she exists. So we can all be a family, right? It's never too late to be a family, right? Isn't that what you used to say when you told me the story? About how Dad and Grandpa Lloyd didn't speak for years, until I was born? And then you all made amends? You said those exact words, Dad. 'It's never too late to be a family.'"

Their eyes met then, something unspoken passing between them.

"We have only one child," Mom said in a voice that was softer in volume but harder in tone. Quiet, steely.

I felt my mouth hinge open. "What does that mean?"

"I'm saying that Samantha Kinski is not our daughter, Mary. You are. And while we certainly understand your . . . your curiosity, we are not interested in another child. Not at this point."

My father, who'd been raking a hand through his hair, stopped short. "Not even a child," he added. "She's a grown woman. We can hardly adopt her retroactively."

“You can adopt an adult,” I informed him, having done a quick search on my phone before we left campus. “That’s a thing.” When neither replied, I felt my blood pressure rise. “Don’t you even care that she had a horrific childhood? Because I do! While I was taking piano lessons and going horseback riding on the beach, she was thirty miles away, fending off sexual predators and looking for her next meal!”

My mother scoffed, rolling her eyes as she waved a hand dismissively. “Okay, now you’re just being dramatic. I don’t know what she told you, but our foster care system is hardly something out of Dickens. Next thing you’ll be telling us she had to wear rags and scrub floors on her hands and knees.”

The rage that had been simmering in me came to a boil. My father must have seen it in my reddening face because he jumped in, holding his palms up.

“Right. Let’s just stop for a second,” he said. “Marebear, of course we care about what happened to Samantha! Your mom is just trying to say that she’s a stranger. Maybe, with time, we can get to know her a little better. You could even bring her home for Thanksgiving . . .”

That was it for me.

“How can you not see how huge this is?” I demanded loudly. “You have no idea what it is to spend your entire life wondering who you are—really. Who was my mother, and why did she give me up? Why did she insist on the closed adoption so I couldn’t find her? And now, out of nowhere, the universe sends me this . . . this piece of me that I didn’t even know was missing! I’ve felt more complete in the last eight hours than I have in the last eighteen years. And if the two of you can’t see that—can’t help me figure this out, then I don’t think I want to be here anymore.”

“Good idea,” Dad said. “Why don’t you drive back up to campus, and we can talk about this again in a few days when everyone’s calmed down . . .”

He stopped as I shook my head.

“Uh-uh. You don’t want her to be a part of our family? Then I don’t want to be a part of it either,” I informed them less than an instant after the thought formed in my mind.

Mom gasped. “Mary! What are you saying?”

“I’m saying she’s blood. You’re not.”

Chapter Five

JENN

Thursday afternoon

I pick up my rental car, springing for a convertible because, Why not? The hospital is paying for it, along with a hotel room. I don't know how the next few days are going to go, but these people owe me thousands of dollars in therapy, and I aim to start collecting right here, right now. And, while my pain and suffering warrant a suite at the Four Seasons, I'll settle for a king-size single at the Marriott with some ridiculously overpriced room service and minibar purchases. Though I reserve the right to upgrade, depending on how bad this gets.

Braithwaite left about a dozen messages asking me to meet him for dinner, none of which I bothered returning, all of which I promptly deleted. He can see me in his office tomorrow morning, as previously arranged. In the meantime I have a date with a Cuban—of both the human and sandwich varieties. No doubt New York City has some stellar Cuban cuisine but nothing the likes of what you'll find down here in the tiny Cuba Libre restaurant. Though I'm probably biased because my family has owned the joint for decades.

The parking gods are smiling upon me, and I'm able to find a spot on the same block. This whole neighborhood is hopping tonight, and when I walk through the door, there are about ten people already waiting for a table. I don't draw any attention to myself, just slip into the back of the line. It isn't until I'm almost at the front that Stef spots me, looks away, then looks back again so quickly, I'm sure she's given herself whiplash.

"*¡Ay, dios mio!*" she shrieks loud enough to get the attention of every patron in the packed dining room.

A moment later she's pushing past her other customers to scoop me up in a bear hug so tight I'm pretty sure a rib gives. Stef has always been a shorter, sturdier version of me—same dark eyes, same thick, wavy hair,

though hers is worn loose and wild in the way our grandmother Lita used to wear it in old photos. She's all warmth and volume and zero awareness of her own upper-body strength.

"Stef, please . . ." I manage to gasp while patting her back, "I can't breathe . . ."

She releases me, plants her hands on her hips, and gives me that look—chin tipped, one eyebrow doing all the talking. "You don't come to Miami for ten years, and now you show up without so much as a call?"

I shrug and smile sheepishly. "I'm sorry. It was kind of a last-minute thing. Besides, you were just in New York! I think the sheets in the guest room might still be warm!"

My cousin harrumphs, then grabs my hand and pulls me through the dining room, around the tables, and into the kitchen. A half dozen men and women in chefs' whites are too busy chopping, sautéing, and searing to notice us. Finally we slip out the back door into the alley, settling onto the small bench tucked against the building.

"*Dime*," she says. "Tell me. Are you finally ready to make me a *tía*?"

"Stef," I sigh, rubbing my forehead. "We've talked about this."

Too many times.

She shrugs, soft but stubborn. "Hope springs eternal."

"Hope needs a hobby," I mutter. Before she can latch onto the topic again, I barrel ahead. "Actually, it's work. I've got a consulting gig down here for the weekend."

She perks up. "Really? That's great, Jenn! Where?"

Here's the hard part.

"Miami Killian Medical—"

She's got her lips pursed and is shaking her head before I've even gotten the words all the way out of my mouth. "Oh, no. No, no, no, mama. Do not tell me you're going back there."

Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe I should have just slipped in and out of town without saying anything. She'd have never known. But I would have. And that's not who we are.

Our *abuelitos*, Lito and Lita for short, emigrated to Miami from Cuba during the 1970s. Stef's father and my mother are siblings. She, my sister, Jess, and I grew up together in our grandparents' home, bonding over Teddy Grahams and Teletubbies from our earliest days. Now she drops my hand

and shifts to face me fully, dark brows arched high enough to touch her widow's peak hairline.

"Are you out of your mind, Jenn? What if you run into that *pendejo*—what was his name? Brainwhite?"

"Braithwaite," I correct, trying not to chuckle. "And he's the one who asked me to come, actually."

I get a skeptical chicken neck from my cousin. "And why would he do that?"

"Why not?" I clap back. "I'm good at what I do."

Stef scowls at me. "That's not what I mean, and you know it, Jennifer."

I roll my eyes. "Wow, my full name. Pulling out the big guns now, eh?"

"Stop it."

"Stop what?" I ask petulantly as I cross my arms.

There's just something about her that takes me right back to my inner fourteen-year-old.

"*¡Oye, chica!*" she fires back, poking my shoulder with her index finger. "Have you forgotten we used to play My Little Pony together? I know you better than just about anyone, including that blond-haired, green-eyed Irishman of yours. So cut the defensive bullshit already and tell me what you're really doing here."

I hunch forward so that my forearms are on my thighs and glance back up at her over my shoulder. "Okay, first of all, Gabe's French Alsatian. And I told you, I'm being brought in to consult on a case. It's big, Stef. And there's a good reason for me to be involved. But that's about all I can tell you about it—it's a privacy thing, you know?"

She doesn't look convinced, but I can see her softening—just a little.

"Hmmm," she murmurs to herself skeptically. "Okay, well, I'm going to take your word for it, but you remember I'm here if you need me. I got your back."

I sit up, grinning, and knock her shoulder with mine. "Hey, so I'm starving. Any chance you can scare up one of your amazing sammies for me?" I bat my eyelashes coquettishly.

She sighs with feigned irritation and rolls her eyes. "I suppose I could do that. You want regular fries or yuca?"

"What do you think?" I counter.

“Yuca it is!” she declares, grabbing my hand once more and helping me to my feet. When we’re standing, she surveys me for a long, thoughtful moment. “Remind me to send you back to your hotel with mojito ingredients. Something tells me you’re going to need them while you’re here.”

I don’t object, because she’s not wrong.



I’ve seen it again and again—both as a psychiatrist and as a child who once waited for someone who never returned.

A lot of young people never give up hope that their birth parents will come for them. They believe that one day there will be a knock at the door, or a letter, or some dramatic reunion that rewrites everything that went wrong.

My mother, Lorena, certainly knew how to find me if she wanted to. Which, clearly, she did not.

And I was fine with that—eventually. I never went looking for her either, even though I probably could have tracked her down without too much trouble as the internet grew in availability and scope.

I had my grandparents, and they were enough.

It’s my intention to head straight back to the hotel from the restaurant . . . and I do start in that direction, but I don’t stay that way for long. Without my making a conscious decision to drive through our old neighborhood, it just sort of happens—and suddenly I’m passing landmarks that are familiar but different. Despite the years, not much has changed. The houses on our block look the same, more or less—just different cars in the driveway and different kids playing out front.

When I reach our block, I slow. The sight of that narrow, oak-lined street catches something in my chest. The same cracked sidewalks. The same mailbox with the dent from where Lito backed into it one Thanksgiving.

And then—our house.

Lito and Lita’s old house, still painted the same faded yellow, the porch sagging slightly at one corner, the iron railing rusting at the base. The hibiscus bushes have grown wild, pink blossoms spilling over onto the walkway. If I squint, I can almost see them there—Lito in his guayabera,

Lita with her sun visor and her pruning shears, both rocking slowly in those squeaky wrought-iron chairs.

I pull over to the curb, kill the engine, and just sit there. The yard looks smaller than I remember. When I was a kid, it felt like a kingdom—grass tall enough to hide in, the old mimosa tree in the corner like a sentinel watching over us. There used to be a wooden swing hanging from its lowest branch, worn smooth from a thousand afternoons.

I can see us there—Jess and me. We're around ten years old, barefoot, hair wild, pushing off with both feet.

"Higher, Jenny! Higher!" my sister hollers.

I'm standing behind her, pretending to drag my heels, just to make her beg.

She always wanted more—more height, more laughter, more everything. Years later, when the swing snapped unexpectedly, she tumbled backward, taking me down with her. We hit the ground laughing so hard, our sides ached. Lita came running out, clutching her rosary like she'd heard a gunshot, scolding us all the way to dinner.

The memory hits so vividly that for a second I could swear I hear it—the creak of the rope, the bark of her laugh, the soft thunk of her sandals landing in the dirt. I grip the steering wheel tighter, waiting for it to fade. It does, but slowly, like a song trailing off.

I look at the tree now—still standing, but the swing is gone. Just a pale groove in the bark where the rope used to rub.

It's strange, the way the past gets edited by time. The tree stays; the laughter doesn't.

The house belongs to my aunt and uncle now, Stef's parents. I'm a little relieved they're traveling for the holiday weekend so I don't have to make an excuse not to go inside.

I ease the car back into drive and roll down the block—one, two, three, four—until the road dead-ends at the cemetery fence. The chain link glints in the sun, separating the living from the no-longer.

This is as close as I've ever gotten. It's been more than two decades, and not once have I been able to propel myself through those gates, around the drive, and up the hill to the shady plot under the mimosa tree.

From this exact spot, I can just make out the pale marble headstone. A matching carved angel sits perched atop it, watching over the grave's occupant, the epitaph carved in curling script:

AND I WILL SLEEP IN PEACE UNTIL YOU COME TO ME.

It's funny, the symmetry of it—how that same tree grows here too, its blossoms falling on her name every spring. There was a time I thought I'd never get past the sound of her death, that the memory would drown me whole.

But grief has a rhythm of its own. It buries what it must, resurrects what it can, and waits for you to show up again when you're ready.

"Sleep, sweet Jessica," I murmur. "Sleep."

Chapter Six

MARY

Five years ago

The car hummed around us, a sealed capsule of silence. My hands were locked on the steering wheel, our reflection faint in the windshield—two sets of eyes staring back at me, mine and hers, both shell shocked.

I told myself I was angry at my parents, but really, I was furious with myself. Sam told me to call first. To ease them into it. But I wanted the surprise—the joy, the miracle moment.

I wanted to give her the family she should've had.

A memory of my parents rose uninvited, so clear that it felt like I could roll down the window and smell it.

Dad at the grill, sleeves rolled up, pretending he was on some cooking show. “Temperature is an art form,” he said solemnly as he flipped a burger. “You’ve got to know when to commit.”

Mom lounged nearby in her deck chair, sunglasses perched on her head, pretending to read but mostly watching him. “Commit to not giving us food poisoning,” she called out.

I stretched on the grass with a lemonade, pretending to study.

Dad grinned over the smoke. “That’s the Langston way, Marebear. Never panic, always flip with confidence.”

Mom laughed. “The secret,” she said, “is a well-funded take-out budget.”

And we all laughed, and I remember thinking, *This is what home feels like.*

The memory faded as quickly as it came. The smell of charcoal became hot asphalt; the laughter turned into the steady hum of tires. My fingers further tightened on the steering wheel. The easy, certain world I grew up in felt a million miles away.

A horn blared behind me, jolting me fully back. The sun was lower now, pouring through the windshield in bright, blinding stripes. Sam was still facing the window, her reflection ghostly in the glass.

The silence stretched so long, it felt like a living, breathing thing sitting there between us.

Then, quietly, I asked, “Did you ever look for them?”

She turned her head slightly. “Who?”

“Our parents. The people who . . . made us.”

Her breath left her on a short, tired laugh. “You mean the people who threw us away.”

I blinked. “That’s not fair. You don’t know what their situation was—maybe they—”

She shook her head before I could speculate on any alternative scenarios.

“I know enough,” she said wearily. “I know that I struggled every day. I only had myself to count on. You had . . . more. Clearly.”

“I didn’t know you existed, Sam.” I reminded her gently. “None of us did. My parents didn’t—”

“Your parents,” she snapped, then took a deep breath before softening her tone. “Your parents raised you in a huge house with a pool and a stable. They showed up for you. They’d do anything, give anything to make you happy.”

“It’s not like some fairy tale,” I whispered.

“Sure looks like one from where I’m standing,” she muttered, turning to look out as the orange cones and flashing lights funneled us into a single lane. “I just . . .” she began again after a long moment, not bothering to look at me, “I can’t help but wonder what it must have been like to be you. To have that. Even for a minute.”

The road narrowed; so did the air as I gripped the steering wheel tighter.

“You should have had all of it. My life should have been your life.”

She shrugged, a sad smile tugging at her lips.

“It’s a shame, you know? I let myself get excited there for a second—this idea that I finally had someone in my life. I never dreamed I’d find family. But here you are.”

I glanced her way, perplexed.

“What’s a shame? You *should* be excited! I’m excited . . .”

“Nah,” she said, shaking her head slowly. “That’s not the way it works out for me. I should have known better.”

Something in her tone made me grip the wheel harder. “What? Sam, I am here for you. I’m your sister! You are never going to be alone again!”

For a second she looked as if she might believe me. But then it was gone, the hope in her eyes replaced with steely certainty.

“You don’t get it, Mary. Nothing good lasts. Not for people like me.”

“Sam—”

“It’s fine,” she said quickly. Too quickly. She shifted, reaching for her seat belt.

The movement made my pulse spike. “What are you doing?”

“I just need air.” She fumbled with the buckle. “I need . . . a minute.”

“Sam, wait—we’re still moving.”

“It’s barely anything. I’ll be okay.”

“Please,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm. “Just talk to me.”

She shook her head, eyes shiny but determined. “Not right now. Pull over.”

“No,” I said softly. “Not like this.”

“Mary.” Her voice wavered. “I need you to stop the car.”

Traffic slowed around us, the crawl almost a standstill—but not quite.

“Sam, please,” I whispered.

She unbuckled.

“Don’t—” My heart slammed against my ribs.

But her hand was already on the door handle. Even at five, maybe ten miles an hour, the idea of her stepping out made my stomach drop.

“Sam, just—wait!”

The door cracked open.

She jumped.

Chapter Seven

JENN

Friday morning

Primum non nocere.

First, do no harm.

That's the Hippocratic oath—taken by all doctors. We have to swear to consider the consequences of our actions and treatment. In other words, we have to promise not to make things any worse for the patient than they already are. Too bad we make no such promise to ourselves.

I'd never in a million years recommend one of my clients hop on a plane and head right back to the place that scarred them. Not without months—maybe even years—of preparation in the office. Because walking back into the “scene of the crime” without proper preparation is like walking into the wilds of Alaska in January without a coat. In flip-flops. And a tank top.

Foolish at best, suicidal at worst.

And yet here I am.

The campus of Miami Killian Medical Center looks pristine—perfect hedges, tropical greenery, glass-faced buildings gleaming like they've never known rot. But I remember when this place reeked of mildew and despair. The psychiatric center, once referred to as the catacombs because of its dark, dank, claustrophobic interiors, now boasts an atrium with vaulted ceilings and a gurgling water wall.

My heels click on the marble floor as I make my way to the reception desk. I've dressed for battle—tailored black suit, hair in a tight bun, my expression calm and composed. Controlled. Professional.

I have the sudden, nearly uncontrollable urge to snap the band on my wrist. But I keep my hand low now, in case Julian is somewhere nearby watching. He'd recognize the gesture instantly.

“Good morning. May I help you?” asks a young man stationed in front of a computer at the main desk.

“Good morning. Dr. Jennifer Flores for Dr. Braithwaite,” I say, handing him my license before he can ask; better to stay one step ahead.

“Good morning, Doctor,” he responds pleasantly, holding it in one hand while scrolling down his computer screen with the other. “Uh-huh. I’ve got you right here. Would you look directly into the lens, please?”

He’s pointing at a camera mounted atop his monitor. I smile. He clicks. A moment later a printer behind him hums to life, and he spins around just in time to pluck my new ID from the tray and affix it to a lanyard.

“Wow, that’s impressive,” I say as he hands me my new necklace, still warm from the machine that created it.

“We take security pretty seriously around here,” he explains. “Please keep that on at all times while in the building. Next time, you don’t need to stop here. Just scan the card against the black pad mounted on the wall by the door over there. Someone from Dr. Braithwaite’s team will let you know what you can access internally.”

“Right. Okay, thanks . . .”

“Jennifer!”

The sound of my name freezes me in place. Still facing the receptionist, I close my eyes and take a long breath. Then I smooth my expression—pleasant but neutral—before turning around.

He looks almost exactly as I remember: tall, trim, immaculate in his white coat and bow tie, the same crooked front tooth softening an otherwise patrician face. His blue-gray eyes still radiate that gentle, well-trained warmth—the kind only years of British bedside manner can perfect.

“Dr. Braithwaite,” I acknowledge flatly with a curt nod.

For a second it looks like he might try to hug me. Then he thinks better of it, extending a hand instead, offering up the same smile that once made me feel safe, protected, special. Now it just makes me nauseous. I resist the urge to slip my index finger under the cuff of my blouse.

“Oh, please, please. We’re colleagues now! You may call me Julian!”

We might have been okay if he hadn’t used the word “may.” But it lands more like a command than a kindness. And I don’t do commands anymore. Not from him. Not from anyone.

Ignoring the proffered hand, I drop my voice. “Doctor. Braithwaite,” I grit out, emphasizing each word, “using your first name would imply we

have a personal relationship, which we most certainly do not.”

His smile cools.

“My apologies, Dr. Flores, it wasn’t my intention to imply otherwise.” He lowers his voice—soft, polite, edged. “But you’re in my house now. I have staff and patients to think about. So let’s keep things professional, shall we?”

I blink. Hard. I’ve played out this scenario a hundred times in my head over the years, and it always ends with me eviscerating him. I’m unprepared for him to come right back at me—and with a valid argument, no less. Just because he lost all credibility with me doesn’t mean other people don’t respect him—admire him, even. He’s a brilliant doctor who just happens to be a shit human being. And that’s hardly a rare combination. When his eyebrows quirk upward slightly, I realize he’s still waiting for me to shake his hand. I also realize there are people watching us, including the gentleman who just handed me my ID. So I meet his grasp and give a quick shake, restoring just the hint of a noncommittal smile to my lips.

“Yes, of course, Dr. Braithwaite,” I agree quietly.

He steps back, his face light and bright again as he gestures toward a door off to the side of the lobby. There’s an **EMPLOYEES ONLY** placard affixed to it, and he presses his key card against the pad to release the lock.

“Your card should give you access to all the entrances to the building and onto the ward,” he explains, holding the door open for me. “I’ve had a small office arranged for you down the hall from mine. I’ll just ask that you avoid the third floor because—”

“Because that’s where I am.”

The voice shoots through me with the intensity—and sting—of an electric current.

David Kellogg steps out of the hallway—smooth and composed, a touch of silver sharpening rather than softening him. His hazel eyes have the same laser-cut precision I remember. Still devastatingly handsome. And, I’m sure, still devastating. Period.

“Hello, Jennifer.” His gaze is deliberate, appraising. “You’re looking well.”

“Dr. Flores,” I correct, fighting to keep my tone even.

He chuckles. “Right. You and your attorney made that clear.”

“Indeed. She also made sure the record reflected which one of us falsified documentation.”

Kellogg's smile tightens but doesn't break.

"Integrity," he says lightly, "is a fluid thing. Around here, it tends to follow the man in charge. And these days, that would be me."

I shrug nonchalantly.

"Well, how nice for you. I guess Dr. Braithwaite didn't think it was worth mentioning," I say, shooting my old mentor a glare.

He must have known I'd never have agreed to come back here if I'd known this asshat was still lurking in the hallways, let alone running the joint. That's why he didn't volunteer the information. The real question is, Why didn't I ask?

Braithwaite steps between us, palms raised. "All right. Let's all just take a beat. David, this is not what we agreed . . ."

"We didn't agree on anything, Julian," the other man replies.

His voice peters out under Kellogg's withering glare.

Clearly the bloom is off the rose. Sometime in the last decade, Julian has seen what I saw—and what I warned him about while I was on staff here.

David Kellogg is responsible for the death of at least one patient that I know of. Maybe more.

Not that anyone cared then . . . or now, apparently.

Chapter Eight

MARY

Five years ago

I'd been sitting in the waiting room for nearly three hours when my mother came bursting through the door.

"Mary! Oh, thank God!" she cried, pulling me into her arms the instant I was on my feet. "Thank God you're all right!"

"Mom!" I gasped, feeling my ribs contract in her viselike grip. "Mom, please! You're hurting me!"

She let go of me abruptly and took a step back, still gripping my upper arms as she scanned me from head to toe and back again. When she was convinced that I truly was unharmed, she let go, wiping at the tears running down her cheeks.

"Oh, baby, I'm just so . . . relieved," she whispered with a sniff.

Then we heard my father yelling from down the hall.

"Terry? Terry, where are you?" he called out.

"Doug, we're here," she responded loud enough for everyone on the floor to hear.

When he, too, came flying in, making a beeline for me, I held up my palms. "Don't. Please. I'm fine, Dad. Really, not a scratch on me."

He stopped just in front of me, both hands running through his hair at the same time as he looked up at the ceiling and blinked back tears of his own. After a long moment, he pulled me into his arms and just held onto me as I listened to the muffled sound of his heart beating through the wall of his chest.

Wow, they really were scared!

I looked up into his face. "I'm sorry for what I said before I left," I whispered, blinking back tears of my own. "I didn't mean it—"

"I know, baby," he murmured, pulling my head back to him and stroking my hair the way he did when I was a little girl.

At last he loosened his grip after a few minutes. “Honey, what happened?” he asked.

I didn’t really know—everything had happened so fast. And I had to walk a very thin line. If I told the whole truth, there was a real chance they’d decide Sam needed to be put on psychiatric lockdown for her own safety. Maybe she’d been impulsive, sure, but she wasn’t dangerous. And I wasn’t about to lose my sister—not now that I’d finally found her. So I told the police the same version I told the nurses: a softened version of what happened, something that didn’t involve the words “jumped out of a moving car.” It wasn’t exactly a lie . . . just the version least likely to get her locked away.

“The car door—it wasn’t latched all the way, and I-I don’t know, I somehow tripped the locks with my elbow. It was one of those perfect-storm things, and she just sort of . . . fell out of the car.”

What little color had remained in my mother’s face drained in front of me. “While it was moving?” she gasped.

“Yeah. But I had just driven into a construction zone, so I was going way slower than I could’ve been,” I explained, digging deeper into my alternate version of events.

“But you’re okay?” my father confirmed.

I nodded again. “Yeah, Dad, I’m fine. I didn’t even want the cops to call you, but they said they had to since the car’s registered in your name.”

They looked at each other, then back at me, and I had the distinct impression that they’d spent time discussing how to handle this. How to handle me.

“Mary,” Mom began softly, “we’re sorry about how things went this afternoon. You just . . . it was just such a shock, finding out about Sam. It’s going to take a little time for us to get used to the idea of her, you know?”

I’d spent the last three hours kicking myself over this. I hadn’t done any of us any favors by ambushing them earlier. But here was an opportunity. I was certain of it.

“I’m so sorry too—about how I sprang all this on you . . . and about what I said.”

There were fresh tears in her eyes. “Mary, you know that we could not possibly love you any more if you’d been our biological child. I’d do anything to keep you safe and happy. So . . . if you want us to spend time

getting to know Sam with you, of course we'll do that. We'd do anything for you."

I flung myself into her arms once more and held on tight.

It was another hour before the doctor came to find us in the waiting room, still wearing his surgical scrubs and cap. He looked tired as he approached us.

"Are you Mr. and Mrs. Kinski?" he asked my parents.

They were shaking their heads before he'd even finished the question.

"No, we're not—"

"No, they're not," I jumped in, cutting them off. "But I'm . . . I'm her sister . . ." I couldn't decide which felt stranger, saying the words or hearing them.

I had a sister. And I was all she had.

"Oh, yes, of course! You're twins, then," the doctor noted, taking a good look at me. "Right, well, Samantha is going to be fine, but she's pretty banged up. The worst of it is a broken arm, bruised spleen, and broken pelvis. There are some very nasty abrasions on her body—road rash, as the bikers like to call it. Those will need some special wound care for a while to prevent infection."

"Oh, thank you, Jesus!" I murmured a relieved exhalation.

How horrible would it have been to find my twin, only to then lose her hours later?

"That being said, it could have been much worse. I'm keeping her here for a few days, but then you can take her home. She's going to have to take it easy for a while. It'll be two or three months before she fully bounces back from this. Maybe as long as six months to heal."

"What about school?" I asked. "We start our freshman year at college next week."

The doctor shook his head grimly. "No, I'm afraid that's out of the question. Next semester, perhaps, but not right now. What Samantha needs is to rest and recuperate for a while."

I looked at my parents just in time to see something unspoken pass between them.

"We'll see to it she has everything she needs," my mother replied for them both, and my heart swelled with gratitude, pushing out any lingering remnants of my earlier anger.

“Excellent,” the doctor said with a small smile, oblivious to the volumes of subtext unspooling right under his nose. “Well, she’s in recovery now, and it’ll be a bit before she’s got a room of her own . . .”

“Can I see her?” I asked. He looked as if he wanted to say no. “Please?” I added for good measure.

“All right,” he agreed reluctantly, raising a finger at me. “But just for a few minutes. She needs to rest. And she’ll be groggy from the anesthesia.”

I nodded enthusiastically. “Okay, yeah. Of course,” I promised.

Back in the recovery room, Sam lay flat, her left arm in a cast and draped across her chest. I wasn’t prepared for the extent of the “road rash” the doctor had mentioned. A large bandage was swaddled around her head, and her eyes were closed.

“Just a few minutes,” the doctor reminded me with a finger wag.

I nodded and smiled, waiting until he was out of earshot before leaning over the bed.

“Sam?” I murmured softly. When she didn’t stir, I tried again. “Sam? Can you hear me?”

One of her eyes fluttered open slowly, the other swollen shut. She squinted at the fluorescents overhead.

“When did you get here?” she rasped.

“I’ve been here. We’ve been worried sick about you.”

“We?” A faint frown. “We who?”

“Me and my parents,” I said.

She let out a weak scoff—more breath than sound—then winced. “Ow. Okay, note to self: no facial expressions.”

“You really need to stay still. They’re going to move you upstairs soon.”

“Just go.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Go. Go home to your . . . whatever. McMansion with ponies.” The line would’ve landed sharper if she hadn’t swallowed between every other word.

“I don’t want to go home.”

“Then go back to school. Go to Disney World. I don’t care. Just—” Her eyes squeezed shut, jaw trembling. “Just go away. Jesus, I literally jumped out of a moving car to get away from you. I thought that was a pretty solid hint.”

“Yeah, about that.” I crossed my arms. “What were you thinking? You could’ve been killed.”

“Yeah,” she said, too lightly. “That was kind of the point.” The corner of her mouth lifted in something that attempted to be a smile but died immediately in pain. “God. Everything hurts.”

“Uh-huh, good. Maybe that’ll teach you not to swan dive onto asphalt. We’ve only just found each other, and you go and do something extreme like that? Why?”

Her good eye opened, raw and shining.

“Because I was okay,” she whispered. “Okay with being abandoned. Okay with being the girl nobody wanted. Bad foster home after bad foster home—I’d made my peace with being alone. And then you show up. You, with your perfect stupid life and your perfect stupid name, and suddenly I’m staring at . . . what could’ve been. If the universe hadn’t screwed me.”

“And that’s worth ending your life for?”

She turned her face away, but not fast enough to hide the tears. That alone cracked something open in me. I reached for her hand—her good one—and squeezed.

“What?” she sniffed. “What do you want from me?”

“I want to get to know you. I want you to be my sister. I want a life with you in it, Samantha Kay Kinski.” Then, more quietly: “Unless that’s not what you want. I can walk out that door. I can let you go, if that’s what you need.”

“No.” Her head jerked—immediately regretted. “Ow. But . . . no. I don’t want you to go.”

“Then stop trying to shove me out of the room.”

She let out a shaky breath. “Look at me. I’m not going anywhere like this. They’re talking about sending me to a rehab place until I can walk on my own. There goes my semester.”

“That’s not happening.”

She blinked. Confused. Suspicious.

“What’s not happening?”

“You’re not going to any facility. You’re moving in with us.”

“Us?” she echoed. “Who’s ‘us’?”

“Me. And my parents. Terry and Doug. We’ll take a semester off. We’ll go back together in January.”

“Oh God. No. No. I’ll lose my dorm, my scholarship—” She stopped when I held up my hand. “What? You already solved all that too?”

“I did. You can move into my apartment in January. It’s paid for. And scholarships can be paused for medical reasons. My dad knows the provost—he can make the calls.”

She gave a tiny, exhausted snort. “Must be nice, having a daddy hotline for life’s problems.”

“You can push me away all you want—I’m still not leaving.”

Her good eye studied me like I was an unsolvable riddle. “You’ve officially lost it.”

“Maybe a little.”

She sighed, eyelid fluttering. “I’m not imagining it. Your parents don’t . . . like me.”

“They don’t know you yet.”

“They will when I show up at their house missing half my limbs and wrecking their china.”

I couldn’t help a tiny laugh. “China’s overrated.”

She didn’t smile, exactly, but something in her face softened.

“Spain?” she croaked when I teased her about studying abroad.

“You pick the semester,” I said.

“Stop,” she whispered. “Just stop.”

“What am I stopping?”

“Making it sound like I can do anything I want.”

There it was—the truth beneath every tantrum, every sharp edge, every reckless dive onto the pavement.

“And why can’t you?” I asked gently.

“Because I’m not you, Mary.” No venom. Just fact. “I don’t have money or connections or a fancy name. Life doesn’t open up for me like that.”

I swallowed. “I know. I’m sorry. I’m trying to tell you . . . you’re not alone anymore. You have a sister. As long as I’m alive, you have family.”

She stared like she’d never heard the word used on her before.

And maybe she hadn’t.

So I squeezed her hand again.

This time, she squeezed back.

And neither of us knew how much that promise would cost.

Chapter Nine

JENN

Ten years ago

If.

How is it that such a tiny little word can wield so much power?

Those two letters can be a threat. They can be a plea. They can be a wish.

And they can be a curse.

The ifs surrounding that night during my third year of residency still haunt me a decade later.

If Kellogg hadn't been covering the regular attending.

If the ER hadn't been a complete shit show.

If I'd made my case better and stood my ground stronger.

If I'd picked up the phone and called my supervising psychiatrist for backup.

If any one of those things had been different, a fourteen-year-old girl might still be alive today. But they weren't, and she's not.

Her name was Cami Miller. She'd texted intimate photos to her boyfriend. When they broke up, he shared them with the whole school—then the little cybershit uploaded them to an amateur porn site. Her parents brought her in when she went from hysterical to unnervingly calm. I tried to engage her, but she refused to speak, refused to look at me. My gut said she was high risk. I marked her chart for fast-track admission. I just needed the attending's signature.

I'd barely interacted with Dr. Kellogg before that night. When I found him, he had a coffee in one hand and his phone in the other.

"I don't give a damn who you need to wake up!" he barked into the phone. "We're drowning down here, and I swear to God I'm going to close the ER to ambulance traffic if I don't get some help in the next thirty minutes!"

He slammed the phone down on the counter. The nurse beside him jumped, scattering file folders across the floor.

“Oh, brilliant! Just fucking brilliant!” Kellogg roared, sloshing coffee over the rim. “Can nobody do their job tonight?” That was when he noticed me, chart clutched to my chest. “What do you want?” he demanded.

I stepped forward, took a deep breath, then explained the situation as calmly as possible. To his credit, he listened—interjecting every few seconds to bark orders at whoever passed. When I finished, he stared down at me.

“Right. So let me get this straight—some kid gets caught sexting, cries a little, and now mommy and daddy want *us* to deal with it? Have you even seen the waiting room backup?”

“No. I mean, yes—”

“Which is it?” he snapped, stepping into my space.

I flinched.

“No, that’s not what happened. Yes, I’ve seen the backup in the waiting room. But in my opinion this is a high-risk patient.”

“Your *opinion*?” he echoed, brows raised incredulously. “What’s your name?”

“Jennifer. Flores.”

“What are you? Second-year?”

“Third.”

“Right. A third-year. And, Jennifer Flores, do you really think I give a shit about your opinion?” His spittle hit my cheek as he spoke down at me. “News flash! Teenage boys think about sex nonstop. If the girl was naive enough to send the photos, she deserves a little humiliation. She hasn’t swallowed a bottle of pills. She hasn’t tried to slit her wrists. Mommy and daddy just got tired of listening to her whine. Send her home.”

A quick glance around told me no one else was near enough to witness this interaction.

“Dr. Kellogg, I think you’re way out of line here,” I began, stopping short when his face darkened with rage.

“*I’m* out of line?” He took another step, voice dropping low. “Get. Out.”

“But I haven’t—”

“Get the hell out of my ER and pray that I don’t report your ass to Braithwaite tomorrow.”

He snatched the chart from my hands. I got the hell out.
The next time I saw the chart was at my disciplinary hearing.
The next time I saw Cami Miller, she was in a casket.



Friday morning

To see Kellogg today, sitting easily in this sunny office in his bespoke suit and Italian leather shoes, you'd never guess what he's capable of. Calm, charming, predatory beneath the polish.

He studies me now from across the desk lined with framed photos—vacations, probably. A yacht. A Porsche. Maybe a blonde or two. My stomach turns.

“Julian here had to work pretty hard to convince me that you were the only one for this assessment,” he says smoothly. “I was skeptical—until he disclosed your personal history. I had no idea you'd experienced so much trauma as a child. No wonder you were so troubled when you were here. We should have been treating you, not teaching you.”

My fingers find the elastic on my wrist, rolling it like a rosary.

Breathe. Respond, don't react.

“Dr. Kellogg,” I say evenly, “I really could not care less what you think of my life, past or present. So here's the deal: If you're just going to skulk and preen like a B-movie villain, I'll just be heading home.”

He gives that practiced smile—charm without warmth.

“Oh, now, Dr. Flores, no need to get so defensive. Believe it or not, your insights might actually be useful here. So—shall we?”

Before I can tell him where to shove his insight, there's a knock.

“Come in!” he calls out. The office door opens, and a woman with short-cropped gray hair and a plum-colored suit joins us.

For a second, it's like my brain short-circuits.

Joyce Danner.

The hearing rushes back in jagged images: the white glass table, the ticking clock, my palms sweating through the paper cup while Joyce coolly asked if I'd like to amend my statement “for accuracy.” I remember the

scent of burnt coffee, the hum of the fluorescent lights above. Even in that windowless basement conference room, her words came out in a clipped courtroom cadence. It's the first time I've actually laid eyes on her in all this time, but she had a recurring role in my nightmares for years. Come to think of it, all three of the people in this room did.

No wonder Gabe didn't want me to take this job. He saw this little bout of PTSD coming a mile away.

This time I give the elastic on my wrist a sharp snap, forcing myself back to the room, to the present, to the woman who likely doesn't remember breaking me. She nods in my direction, circling around to stand on the other side of the desk next to Kellogg.

"Dr. Flores. Nice to see you again."

"Nice to—" I start to reply, but the lie catches in my throat so I try again. "Sorry—nice to see you again, Joyce."

She perches on the end of a chair that Julian has pulled up for her.

"Right, so let me tell you what we know so far," she begins. "Yesterday morning a ranger discovered the body of Samantha Kinski floating in a canoe in a remote part of Everglades National Park. A short time later, he came across Mary—still alive but barely conscious. And, while it appears to be accidental, the two sisters had a rather . . . tumultuous . . . relationship. And the questions the police have been asking suggest they could be considering the possibility of foul play."

At last, something substantial I can focus on beyond my own dark past. I grab onto it like a flotation device. "I presume they're doing an autopsy on Sam?"

She nods. "Yes. We should have that report in the next day or two—there's a bit of a backup at the coroner's office going into the holiday weekend. But once that comes through, it will, hopefully, clarify things."

I shake my head slightly and raise my palms. "I have to ask—is this evaluation really necessary, considering no one is accusing her of anything yet?"

"Right, well," Julian begins cautiously, as if measuring how much to tell me. "Perhaps you noticed the Lloyd Langston Oncology Center on your way in?"

I had, and I already knew what he was getting at.

"Yes, I remember reading that Mary Langston is from the Langston Pharma family. Is that why she was brought here to Miami Killian?"

All three of them nod.

“I’ve known the family for many years,” Julian explains smoothly. “Her grandfather, Lloyd Langston, was a great philanthropist, and he bequeathed a substantial endowment to the hospital in his will. Mary’s parents, Doug and Theresa, have continued his work. In fact, they’re largely responsible for this new facility,” he tells me, gesturing to the walls and ceiling around us as if the whole place somehow belongs to him too.

Über-rich patrons of the hospital with a daughter in trouble. I’m hoping this isn’t going where I think it is, because I wouldn’t put it past any of these people. I lean forward in my chair and lock eyes with Joyce.

“I hope no one expects me to produce a bought opinion,” I say.

The lawyer doesn’t bat an eyelash at my accusation. “Not at all, Doctor,” she replies smoothly. “Yes, of course you’re being paid for your evaluation. But no, we’re not expecting anything other than your opinion—your honest opinion. The family would like to get a jump on this—before the district attorney’s office can have their own evaluation done. If I know what we’re dealing with, then I’ll know how best to proceed. How best to protect the hospital while also assuring the Langstons that we have Mary’s best interests at heart.”

“Which we do, of course,” Julian adds with a small, approving nod beside her.

Right. Because protecting Mary means protecting the massive influx of cash that comes with them.

“So what is Mary saying happened?” I ask.

“Not much. She says she can’t recall most of it. Just that she and Samantha were scouting a new canoe route. They ran a company, Wild Gemini, leading multiday Everglades trips. This one was a test run. Apparently, they were doing fine until they hit an eight-mile stretch known as the Nightmare.”

“Well, that’s not ominous or anything,” I comment.

“Yes, quite,” she agrees. “It’s a narrow cut-through that separates the north and south Everglades. It’s notoriously difficult to paddle through. We don’t have all the details of the recovery site at this point, but we do know that Sam wasn’t a strong swimmer. And, should the autopsy come back with drowning as the cause of death, they’ll most certainly consider the possibility that it wasn’t an accident. We just don’t know which way this thing is going to go.”

“We’re hopeful that, as the shock wears off, she’ll be able to tell us a bit more,” Julian adds.

My body language training kicks in, and my eyes are drawn to his tie, which he’s rubbing with his thumb absently.

“Physically, she was a mess when they found her,” he continues. “Severely dehydrated, borderline hypothermic, and half out of her head. She was scratched to hell, eaten alive by bugs, and covered in superficial infections. We’ve started IV fluids, broad-spectrum antibiotics, and wound care. She’s stabilizing well and should make a full recovery.”

I let out a long, slow exhalation as my gaze makes the rounds until I’ve had eye contact with all three of them.

“Okay,” I begin slowly. “So let me make certain I understand the arrangement here. Assuming I agree, then I’d be working for the Langston family, not the hospital. And not the court.”

“That’s correct,” Joyce agrees.

“And . . . if they don’t like what I have to say? Then what?”

Joyce shrugs and spreads her hands out in front of her. “Then nothing. You’ll be paid no matter what your opinion is. But, just so you know, you might be called upon to testify on Mary’s behalf if it comes to that. And, on the flip side of that, you’ll be bound by doctor-patient confidentiality should the police or a prosecutor or anyone else question you. That is, unless you have the family’s express permission,” Joyce explains.

“You mean Mary’s,” I correct her.

She looks confused. “Mary’s what?”

“Mary’s express permission. The family may pay my fees, but she calls the shots as far as what’s disclosed and to whom—including the parents.”

Joyce glances at Julian, who smiles broadly.

“Well, of course, of course. That goes without saying,” he declares with the trademark warmth that used to soothe me. Now it just seems condescending. “This is all aboveboard. You’re just an independent contractor we’ve brought in to avoid any conflict of interest should this become a criminal investigation at some point.”

“Look, Dr. Flores,” Joyce says, “Mary’s name will be released in a couple of hours, and then it’s only a matter of time before the press is camped out in the parking lot. We really need your answer here—one way or the other. Are you willing to treat her and sign a contract to that effect, or

do I need to find someone else? Because we're up against the clock right now, and the Langstons are waiting for an update."

I take a deep breath as I consider everything I've heard in the last half hour. There's nothing inherently wrong with this. It makes perfect sense, in fact.

"Yes," I agree at last. "I'll take the contract—so long as it's understood that I'm going to conduct my own evaluation, in the manner I choose. I don't want anyone second-guessing my methods or my progress. And I won't lie—not in her chart, not in a courtroom. If you really want to know what I think, I'm going to tell you."

She nods once firmly, as if I've just confirmed what she already knows.

"Excellent. Her parents will be very pleased to hear it. They were hoping you'd accept the job."

Hopefully that means they're more likely to be forthcoming with information.

"Do you think they'd be willing to talk with me about Mary?" I ask.

"Oh, yes. They're quite eager to speak with you. They were hoping you'd see them this morning in fact."

"This morning?"

I know I want to speak to the Langstons about their daughter; I just hadn't planned to do it before I'd actually met her.

Julian nods. "Yes, as Joyce just said, they're quite eager. I thought perhaps you and I could go over a few things in my office and then meet with them downstairs in the coffee shop."

My sigh comes out as a little puff of air. "Right. Okay, well, they can give me some insight into Mary's state of mind."

"Yes, well, that's rather the other way around."

I don't understand.

"Excuse me?"

"They're hoping *you'll* give *them* some insight," Kellogg explains a little too slowly.

I ignore the implication that I'm too dim to get it and focus on Joyce.

"Meaning what, exactly?"

Joyce and Julian exchange glances briefly before she replies.

"Meaning Mary Langston hasn't spoken to her parents in years, and it's unlikely she's going to start now."

Chapter Ten

MARY

Five years ago

I used to think of morning sunlight as a nuisance—the way it came slanting through my blinds, beckoning me to get up, get moving, be productive.

But that was before Sam.

Now, every morning started with her soft knock on my door and the smell of coffee. Sometimes she'd already been up for hours reading on the porch or taking a slow walk with the housekeeper's old Labrador. Other days we'd sit cross-legged on my bed, sipping from mismatched mugs while she coaxed stories out of me—high school romances, family vacations, holiday traditions. All the ordinary stuff I took for granted were the things she wanted to hear most.

It was strange how natural it felt, how quickly she slipped into my rhythms. We'd finish each other's sentences, sing the same line of a song without realizing it, or blurt out the same thought at the same time and dissolve into laughter. I started to understand why people always said twins had their own language. Maybe we did too—it had just taken eighteen years to learn it.

For the first time in my life, I didn't feel like something was missing.

For the first time in my life, I felt whole.

We'd set Sam up in the guest room down the hall, complete with an ensuite bath and a walk-in closet that was bigger than her old dorm room. Not that she had much to fill it. Everything she owned fit with plenty of room to spare: a large roller bag of clothing and toiletries, a couple of boxes of books, and a tall hiking pack stuffed with camping gear—a pop-up tent, a tiny stove, and a sleeping bag. She owned exactly four pairs of shoes total: sneakers, hikers, black flats, and flip-flops.

At first, she seemed overwhelmed—lost in that empty space, like she didn't quite believe she was allowed to stay. But after a few days, she began

to make herself at home—claiming a favorite mug for her morning coffee, rearranging the bathroom drawers, napping on a chaise longue by the pool.

After a little while, we settled into a comfortable routine. She had physical therapy in the basement three mornings a week, while I logged time on the treadmill beside her. By late October, the scabs and bruises had faded, replaced by a pale-pink map across her arms and legs. “Battle scars,” she called them. Sam didn’t care about appearances anyway—never wore makeup, never fussed with her short ponytail. Her focus was always on what she could do, not how she looked doing it.

Afternoons were for small adventures: runs to the farmers market, drives down to Coconut Grove, even one disastrous attempt at renting bikes. Sam insisted she “knew how,” then immediately veered into a palm tree and blamed the bike for “having an attitude.” We were doubled over laughing before we even made it out of the parking lot. We stayed up late bingeing old horror movies, and she’d mock every predictable jump scare until I was gasping from laughter. I’d never had that kind of fun with anyone—not even my friends from school.

For a while, it really did feel like a honeymoon. Like we’d finally hit pause on the rest of the world and found a rhythm that belonged only to us.

“So the deadline’s almost here for the spring semester,” my father mentioned over dinner one evening in early November.

They’d been dropping not-so-subtle hints for weeks that it was time for me to return to school, but I hadn’t done anything about it.

“I was thinking I might like to take some time and see some of the country,” Sam said, cutting into her roast beef.

My parents had raised me vegan, and there was something mildly unsettling about meat at our table. The housekeeper, though, was delighted to finally serve someone who appreciated it.

“Oh, really?” Mom asked, brightening. “I think travel is so important of a young person. Where were you thinking you’d like to go?”

“The Pacific Northwest,” my twin said, not looking up. “There’s this place out in Oregon—the North American Wilderness Academy? They train you to be a wilderness guide. You learn orientation and navigation, first aid—even bear safety. It takes like two months, but by the time you’re done, you’ve got a certification. I was thinking . . . maybe instead of going back to college and doing all the classroom stuff, I’d just head out there and learn in the field. Then, hopefully, I could get a job as a wildlife guide out there

somewhere, or maybe even a park ranger. It's always been my dream to have a little cabin in the woods by the water."

Her face softened as she said it. For once she looked completely at ease.

"Well, now I think that sounds like an *excellent* plan!" Dad said a little too enthusiastically, probably calculating the distance between here and Oregon.

Then he turned to me. "Maybe you two can see each other at the holidays. Or when you're on break between semesters."

At this, my twin caught my eye. "I was actually hoping Mary might come with me. Just to help me get settled? Or . . . maybe even take the course with me? I mean, if she wanted to . . ."

I gasped, tossing my fork down. "That is an amazing idea! We could stay here through Christmas, then head out there after New Year's!"

"That's what I was thinking too," Sam agreed with a small, almost shy smile.

But when I glanced around the table, I realized she and I were the only ones who were smiling.

"Mary," Mom said, her voice tightening, "you really shouldn't postpone school any longer. You're already a semester behind everyone else."

"Jesus, she's not in middle school," Sam said lightly, almost amused. My parents both stiffened at the language, which only made her raise her brows innocently.

"Meaning what, exactly, Samantha?" Mom asked through clenched teeth.

"Meaning she's not getting held back or whatever," Sam replied, unbothered. "Hell, she was there for like five minutes. She didn't even have time to make any friends."

Mom's spine straightened a fraction—the profanity, the flippancy—but Sam either didn't notice or pretended not to.

Dad stepped in. "We put a very high premium on education in this family. The sooner she finishes her degree, the sooner she can take her place at Langston Pharma, like her grandfather always wanted."

"And what does Mary want?" Sam asked—not confrontational, just direct.

Three pairs of eyes swung toward me.

"I . . . uh . . . I don't know," I said. "Maybe take some time to work, travel. It might make me a better employee later. You guys both worked before joining Langston Pharma."

Dad sighed. "Your mother and I both earned our degrees while working full time. It took years. We don't want that for you. You should focus on school now—plenty of time to work later."

"Exactly," Sam said, pointing her fork in agreement. "Doug, you just said it—she'll spend most of her life doing something she probably hates. Shouldn't she get to enjoy herself first?"

Mom's tone sharpened. "Your father and I will discuss this, Mary."

Sam let out a soft, incredulous breath through her nose—not mocking, just . . . amazed.

Mom heard it anyway. "Is something funny about that, Samantha?" she asked icily.

"Actually, Theresa? Yeah," Sam said, mirroring the cool formality of my mother's tone. "You talk like she's eight, not eighteen. She's legally an adult. She can make her own choices."

"We're her parents," Mom snapped. "It's our job to guide her."

"Oh, and I'm the danger she needs guiding away from?" Sam asked, voice still steady. "Jesus Christ."

That did it.

Mom's chair scraped back. "We do NOT take the Lord's name in vain in this house!"

Sam didn't flinch. "Right. Sorry. Maybe you want to baptize me in the pool next?"

"Okay!" I said brightly, hands up. "Let's not do this."

I exhaled. "Look—I'll go back to school. But maybe I take a gap semester first. I'll tell the college I'm returning in the fall, and I can spend a few months out West with Sam. It's a compromise."

The tension stretched taut for several seconds until Mom finally sighed, her shoulders releasing. "All right," she said quietly.

Dad looked ready to object but wilted the second she shot him a look.

Sam leaned back, muttering, "Just one big happy family."



By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, things between Sam and my parents had thawed only slightly. They were polite with her, careful with their questions, but there was always a faint stiffness beneath everything—as if they were still trying to decide what box she belonged in. Sam felt it too. She stayed helpful, quiet, and mostly out of the way.

The kitchen was its usual holiday chaos.

Mom orchestrated the vegan spread like a conductor—mushroom-lentil roasts, wild-rice stuffing, roasted vegetables, all her usuals. Meanwhile, the housekeeper happily handled the small turkey entrée for Sam and our guest, humming as she basted it.

I was lighting the candles when the doorbell rang.

“Mary, get that?” Dad called.

“Of course!” I called back. “Sam, come meet my Uncle Jules!”

“Yeah . . . just a sec,” she said, eyes glued to the cucumber she was peeling.

But at that exact moment, the housekeeper swooped past her with the roasting pan, someone opened a cabinet drawer right behind her, and she turned abruptly—bumping straight into the counter’s edge. The cucumber slipped out of her hand, the peeler clattered to the floor, and she instinctively reached for a dish towel to mop up a smear of dressing . . . knocking that to the ground too.

“Ugh—sorry,” she muttered, crouching down to grab it all while everyone else kept cooking at full throttle around her.

Given how tense things had been with my parents, I knew she was anxious about meeting yet another person from the life I’d built without her. But with the tiny kitchen pileup, I figured she just needed a moment to collect herself. So I left her and ran to the door with a smile.

“Uncle Jules! Happy Thanksgiving!”

He stepped inside—warm, polished, carrying a bottle of wine and a small gold-wrapped box.

“Mary! It’s been far too long,” he said, pulling me into a hug. “I’m so happy to see you.”

Then, over my shoulder, he added lightly, “Ah—and this must be Samantha . . .”

I turned—and there was Sam in the kitchen doorway, looking like someone who’d wandered onto the set of a Hallmark Christmas movie without a script. She still had the cucumber peeler in one hand, but now a

small mountain of parsley was clinging to the front of her shirt like festive, leafy confetti. A sprig hung from her sleeve, betraying the kitchen collision she'd just escaped.

Her eyes were wide, her posture stiff, her whole expression saying: *I was not emotionally prepared for this scene.*

Oh, Sam, I thought, guilt tightening in my chest.

Maybe I shouldn't have thrown a brand-new family member at her right after holiday prep carnage. I'd been so eager to introduce her—too eager.

Julian merely smiled and reached out, briskly plucking the stray parsley from her sleeve before offering it back with a little flourish.

"There you are," he said kindly.

Sam blinked, flustered. "Oh—um—thanks. The kitchen got . . . dramatic."

"Holiday kitchens tend to," he said easily.

She managed a shy laugh and stepped back into the room, brushing at her shirt.

Julian watched her go, eyebrows raised. "My word. The resemblance is remarkable."

"I know, right?" I said, beaming.

At dinner, Sam kept mostly quiet, but Julian—warm and curious as always—did his best to draw her out.

"So," he said, cutting into his roasted vegetables, "will you girls be returning to college for the winter semester?"

I felt my parents tense almost in unison—like someone had pushed a hidden button.

I smiled anyway. "Actually, no. We're . . . taking the spring off. Sort of a gap year so Sam and I can do the North American Wilderness Academy program."

Julian lifted his brows, surprised. "Isn't that based in Washington State?"

"Oregon," my twin corrected quietly.

"Well, my goodness, that's quite an adventure!"

"You're right, Julian, it *is* an adventure," Mom said, her voice carefully pleasant. "Maybe too much of one. This program is—well—it's very far away and very demanding. We would prefer Mary return to school in January. Perhaps you can talk some sense into her."

Julian considered this. “Well, I can understand your concerns,” he said diplomatically, then turned to me. “Mary, it’s true. That program is rigorous.”

Mom nodded vigorously. “Exactly.”

“I like the outdoors just fine!” I protested. “And it’s not like I’ve never been camping in my life.”

Dad lifted an eyebrow. “Honey, sure, we had a few family camping trips, and you did a couple overnight trips in Girl Scouts. But what you’re talking about is on a whole other level. You didn’t even do the summer-camp-in-the-woods thing.”

I put my fork down. “And whose fault is that?” I teased. “You two were the ones who insisted I needed to spend my summers working. ‘You’ll never learn to respect money until you go out and earn your own.’”

Even Sam chuckled at my “serious dad” impression.

“Mary, you make it sound like we sent you to work in the coal mines!” Mom laughed. “You babysat, walked Mrs. Feldman’s dog, and helped out at Julian’s place.”

Julian nodded. “Mary was a godsend the way she tamed my clutter. She organized my office, sorted my patient files, kept me from drowning in paperwork . . . And she spent hours in the garden with Rose.”

“I think she loved teaching me about flowers almost as much as I loved learning about them,” I said softly.

The table quieted for a moment at the mention of her.

Then Julian smiled a little. “She always had some new project going out there. Her whole little gnome-and-fairy kingdom tucked in among the herbs . . . mushrooms, lanterns, tiny benches. She could lose an entire afternoon arranging it.”

I laughed softly. “I loved that garden.”

We were all smiling now, even Sam—until Mom’s voice gentled again.

“Well, despite our stroll down memory lane, this program will be incredibly demanding,” she said, then glanced at Sam. “Sam, you’re still not a hundred percent after your accident.”

Julian blinked. “Accident?”

Mom filled him in on the horrifying details.

He turned to my sister with a gentle, concerned expression.

“My dear, Theresa has a valid point. Do you think it’s wise to take this on right now? Perhaps you two should stay closer to home—at least for the time being. I’d be happy to arrange a referral at Miami Killian Medical Center. Maybe another few months of rehab before something so physically intense . . .”

The color drained from Sam’s cheeks. She shook her head quickly.

“No, thank you . . . I’m fine. Really. I’m good . . .”

For someone so tough, she always seemed startled by sincere concern. I nudged her knee under the table.

“It’s true,” I said firmly. “Sam’s been working extra hard. I’ve even started teaching her to swim in the pool. But thank you, Uncle Jules. You’re super sweet.”

Julian nodded and moved smoothly on to complimenting Mom’s lemony brussels sprouts.

I leaned over so only my sister could hear me.

“It’s going to be so amazing!” I whispered excitedly.

She smiled, the most genuine smile I’d seen all day.

“I know. I’m counting the days.”

As it turned out, those days were already running out.

Chapter Eleven

JENN

Ten years ago

After that horrific night in the ER, six hours after discharging Cami Miller, I was sitting on the floor outside Dr. Braithwaite's office, shaking so hard my teeth hurt. I'd walked the hospital for hours, adrenaline tearing through me until my body finally gave out right there in the hallway.

"Jennifer?" he said when he arrived, dropping to a knee beside me. "What's happened?"

I tried to speak, but nothing came out. He guided me inside, settled me in a chair, and waited.

And then it all came out of me in a single, jagged breath: Cami's visit, her parents' fear, the intake, Kellogg snapping at me, refusing to admit her. By the time I finished, I was crying—ugly, gasping tears I hated giving him or anyone else.

Julian handed me tissues and crouched beside me. "Jenn, you didn't do anything wrong," he said gently. "David Kellogg can be . . . difficult. What you're describing is unacceptable, and I'll deal with it. But you? You're safe. I won't let anyone jeopardize your residency."

That promise—the confidence in his voice—felt like someone lifting a boulder off my chest.

"I was afraid he'd retaliate," I remember whispering. "That he'd try to get me fired."

"Nonsense," he said firmly. "I'll keep you off his rotation for a while, give you breathing room. You did what you were trained to do. This will blow over."

He squeezed my shoulder like a father reassuring his kid after a nightmare.

"Go home," he said. "Sleep. Let me take care of the rest."

And I believed him. Completely.

How tragic that I did.

Exhausted, I went home and collapsed into bed—sleep brought a few hours' peace before the ringing phone dragged me back.

"Hello?" I rasped, unable to summon the energy—or the will—to sound awake.

"Jennifer?" A woman's voice.

"Mm-hmm."

"Jennifer, this is Maggie O'Day."

My eyes flew open. Maggie was the director of residents at Miami Killian. If she was calling me, then Kellogg had probably reported me for insubordination.

Shit.

If they put a permanent note in my file, I might never get a job after residency.

"Um—hi, Maggie. How are you?"

She didn't bother with pleasantries.

"I'm calling to inform you that your residency has been suspended pending an internal investigation," she said crisply. "You'll receive written notice—"

I bolted upright. "I'm sorry—what did you just say?"

"Dr. Flores, you will not be permitted to practice until the investigation is complete. Someone will contact you to arrange a meeting with legal."

Oh my God—he'd actually gotten me suspended.

"I don't . . ." I stopped, rubbing a hand over my face. "Is that really necessary? He was completely out of line. Dr. Kellogg was in a foul mood last night. I wasn't the only one he yelled at."

Silence. Then—

"Dr. Flores—Jenn—did you treat and discharge a woman named Cami Miller last night?"

Something twisted low in my stomach, acid rising in my throat.

"I did . . ."

"Perhaps you're not aware—Miss Miller died by suicide a few hours later. Her parents are, understandably, distraught. Their attorney has already been in contact."

The room seemed to tilt as the hand not holding the phone flew to my mouth.

“Oh . . . oh my God . . .” I whispered. “I told him. I told Kellogg she needed to be admitted, but he wouldn’t listen . . .”

“Do you have an attorney, Dr. Flores?”

“What? No! And residents are covered under the hospital’s insurance, right?”

Her voice dropped, suddenly cautious. “Jenn, listen to me carefully because I won’t say this again—and I’ll deny it if you tell anyone I did. When you hang up this phone, get yourself a good attorney. Do not wait, and do not speak to anyone but that person. Do you understand?”

“But I talked to Dr. Braithwaite this morning—”

“No one,” she snapped, then shifted back to her professional tone as if the outburst had never happened.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped listening. Cami was dead, and I was already the scapegoat.

“Thank you,” I managed before hanging up and sprinting for the bathroom, barely making it before the vomiting started.

When there was nothing left, I curled on the cool tile, cheek pressed to the floor, until the sunlight through the window dimmed to gray and the cicadas began outside. Then I pushed myself up, found my phone, and made the only decision that felt possible.

I didn’t care what Maggie said. Julian Braithwaite was the only person who could make this go away. And I knew he would never let me down.

How wrong I’d been. Even a decade later, I still cringe at my own naivete.



Friday morning

A door clicks shut somewhere down the hall, and the sound pulls me back to now—to Julian’s office, the smell of his bergamot tea and leather bindings. He looks every bit the kindly, fatherly professor. The illusion owes a lot to the setting. Where Kellogg’s office was all glass and sunlight, Julian’s is a study in comfort. The blinds are drawn against the harsh Miami

glare, and the light is warm, amber, forgiving. Bookcases climb to the ceiling, and a pair of well-worn armchairs sit tucked in the corner.

I'm sitting in one now as he joins me, carrying one of his trademark red leather notebooks. At first glance he looked almost unchanged, but now that we're alone and I have a chance to really study him, I can see the subtle wear: the faint looseness around his jaw, the softened line of his shoulders, the way he settles into his chair with a sigh he probably doesn't realize he made.

"Still using the red journals," I note.

He smiles, sheepish. "Yes, though I have to order them custom these days—the company went under years ago."

"Still one for every patient?"

He nods. "One per patient, per year. Hardly high tech, but it keeps my thoughts organized—and off the grid."

"Well, you've got a point there."

He clears his throat and gestures toward my arm. "And I see you've kept one of your old habits. Still need it?"

I glance down at the pink elastic peeking from under my sleeve.

"I do this week."

My dry tone earns a quick, genuine laugh from him—an echo from another life. I can't help smiling back.

"I'm glad you came," he says at last, earnest now. "I wasn't at all certain you would."

"Neither was I."

"I know you won't believe this, but it makes me very happy to see how well you're doing. You've become an exceptional doctor, Jenn. Truly."

"Yes, well. I'm sure you expected otherwise."

"What? No!"

I hold up a hand. "Come on, Julian. Ten years isn't long enough to pretend nothing happened. You knew exactly what went down, and you still backed Kellogg."

He takes off his glasses, rubs the bridge of his nose. When he looks up again, he seems older, smaller.

"Jenn," he says quietly, "there's nothing I can say to make it right. But for context—David was up for a promotion. The board adored him. I knew he'd be my boss within weeks. And my wife . . . you remember Rose. She

had stage-three ovarian cancer. David promised to get her into a clinical trial if I recused myself from your hearing.”

I study his face for any flicker of deceit. Nothing. Then again, Julian has always been a master at keeping his expression neutral.

I remember when Rose was first diagnosed—how he took a leave to take her everywhere: Sloan Kettering, Mayo, Dana-Farber. Back then, it reassured me, seeing how fiercely he loved her. There’d been rumors years earlier, before my residency—something about a graduate fellow he’d mentored a little too closely. But I’d never witnessed anything that aligned with the gossip. With me, he’d always been professional, polished, devoted.

Maybe he was both things at once.

Maybe he’s telling the truth now. Maybe not.

In the end, does it really matter why he did it?

“And did it help?” I ask flatly.

“It bought her another year. A good one.” He sighs. “I’ll always hate David for forcing my hand, but I won’t lie—I’d do it again. I regret the means, but not the time we gained.”

And there it is. Desperate people do desperate things.

We sit in silence for a long moment, the air heavy between us.

“You’re close with the Langstons,” I finally say.

Relief flickers across his face at the pivot to neutral territory.

“Yes. I knew Doug’s father, Lloyd, for years—consulted for Langston Pharma. They were actually estranged for some time after Doug and Theresa married. But when they adopted Mary, everything changed.” He pauses for a long, thoughtful moment. “They’re good people who adore their daughter, Jenn. That much will be obvious when I introduce you.”

The last line stops me short.

“Oh, that’s really not necessary, Julian. It’s better if I go alone. I’d like to get my own read first.”

He hesitates, thumb running along the spine of his red notebook.

“They trust me, Jenn. It might make things easier.”

“I’ll manage,” I assure him politely but firmly.

“Yes, of course,” he agrees with a weary nod.

The sadness in his face tugs at something old and buried. His confession about Rose has loosened memories I’ve spent years trying to pack away. I flash on my husband’s face—his steady warmth, the way he anchors me—and feel a small shudder at the thought of losing him.

Maybe that's why I offer the tiniest olive branch.

"Julian," I say quietly, "I'm sorry about Rose."

For a moment we're just two people staring at one another across the wreckage of a decade.

"Thank you," he says gently. "I appreciate that, Jenn."

And, for the first time in years, I almost believe him.



They've been thoughtful enough to clear a small office for me to use, and I take advantage of it to go through Mary's file before meeting with her parents in an hour. I'm so engrossed, I don't even register that someone has entered the room.

"Hard at work, I see," Kellogg says as he drops down into the chair across from me.

I look up at him. "Something I can do for you, Dr. Kellogg?"

"Word is out that Samantha is dead and Mary's being treated here. The news trucks are already setting up camp in the parking lot, and the hospital's PR office is being flooded with requests for a news conference."

"Are you planning on giving one?" I ask, curious to observe him in this new role of his.

New to me, anyway.

"No, but we are about to release a statement saying that she's been admitted for treatment following an accident in Everglades National Park and is in stable condition."

I nod. "Sounds reasonable enough."

He cocks his head to one side, obviously assessing me. "We settled, you know. With the Millers. For nearly a million dollars."

I did know there'd been a settlement—I just didn't know how much.

After the catastrophic hearing, the hospital agreed to facilitate a quick and quiet transfer to another residency program so I could finish out my training in peace—away from Miami Killian, Julian Braithwaite, and David Kellogg.

I try to keep my face impassive as I shrug. "Oh, I don't know, a million dollars seems pretty cheap for the life of a child," I reply coolly. "It would have cost you a hell of a lot more if you hadn't settled."

"Yeah, well, clearly it hasn't hurt my career."

I don't comment. Instead, I pose a question that's been niggling at me since I got Julian's call. "Why am I here?"

He doesn't miss a beat.

"Because the Langstons are powerful people with a lot of money invested in this hospital, and it's in our best interests to see Mary gets the best possible care. And, like it or not, Julian's right about you being the best person for this particular case." I'm about to applaud his newfound maturity, but then he goes and ruins it by opening his mouth once more. "Plus, if this goes south, you'll make a great scapegoat. So . . . win-win," he informs me with a grin.

Gabe would tell me to ignore him. Stef would tell me to eviscerate him.

I swear, it's like having a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other.

In the end, I meet them somewhere in the middle, sighing disappointedly. "Really? Is that the best you've got? Well, good luck with that because I'm not a lowly resident anymore. I'm a well-established practitioner in this field. And I wasn't the one who got caught falsifying charts and forging signatures. I'm not the one who sent a fourteen-year-old home to die."

He gets to his feet. "You know, Dr. Flores, medicine's not a fairy tale. There are no heroes and villains—just people who make hard calls. Some of us stomach it better than others."

"I'm pretty sure you're the villain now—just like you were back then."

He smiles thinly. "Keep telling yourself that. In the end, this place doesn't care who's right. It cares who's still standing."

He doesn't wait for my reply before strolling out the door.

Chapter Twelve

MARY

Five years ago

When she spun the chair around to face the mirror, I was struck speechless. I watched, fascinated, as the stranger—the woman who looked like me, but not really—reached up to press a lock of her hair between her fingers. It felt soft and silky, the new cut fringing my face perfectly.

“You look amazing!” my stylist told me. “Why didn’t we do this sooner? The shorter hair suits that pretty heart-shaped face of yours perfectly!”

She was right: it did. Of course, I’d known that long before I walked through the doors of the salon. I only had to conjure an image of Sam to know exactly how the cut would look on me.

We were less than a month out from our excursion to Oregon. I just had to try and keep the uneasy peace that had settled in our house until then, hoping that a little distance might just give my parents a better impression of Sam and our burgeoning friendship. They’d come around once they realized how close we’d become and how she made me push my limits—doing things outside of my comfort zone.

The haircut was totally my idea, and I planned to follow it up with a tattoo that matched Sam’s. I’d been thinking about how fun it would have been to have an identical twin when I was a kid—fooling teachers, taking tests for each other, covering for each other . . . We had missed out on the whole *The Parent Trap* experience! But that didn’t mean we still couldn’t have a little fun with it.

My intention had been to spring it on my sister first, then the two of us could surprise my parents together. But my mom intercepted me the second I walked through the front door.

“Sam? I wonder if you and I might have a chat?”

She didn't give me so much as a second glance. I couldn't believe it. My own mother couldn't tell us apart!

"Yeah, sure," I replied, imitating my sister's flatter, cooler affect.

Following her out onto the back patio, I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from cracking up and giving it away. I wanted to see just how far I could go—just how long before she caught on and we had a good laugh over it.

"Come, sit with me," she said, leading us to the sofa under the large gazebo across from the pool. "Look, Samantha—Sam," my mom began once we were settled, "we understand you've done without your entire life. And you know what? That doesn't have to be the case anymore."

I felt my heartbeat pick up a little. Finally! They were finally coming around. The wave of relief was so strong that it was practically euphoric.

"Oh yeah? Great," I said, pairing my best Sam-centric tone with her signature nonchalant shrug. "What were you thinking?"

My mind was whirring with the possibilities . . . Maybe they'd ask her to move in here permanently. Maybe they'd offer to get the two of us a condo on campus. Maybe they'd—

My thoughts came to an abrupt and screeching halt when she pulled something out of her pocket and held it out for me to take.

"What is that?" I asked, staring down at the folded check.

"Consider it seed money. Just a little something to get you set up—wherever you want to go. It's enough for a car and moving expenses, for several months' rent, incidentals . . . If you spend it wisely, you'll be set for some time, Samantha."

My hands had a slight tremor as I took the paper from her and opened it.

Two hundred thousand dollars.

"And there's more," my mother continued as I scrambled to process what was happening at that moment. "Once you give us a bank account number, there will be a . . . let's say . . . stipend . . . deposited on the first of each month for an additional five thousand dollars." She sat back and considered me—or Sam, as it were. Because Theresa Langston had never once looked at me with the kind of cool detachment she was looking at me with at that moment. Now that she thought I was someone else.

I jumped a little, startled when she put a hand on my knee.

“Sam, it’s enough to keep you comfortable the rest of your life. You don’t even have to work if you don’t want to. Or maybe you’ll start that company—that tour company you talk about. You could go to another country, even! South America, Europe . . . We could certainly help you get what you need to make an international move if that’s what you wanted. Really, the possibilities are endless.”

I tried to swallow past the hard lump that had formed in my throat, but my voice still came out sounding strained. “Is that . . . ?” I began, closed my eyes for a second and tried again. “What’s the catch?”

My mother’s mouth tightened slightly at the corners. She never did like dealing with the nitty-gritty details of business. That was for my father, for the attorneys, for other people to hash out. But I imagined her and my father deciding that this particular pitch would be best coming from a woman. From her.

“You have to cut off all communication with Mary.”

Bitter bile filled my mouth, and I had to swallow quickly.

“She’s my sister,” I said when I was sure I could speak without gagging and retching right there on the six-figure Persian rug. “And we’ve only just found each other—”

“But is she?” Mom asked more sharply than I expected. “Is she really your sister, Samantha?”

“Well, yeah . . . obviously . . .”

She shook her head. “This is what I keep telling Mary—simply sharing DNA, simply looking like someone, does not automatically bond you together for life. Come now, Sam,” she said conspiratorially, softening her tone and volume. “We both know you’re not looking for a ready-made family. You’ve been on your own for so long! You’re independent—doing what you want to do when you want to do it, with no one to answer to.”

“And . . . uh . . . what would you tell Mary? About me just . . . disappearing?”

My mother scoffed and waved a hand. “Pfft. We’ll find a suitable story.”

It was as if someone flipped a switch in me. Sitting there, knowing I looked exactly like Sam, somehow emboldened me to tamp down the “good girl” in me and channel my grittier, savvier counterpart.

“You don’t think she’ll be upset? That this might hurt her after we’ve gotten so close?”

Her smile was all ice. "Trust me, Sam, she'll get over it."

Did she really think that? Was it possible my mother believed me to be so shallow and vacuous that I could somehow be manipulated into forgetting I had a twin?

"Yeah? I'm not so sure about that."

"I am."

"And . . . if I say no?" I ventured, curious to see what the answer would be.

Her expression hadn't moved a millimeter. If anything, the chilly smile broadened, as if she were delighted to hear the question. "Oh, Sam," she said in a lowered, markedly darker voice, "you do not want to test me. This family has limitless resources, and I promise you I will use every single one of them to make your life more difficult than you ever imagined possible."

"Yeah, that'd be some trick. I'd like to see you try."

My mother and I both turned at the sound of my sister's voice behind us. Neither of us had noticed her leaning there against one of the gazebo poles.

"Love the haircut, Mary," she said, with an approving smile. Then she looked to my mom, whose mouth hung open, her eyes huge as they moved from her to me and back again. And again. And again. "What do you think, Terry? Damn near impossible to tell us apart now, right?"

"M-Mary?" Mom whispered at me.

I stood up and walked over to Sam. "My parents want to give you a couple hundred thousand dollars to go away. You interested?" I asked her loud enough for my mother to hear.

Sam threw her head back and laughed. "Seriously? That's what she was telling you?"

I pulled the folded check from my pocket and held it up for her to look at.

"Wow. I don't think I've ever seen my name attached to a number with so many zeroes behind it!" she marveled, amused. She looked around me to my mom. "Tempting, Terry, but I don't need your bribe. I'd rather have my sister. Come on," she said to me. "Let's get packing. I think maybe we should leave sooner rather than later."

I sighed sadly, shaking my head as my mother looked on, incredulous and struck silent.

“You know what, Mom, I never would have believed it if I hadn’t heard it myself. If I hadn’t seen your expression with my own two eyes. My God, but you’re a convincing liar! Makes me wonder what else you’ve said over the years that was total and complete bullshit.” I savored the curse as I said it, another layer of insult to hurl out in the wake of the pain I was feeling.

“Mary—” she tried, but I cut her off abruptly.

“No. I’m done,” I spat at her with more venom than I’d known I had in me. “You don’t get a say in my life. Not ever again.”

“You don’t mean that—”

“I do!” I assured her loudly.

“Mary, baby, please don’t go. Not like this . . .”

My mouth twisted into the same smile she’d given me not five minutes earlier. And when I spoke, it was a perfect imitation of her voice, her tone.

“Trust me, Mom, you’ll get over it.”

Chapter Thirteen

JENN

Friday morning

When I arrive at the hospital coffee shop, Doug and Terry Langston are already waiting at a corner table by the window, set apart from the buzz of the breakfast crowd. Their pallor, the tremor in their hands as they stir untouched lattes—these are the faces of people who haven’t slept in days.

There’s a third cup on the table.

Before I can process that, a familiar baritone sounds behind me.

“Jennifer.”

Every nerve in my body braces. I turn to find Julian—whose office I left not an hour ago—standing there, a plate of pastries in hand.

“I thought I’d join long enough to make introductions,” he says smoothly, reiterating his offer from our earlier conversation.

The one I declined.

“I see.”

“I didn’t want to leave Doug and Terry alone at a time like this,” he explains softly.

I manage a tight smile. *Actually, that would’ve been exactly the point.* I’d wanted a clean read on them—no third-party interference, least of all his. Whatever thawing that began back in his armchair has started to reverse course.

Doug rises at once, relief and deference flickering across his face as we approach.

“You must be Dr. Flores. I’m Doug Langston,” the man begins, then gestures toward his wife, who’s still seated. “And this is my wife, Theresa—Terry. Julian’s told us so much about you.”

Has he now?

My old mentor gives that practiced paternal half smile.

“Indeed! Jennifer and I go back a long way. One of the finest residents I ever had.”

My throat feels dry as chalk. “I understand you’ve known Dr. Braithwaite for quite some time.”

“Yes, we’re so grateful for Julian. Thank God we have him to help us navigate this nightmare,” Terry says in the raspy voice of the emotionally exhausted.

Julian lays a hand on her shoulder. “You focus on your daughter, Theresa. Let the rest of us worry about logistics.” His tone is a tranquilizer in human form.

Doug looks at me, desperate. “They still won’t let us see her. Julian says it’s standard, but she’s our child. She won’t even talk to us.”

“She’s frightened,” Julian answers before I can. “And familiar faces can be . . . overwhelming at a time like this. But I can assure you, Mary is in excellent hands with Dr. Flores here.”

“I’ll do everything I can for her,” I tell them, in as comforting a tone as I can manage.

Braithwaite deposits the plate of pastries on the table and grabs his coffee. “I’ll leave you to talk. Call me when you’ve finished, Doug.”

His hand squeezes Doug’s shoulder.

When he leaves the cafeteria, my chest seems to loosen, my lungs expanding more deeply. I offer the Langstons a warm smile. Not that they notice.

“I don’t know what we would have done without that man,” Terry murmurs, watching as he walks away.

I slip into the chair he was occupying before I arrived and use a napkin to wipe away the ring of condensation left behind by his mug and take my first good look at the couple.

Terry Langston is all sharp lines and lean strength, her short salt-and-pepper layers swept back off her face in an easy, no-nonsense style that gives her a trim, slightly boyish look that somehow suits her completely. Beside her, Doug carries more heft than his wife, though not in an unhealthy way—just the sturdy, softened edges that come with middle age. His hair is a mix of brown and silver that looks sun faded rather than aged.

“You seem very close,” I note.

The couple nods in tandem.

“But it wasn’t just that,” Terry Langston pipes up. “Julian was a sort of . . . a peace broker . . . between Doug and his father. They’d had a terrible falling out after we got married . . .”

Doug lets out an incredulous bark of laughter. “Hah! More like Dad had a colossal meltdown! He disowned me. Wrote me out of the will, the whole thing. My father was a miserable man for a long time after my mother died. He hated the world and everyone in it, including me.”

“So what changed?”

“Julian. He knew we’d been trying desperately to have a baby for a few years with no luck. Turns out he sat on the board of a private adoption agency and pulled some strings to get us to the top of the waitlist.”

My jaw tightens. This is a pretty big detail that dear Dr. Braithwaite neglected to share with me. And it explains the vibe I’m getting here—that they see him as a savior, a benevolent hand behind the curtain.

I keep my expression neutral. “That was very generous of him.”

“Julian’s been more than generous,” Terry says. “He’s family.”

I file that away. *Family*.

And we all know you don’t treat your own family. It’s unethical. And in this hospital—in most every hospital—it’s strictly forbidden.

But then, if you can bring in someone else to do it for you . . . someone you think you can manage . . .

I shake my head slightly as if I can pry the thought loose. It’s entirely possible I’m overthinking this. Before he failed to support me against Kellogg, I, too, thought the world of Julian. Just because our relationship soured doesn’t necessarily make him a bad person. Or a bad doctor. Before I can give this any more consideration, Terry continues with the story.

“Julian made sure Lloyd—my father-in-law—knew he had a granddaughter, and that she’d been named for Doug’s mother, Mary Louise,” she explained, tears brimming behind her lashes. “The first time Lloyd laid eyes on her . . . he just wept.”

“Dr. Flores, my father had liver cancer and wasn’t expected to live long. So we moved in to help with his care and so he could spend as much time with the baby as possible. But then . . . it was amazing—he didn’t die!”

I shift in my chair so I’m leaning in closer to the couple. “Really?”

“Really! Tough old bird went on to live another six years!” Doug exclaims. “I swear it was that little girl. It was Mary. She’s always had a

way of bringing sunshine with her wherever she goes.”

At this comment Terry chokes back a sob, placing a hand over her mouth. “But now . . .”

“But now . . . what?” I coax.

Doug sighs heavily as he pats his wife on the arm. “She’s totally cut us out of her life. We haven’t spoken to her in nearly two years. She won’t see us. Not even now . . . now that all this has happened. But we’re praying that she’ll talk to you.”

I offer them my warmest smile. The one that—hopefully—conveys my empathy and concern, the latter of which I suddenly have a lot of as I take in their haggard appearances. Her forehead is permanently creased where the brows pull it down into a frown, while his mouth is set in a perpetual pucker of concern. It’s the kind of wear and tear that comes from years of protracted worrying.

“Well, I’ll be meeting her later this afternoon, and I promise you I’ll broach the subject with her,” I assure them. “From there, though, it’s totally up to her.”

Terry grabs onto my comment like it’s a life raft.

“So she’s well enough to speak with you?” She starts wiping her damp face with the back of her hands. “Do you know—can you at least tell us how she’s doing? Physically, I mean? Is she terribly hurt? Should we be contacting larger hospitals with more resources or a specialist of some sort?”

Time to inch my way out onto the tightrope. Julian was right about this much: Their intentions are so sincere that I can’t help but be affected by their love and concern. Still, I have to be careful with how much I disclose.

“As I said, I have yet to meet her personally, but, from what I’ve been told, she’s stable.”

Theresa Langston presses a hand to her chest and closes her eyes. “Oh, thank you, Jesus. Thank you,” she murmurs, crossing herself with a trembling hand.

Before they can ask for more details than I’m able to give them, I lean forward in my seat slightly, both hands wrapped around my paper cup on the table. “I wonder . . . would you be comfortable telling me what happened? Why it is, exactly, there’s this rift between all of you?”

Doug doesn’t let an entire second tick by before spitting his response. “It was *her*.”

The three words are a pronouncement, a condemnation. And it takes me a second to figure out who he's talking about.

"You mean . . . Samantha?"

They nod in somber agreement, unquestionably united in their belief that Mary's twin is responsible for the breakdown of their relationship with their daughter.

"We were always so close," Terry tells me insistently. "I know it's hard to believe, but we never had any of that tween or teen drama. She shared everything with us—wanted us to know every little thing that was going on in her life! We were just that kind of family. Then she went off to college . . ."

Doug smirks, running a hand through his hair as he shakes his head, conveying total and complete disbelief. "It was a total fluke. One in a million, maybe. I mean, Mary got into Vassar, NYU, and UC Berkeley!" he says, pointing his index finger at me as he rattles off the colleges. "If she'd gone to any one of those—hell, if she'd gone *anywhere* else . . ." He lets himself fall back against the chair with a sigh that's brimming with regret. "If any one of a thousand tiny things had been different, then they never would have crossed paths, and none of this would have ever happened."

Terry picks up the narrative here. It's like watching a relay race with participants handing off the verbal baton between laps. "It was the first time she'd really been away from home—from us," she explains. "And she was only there a few days when"—she makes a circular gesture with her hand as if to encompass something floating in the ether around us—"when that girl turned up out of nowhere. That's when all hell broke loose."

This is a decidedly darker spin than the one that was peddled in the news and across social media—the miraculous reunion of identical twins separated at birth.

"May I ask—I can't recall ever having seen a comment or quote from either of you. No interviews or talk show appearances. Nothing like that."

"Because we had nothing good to say about this situation," Doug tells me flatly.

"Okay, I get that. I guess maybe I'm surprised you didn't say that publicly."

He scoffs. "Oh, we wanted to, believe me. But we couldn't. Not if we wanted to maintain any sort of relationship with our daughter."

"I'm not sure I understand . . ."

“It was like we were being held hostage!” Terry snaps, suddenly agitated. “We couldn’t criticize Sam. We couldn’t question her motives or confront her. We couldn’t say a single word against her—not privately to Mary, and certainly not in the media. Our daughter made it perfectly clear that doing anything of the sort would result in her cutting us off—for good this time.”

The last part of the sentence catches my attention.

“This time? So . . . she’d cut you off before?”

Tears brim in Terry’s eyes. “Look, Dr. Flores, we’re a devout Christian family,” she replies, ignoring my question. “We make a great effort to not be judgmental, but she just . . . she made it very difficult for us to like her. Mary wanted so much for Samantha to be a part of our family, but how could she be? She hated us! She mocked us and everything we stand for.” Terry drops back again, rubbing the bridge of her nose with one hand while holding up the other toward the ceiling. “She was just so . . . different from Mary. How could two people who share that much DNA turn out to be so completely different?”

I sit back as well, folding my arms across my chest as I shrug. “That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it? Nature versus nurture, right? Scientists have been trying to crack that code for centuries. We know that some things are hardwired into us, other things are learned from our environment and the people who populate it.” I glance out the window, spotting a pair of nurses in burgundy scrubs having lunch at a table in the courtyard.

“Not having met Sam, I can’t say for certain,” I say, “but from everything I remember from the coverage . . . it always sounded like she’d had a rough upbringing. Those pieces made it hard *not* to feel for her. Kids who grow up in custodial care—through no fault of their own—don’t have an easy time of it. They learn to fend for themselves long before they should have to, and that kind of history carries weight.”

“Look, even if that’s the case,” Doug says, getting more riled up by the second, “wouldn’t you think she’d have at least a tiny bit of gratitude for what we were offering her? But no! Heaven forbid she say ‘Thank you’ or ‘I really appreciate that.’ It was like we owed her something!”

I tilt my head to one side as I consider this. “Like what? What kind of help did you offer Sam?”

“Well, we let her come and live with us after her accident, for one thing,” Terry begins, then pauses.

“What accident is that?”

She goes on to tell me about how Sam fell out of a moving car that Mary was driving. It occurred the same day Mary and Sam had surprised them by just showing up at the house. Things had not gone very well, apparently.

“Of course we felt guilty,” Terry says. “How could we not? The way Mary stomped out of there like that . . . And then we thought she’d been hurt as well. We were absolutely frantic until we got to the emergency room and saw for ourselves that she was safe! But Sam—the poor girl was a mess. What were we supposed to do? Just leave her there, all alone?”

“Regardless,” her husband adds, “we took her in and made certain she had everything she could possibly need for a comfortable recovery—only for her to turn around and challenge us at every turn, questioning everything we said or did.”

“Okay, like what?” I press.

Doug scoffs. “Pfft, what didn’t she criticize? Our house was too big, our cars were too flashy, we threw money around. In her mind we were some kind of caricature of wealthy, entitled people who were out of touch with how ‘real people’ lived their lives,” he says, making air quotes around *real people*.

“Which was just nonsense,” Theresa informs me flatly. “Nothing could have been further from the truth. I came from a poor rural community in Georgia. My parents had nothing to give us but their love and their faith—but my home was a happy one. That’s what I wanted for our daughter.”

I’m struck by the sincerity in Terry Langston’s words, the conviction. “I can see that Sam’s portrayal of you as a couple—as a family—really bothered you.”

“Well, yes, of course it did! We may have money, but we believe in living modestly and humbly. And we believe in giving back. Those years when Doug and his father weren’t speaking were some lean ones for us. We know what it is to live in a dump, eating peanut butter sandwiches and ramen noodles every night because you can’t afford anything else. So for her to imply—no, for her to *accuse* us of being elitist and out of touch is just . . . it’s infuriating! There she was, our guest, all the while looking for ammunition to turn our daughter against us.”

“She questioned everything and had no respect for our authority in our own home,” Doug adds. “All she did was disregard whatever boundaries we

tried to put in place. It was a nightmare. From the moment Samantha Kinski came into our daughter's orbit, she did her damndest to undermine our relationship with her."

"I'm wondering if, perhaps, all this might have somehow been the result of a miscommunication—" I hold up my palms when they open their mouths to object. "Please, just hear me out. When I say that, I only mean that your family dynamic was so foreign to Sam that she couldn't wrap her head around it. I wonder if she literally *could not* relate to it because it was something she had never encountered in her own life. So I guess what I'm asking is this—are you sure this was all intentional on Sam's part?"

I'm not prepared for the unequivocal response I get from both of Mary's parents at exactly the same moment.

"Oh, without a doubt."

"Absolutely."

I let out a huff of air. "Okay, well." I address both of them, my gaze moving back and forth between their faces, my forearms spread open on the table. "Let's look at this. I mean, here Mary discovers she has a sister. And not just any sister, an identical twin sister. I'd say that's pretty extraordinary, wouldn't you? Especially after years of being an adopted 'only child'? I mean, she goes from having no blood relatives to finding someone with the same DNA."

"But that's the thing," Terry objects. "We could not have loved her more had we made her. Mary was never alone. She always had us—almost from the day she was born!"

I offer a sympathetic smile of understanding. Because I do understand. I understand that they don't understand. They couldn't possibly—no one who hasn't had the unique experience of sharing a womb for nine months could.

As I'm having this thought, Doug wraps an arm around his wife's shoulders, pulling her into him.

I do a quick inventory of my instincts and what they're telling me as I watch the couple in front of me.

I don't doubt these two love their daughter.

I don't doubt that they're out of their minds with worry for her.

And I don't doubt they're lying to me about something.

I'm just not sure what that is.

Yet.

Chapter Fourteen

MARY

Five years ago

When the phone rang for the fifth time in an hour, I shoved it under my pillows.

In retrospect, I probably should've planned better. But everything happened so fast, I barely had time to think. It wasn't like I could just hang around after that stunt my parents pulled. Ready or not, leaving right then and there had felt like the only choice. Storming upstairs and slamming my door would've made me look like a brat. Driving cross-country made me look like I meant it.

Now, though, as the motel air conditioner rattled and spat out another puff of vaguely damp "cool" air, I wondered if maybe there was a middle ground I'd missed. The place Sam found online was called the Sunset Traveler's Lodge—though "lodge" was generous. Two double beds, floral bedspreads with cigarette burns, and a faded print of Mount Hood hanging crooked over the TV. The carpet was thin enough to feel the concrete underneath, and the air smelled faintly of Pine-Sol and old smoke.

Still, we were only twenty minutes from the headquarters of the North American Wilderness Academy—close enough that we could see the mountains rising in the distance when we pulled into the parking lot earlier that afternoon. Sam had pressed her forehead to the car window and just breathed, like she was already home.

By the time we crossed the Florida state line, my parents had put the deep freeze on my credit card. I half expected them to report my car stolen, too . . . but that hadn't happened as of yet. And, luckily, they had no access to my checking and savings accounts. I didn't have enough cash to sustain us indefinitely, but there was enough to keep a roof over our heads for a while if we stayed in more modest accommodations.

For me, this room was a stopgap. For her, it might as well have been freedom.

“You could just turn it off, you know. Or better yet, get a burner,” Sam suggested casually, like this was totally normal advice.

“A burner?” I echoed with a disbelieving laugh. “What am I? A spy? Is the CIA tracing my movements via satellite too?”

Her expression barely shifted. She shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe. Your folks certainly have the connections.”

“Sam, I think you’ve been watching too many movies,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“You sure?” she countered, tone light but with a shadowy edge underneath. “You really don’t think there’s some kind of tracking app on your phone? That Terry and Doug aren’t watching some blinking, green dot labeled ‘Mary’ on a map right now?”

“You think I’d let them anywhere near my unlocked phone?” I shot back.

She tilted her head, giving me that streetwise, seen-too-much look of hers. “Please. You telling me you bought that phone yourself?”

An image of the silver-wrapped iPhone box under the Christmas tree last year popped into my head. “Well, no, it was a gift. But I set it up from scratch.”

“I don’t know,” she drawled.

Living in close quarters with someone for an extended length of time wasn’t easy, and a few of Sam’s quirks were starting to get on my nerves—like her constant skepticism.

“What?” I huffed, unable to hide my irritation. “What are you getting at? Just freaking say it already!”

Her mouth curled at my choice of words. “You can’t even curse when they’re not here, can you?”

I threw up my hands. “Fine. You want cursing? Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Fuckity fuck. There. You happy?”

Something in her expression changed, and she tilted her head to one side, as if seeing me for the first time. “Why, Mary Langston,” she drawled, “are you a . . . virgin?”

I cringed, winced, and blushed simultaneously, inadvertently revealing the truth—though I did my best to deny it anyway.

“None of your business,” I gritted out.

She sat up on all fours, crawling to the side of the bed so she could sit with her feet on the floor, directly across from me. I had yet to master as permanently impassive an expression as my sister had, and every emotion played out across my face like a movie screen. Sam knew that all too well, and right now she wanted a front-row seat for the show.

“You are!” she exclaimed. “Oh, wow! You really are ‘the Virgin Mary’! That’s . . . That’s so—”

“What?” I jumped in before she could finish the insult. “Pathetic? Sad? Lame as hell?”

She pulled a sheepish face. “I was gonna say ‘refreshing,’ but it sounds like maybe you’re a little sensitive about it.”

“Right, because you’re so worldly,” I muttered—immediately regretting the statement as I recalled her comment from that night in the car when she alluded to having been sexually abused. I rushed to correct the offending statement. “Oh, God, I’m sorry, Sam. That was so insensitive of me . . .”

If she was pissed off or hurt, she didn’t show it. Instead I got a single-shoulder shrug and a long, slow blink—another one of Sam’s dramatic trademark maneuvers. It was jarring to look so much alike but be so fundamentally different.

“Whatever,” she replied nonchalantly. “Sex is no big deal. But trust me, the longer you wait, the more disappointed you’re going to be.”

“Yeah? And why’s that?” I asked—again regretting the knee-jerk response as soon as it was out of my mouth.

I didn’t want to know.

But I did.

No one had ever given me any of the nitty-gritty details.

“Because it’s not like you see on TV or in the movies. And it’s not even close to that shit you read in your romance books,” she informed me, gesturing with her chin toward my paperback on the nightstand between us. “It’s not all that wooing and flirting. It’s not sweet or romantic, so you can just forget about those ‘book boyfriends’ you fall for. You’ll never find a man who’s commanding but not stalkery, fiercely protective but not overbearing, or ridiculously handsome and independently wealthy—but who picks plain Jane over slutty Sally every time. Oh, yeah, and that part where they know your body better than you do and can give you orgasms

for days? Total and utter bullshit. Those guys don't exist outside the pages of a trashy romance."

I glanced down at the book with its well-worn spine. The mythical man she described was exactly the one within those pages—dark, brooding, possessive, adoring. He was, in fact, a pretty accurate rendering of the guy who starred in all my fantasies. Before I could comment, she spoke again, her voice quieter and uncharacteristically serious.

"Sex isn't pretty, Mary. It's about power and aggression."

"Sam," I started slowly, cautiously, "did someone . . . Were you raped?"

My twin stared at me for a long beat.

"No, Mary," she said softly. "No one tied me up or held a gun to my head, if that's what you're asking."

"No one has to hold a gun to your head for it to be rape."

"Will you please just stop using that word?" she asked, growing agitated.

"Which word, Sam? Rape? Because that's what it is when you don't consent. Or when you're too young to consent. Or when the person has power over you and you don't feel like you have any choice but to comply —"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, will you just quit it with the sexual harassment training course already? It wasn't rape. I was not raped. I was involved with an asshole who made me think he actually cared about me, that he maybe even loved me, then he took everything from me."

"What do you mean 'everything'?" I press cautiously.

"My choices. My power. My heart. My soul."

It sounded like rape to me, but I didn't want to agitate her anymore.

"I'm sorry," I said, softer, holding her gaze.

Her expression turned confused. "What have you got to be sorry about? You didn't do anything."

"I'm sorry that it happened to you—whatever it was. It must have been awful."

"Could we please just not?" she asked, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. "I just—I'll maybe talk about it sometime, but not today."

Just like that the facade shifted, and for the briefest of moments, I got a glimpse of the real Sam. She was a child, really—a little girl who'd been playing dress-up in the oversize shoes of a grown woman for far too long.

She was tired and fearful, distrustful and jaded. But underneath it all was the tiniest glimmer of something that looked like hope.

I could work with that. I could be the one she could trust and lean on. I would proudly bear the mantle of her hope if for no other reason than it was painful to see the echoes of her past reflected in the face that we shared. It was too close, too much of a reminder that it could have just as easily been me.

“Well, I think you’re a badass,” I told her softly, then lightened my tone with a grin. “I mean, look how far you’ve come—living in the lap of luxury!”

Totally deadpan, I gestured to the green-carpeted, wood-paneled room around us as my twin watched, her eyes narrowed on me, trying to assess how serious I was.

At last she scoffed and rolled her eyes, giving me a half smirk in the process. “Yeah. This is”—she picked up a corner of the brown-and-orange bedspread she was sitting on—“so retro chic.”

Hearing the muffled buzz of my phone under the pillow, I pulled it out, powered it off, and tossed it across the room.

“Come on,” I said, getting to my feet. “Let’s go find me a spy phone.” She laughed, and for the first time, it felt real. We felt real.

Chapter Fifteen

JENN

Ten years ago

I believed Julian when he told me everything that happened in the ER with David Kellogg that night was going to be okay. There had always been a special bond between us, from the first time I heard him speak on a panel at the University of Miami. He became my mentor, eventually helping me to secure a psychiatric residency under him at Miami Killian.

There was no one I respected or trusted more than Dr. Julian Braithwaite. So when he stopped returning my calls, I drove to his Coconut Grove villa in person.

The front door swung open before I could even get out of my car, as if he'd been waiting for me.

"Why aren't you taking my calls?" I asked, more alarmed than angry.

I'd assumed something must have been wrong—maybe something with his wife, who I knew was battling cancer. "Is Rose . . . Is Rose okay?"

"What?" Confusion clouded his face, then vanished. "No, no, she's fine. Well, not fine, but she's as well as can be expected. No, I'm sorry, I haven't gotten back to you because I *can't*. I can't have any contact with you."

I stood at the bottom of his front steps and looked up at him, incredulous. When I spoke again, my voice was hoarse, its volume barely above a whisper. "You know what's going on? What Kellogg is saying I did?"

"I do, yes," he said, the words tight with regret.

"But . . . you know it's a lie, right? I came to you. I told you what he did. You said it would be okay, that you'd help me!"

"Jenn, listen to me," he began slowly. "You must understand I'm in a delicate position here . . . Until the administration has completed a review

of the events, I'm not permitted to have any contact with you. But trust me, this will all blow over."

"Really? Because I'm not so sure about that." I pulled a folded envelope from my back pocket and waved it at him. "He's filed an official complaint with the state medical board."

Julian winced, closing his eyes for the briefest of moments. When he opened them again, I saw the answer there. The fury that rose in me was nothing compared to the betrayal. He couldn't have hurt me more if he'd slapped me.

I turned toward my car, but not before he could see the tears spilling down my cheeks.

"Jenn, I'm so sorry," he called after me.

I kept my head held high. And I kept walking.



Friday morning

The echo of his voice follows me now—ten years later—as we walk side by side down the hospital corridor.

Same careful gait, same calm tone, same man who once stood on his porch telling me he couldn't help.

Only this time, he's the one leading me somewhere I don't fully trust.

We walk for several long strides in silence before I finally say, "You could have told me."

He glances over, brow furrowed. "Told you what?"

"That you handled the Langstons' adoption."

His expression doesn't change. His voice is as smooth and steady as ever. "It didn't seem relevant."

"Relevant?" I stop walking, forcing him to turn. "You're the reason they're here, Julian. The reason *I'm* here."

He exhales through his nose. "My only concern is Mary's well-being."

A short, humorless laugh escapes me. "The same way *my* well-being was your concern?"

That lands. For the first time, his composure wavers—just a flicker, but I catch it. Then he looks at me, really looks, and says quietly, “You’re right. I should have told you.”

It’s not an apology, not really. But it’s the closest he’s capable of.

I nod once and start walking again. By the time we reach the security desk, the tension has cooled into an uneasy truce.

A guard sits at a small desk flanked by two monitors—one with a spreadsheet of scheduled visitors, the other showing a grid of camera feeds. His name tag reads Jerry. When Julian pulls out his badge, I do the same.

He swipes both our IDs through a card reader and returns them with a polite smile. “Thank you, Dr. B. And welcome, Dr. Flores. I’ve got you cleared for access through Tuesday, correct?”

“Yes, perfect,” I say, matching his professional tone.

He presses the elevator call button for us, and moments later, the doors glide open.

Inside, the lighting is low and cool, the air faintly antiseptic. Neither of us speaks. I watch our reflections in the brushed steel—his posture loose and confident, mine stiff with restraint.

When the doors open again, a wave of soft light and filtered air hits me like I’ve stepped through a portal.

The fifth floor—Executive Care Unit, better known among staff as the VIP ward. While 99 percent of us endure the fluorescent indignities of a regular hospital floor, the remaining 1 percent live in another world entirely: private multiroom suites, one-to-one care, and security that rivals a head of state.

This is my first time stepping foot on one of these floors, and my jaw goes slack.

“My God,” I murmur, taking in the reception area—more boutique hotel than hospital.

He gestures for me to exit first into a bright, polished space where every surface gleams. The marble floor reflects the light from soft-amber sconces. A second security officer gives us a courteous nod as we approach the reception counter, where a woman in a plum suit sits behind a sleek computer terminal.

“Good morning, Margaret,” Julian greets her. “This is Dr. Flores. She’ll have full access to the floor.”

Margaret, fiftysomething, with flawless makeup and honey-brown hair twisted neatly at the back of her head, flashes a professional smile. “Nice to meet you, Dr. Flores. Welcome. I’m one of the concierges.”

“Concierge?” I echo, unable to hide my surprise.

“Yes,” she says, clearly used to the reaction. “Just like at a hotel. Someone’s always here—if you need anything at all, from takeout or flowers to pharmacy deliveries or dinner reservations, just come out here or dial zero.”

“Right . . . okay,” I say, still trying to reconcile these luxuries with the overworked nurses and worn linoleum four floors below. I must look like a tourist, gawking at the framed art and window views of downtown. Somewhere beneath us, patients are waiting eight hours for a bed. But up here? You probably need only sigh before an organic smoothie appears.

Margaret buzzes us through a glass door into a hushed corridor carpeted in muted Persian rugs. Soft sconces throw amber pools of light against taupe walls, and the faint scent of lavender hangs in the air.

“It’s quite something, isn’t it?” Julian asks, with a grin, clearly enjoying my reaction.

“It really is,” I admit, hurrying to keep up. “I knew these units existed; I just never thought I’d set foot in one.”

“Ah, well. You’re in for a treat. Jonathan Adler consulted on the redesign.”

“Seriously?” I laugh. “What, are the menus by Jamie Oliver?”

“Wolfgang Puck Catering,” he corrects.

I stare at him. “You’re kidding.”

He grins. “Would I joke about cuisine?”

“Apparently not,” I mutter.

He continues, almost boastful now. “There’s a private bistro with cooked-to-order meals, a spa, library, outdoor terrace, even a small business center for family members. Patients never have to leave the floor—there’s dedicated imaging and a secure corridor to the OR wing.”

I shake my head. “And here I thought hospitals were supposed to smell like antiseptic.”

Julian chuckles. “Not this one. Not when there’s a full-time homeopath on staff to see to the aromatherapy.”

Unbelievable.

He stops at a door marked **HIBISCUS SUITE** and knocks softly before opening it. Inside stands a nurse in a crisp white tunic edged with navy piping. Her badge reads Shannon. Her muted red hair is twisted up neatly, and her curvy frame gives her an easy, approachable presence. For half a second I think she looks familiar, but the feeling slips away before I can place it. Hundreds of people work in this hospital; plenty of them could still be here after all these years.

“Good morning, Dr. Braithwaite,” she says.

The words are pleasant enough, but her tone—and her face—are all ice.

Huh. Someone’s definitely not a fan of my old mentor.

The room looks nothing like a hospital suite. It’s a hotel penthouse that just happens to contain medical equipment. Damask bedding, gauzy drapes filtering soft sunlight, a wall-mounted flatscreen looping Impressionist art. A small reading nook is tucked into one corner, the bookshelf stocked with hardcovers.

Seated there, her legs curled under a fuzzy blanket, is a girl—pale, bandaged, her eyes wide and wary. The few unmarked patches of skin are chalk white.

Julian’s tone shifts as he approaches, the softness in his voice almost rehearsed. “Good morning, Mary. I’ve brought someone to meet you.”

Her gaze flickers between him and me. She knows him—of course she does. The family friend, the longtime confidant, the man who helped orchestrate her adoption and probably their donation to this hospital.

“Remember I told you about Dr. Flores? She’s come down from New York. She’ll be helping us for a little while.”

Helping us. Not helping you.

“Hi, Mary,” I say gently, keeping my voice even. I want her to hear the difference. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m looking forward to spending some time together—if that’s okay with you.”

She doesn’t respond. Just pulls the blanket closer, turning toward the window.

I can almost feel the weight of her silence. She’s been through something terrible—something words can’t reach. And even if they could, she probably assumes there isn’t anyone who could possibly understand.

But then, I’m not just anyone, am I?

Julian clears his throat beside me. “It’s all right, Mary. Just rest. We’ll come back a little later.”

There’s something in his tone—calm, commanding, proprietary—that rubs me the wrong way. It’s hard to tell if it’s my instincts flagging me or if it’s just my irritation with him. Either way, I choose to ignore his cue to leave the same way we came in. I didn’t come all this distance to not even try.

Moving closer to her chair, I crouch slightly, bringing myself level with her. “You don’t have to talk. Not to me, not to anyone. But it might help. And I promise you, Mary, whatever you say is in strictest of confidence. I can’t—and I won’t—discuss anything you tell me with anyone. Not the police, not your parents.” I glance back over my shoulder and up at Julian. “No one you don’t give me permission to speak with.” My eyes swivel back to meet and hold hers. “I’m going to leave a card with my cell number. I’ll be here till Monday—you can call or text me anytime, day or night. But only if you want to. No one is going to be angry with you if you don’t. I won’t be offended. You can trust me.”

When I utter those last four words, I know I’m not just speaking to Mary Langston. I’m also sending a message to the man standing behind me.

They’re the same words he once said to me.

Only when I say them, I mean them.

Chapter Sixteen

MARY

Four and a half years ago

Our instructor, a fortysomething ex-US Forest Service guy who went by the name “Ranger Rick,” looked like he just stepped out of one of those survival reality shows. Dressed in khaki cargo pants, a matching button-down shirt with the North American Wilderness Academy logo, and hiking boots, he was exactly the kind of rugged, weatherworn character you’d expect to find at a place like this.

Our sixty-day course started off with a PowerPoint presentation in a dark, stuffy auditorium, and it was all I could do to keep my eyes open as he took us through an overview of the “adventure” to come. NAWA was never on my radar before Sam introduced me to the organization, but I was becoming excited at the prospect of spending two months out in nature, away from all the technology.

“This afternoon,” Ranger Rick was saying, “we’ll get you outfitted with backpacks, tents, cookware, and all the other essentials. Starting tomorrow you’ll get some training in basic camp skills like making fires, cooking, and, yes, waste disposal. Ladies, there’ll be a special breakout session that covers menstruation best practices . . .”

There was a collective murmur across the room, including from the seat next to me.

“Oh, yay!” Sam whisper-exclaimed. “Tampons in the wild!”

I smirked and shook my head.

Despite the sarcasm, I knew how excited she was about this. We both were.

“On day three you’ll head out in teams of seven, plus a guide. Half of you will start hiking in the Central Cascade mountain range while the other half starts out river rafting and sea kayaking. After thirty days you’ll switch.”

“God, I hope we get the hiking first,” my sister commented.

“You got this,” I told her with a reassuring smile.

That was the one and only thing she had any insecurity about—the water. With time to kill between when we left home and when this course started, we’d spent the better part of November and December teaching Sam how to swim in the hotel’s indoor pool. And while she’d mastered the basics, she still became anxious if the water was too deep. With a life jacket and a little luck, it wouldn’t be an issue. We just had to make sure Sam stayed in the boat.

Rick advanced the slides so we were looking at a group of campers sitting around an amber-tinted fire. They looked tight. They looked happy. Maybe Sam and I would find our place here.

“No matter where you are or what you’re doing, there will be a major focus on teamwork. It’s not easy to be around the same people twenty-four seven in a challenging environment. You’re bound to get on one another’s nerves. But believe me when I tell you the individuals you spend the next two months with, and the experiences you share, will be part of your lives for years to come.”

I glanced around the small auditorium, where a few dozen other twentysomethings sat around us—some looking more enthusiastic than others. For Sam and me, this was a means to an end. First we’d complete this course—a prerequisite for the more intensive wilderness guide programs, all leading up to certification for work in the forestry service or as private guides. None of it came cheap, but luckily I’d beaten my parents to the punch in collecting the refund for the college classes I never took. Even minus the administrative fees, it was just enough to cover the cost of tuition here for the both of us. For the bargain price of nearly \$10,000, we were about to spend the next several weeks sleeping on the ground, peeing under trees, and interpreting the placement of wild-animal poop.

Later on we bonded with some of our fellow explorers in what appeared to be an exact replica of my high school cafeteria—complete with long tables with their attached benches, and multicompartmented plastic trays.

“Mmm, look,” Sam said, elbowing me as she poked at her plate. “Mac and cheese! This was always my favorite in school.”

“I wouldn’t know, being vegan and all. No mac and cheese there. Or pizza, or hamburgers. Oh, but hey, I had lots of salad, veggie burgers, and

tofu scrambles!”

She made a face. “Eww. Yuck. I’m sorry. I guess that was one thing I had going for me growing up—lots of cheap, unhealthy, highly processed food!”

“Excuse me,” said the woman sitting directly across the table from us. She was stunning, with dark, flawless skin and long hair woven into a thousand tiny braids—all pulled together into a single ponytail. She looked like she’d be more at home on the cover of *Vogue* than sitting here. “Hey,” she said, “I’m Naomi and . . . I’m sorry to eavesdrop, but I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation. Obviously you’re identical twins . . . I’m just wondering why you wouldn’t have had the same life experience. Were your parents divorced? Did you have some *Parent Trap* thing going on?”

She was the first person to ask us what the deal was outright. I was all set to give her some vague answer that didn’t reveal too much of our privacy when Sam jumped right in.

“Oh, you won’t believe this—neither of us even knew the other existed until the guy taking our college ID photos noticed the resemblance. And then this one just shows up at my dorm room. It was the freakiest damn thing ever!”

I smiled uncomfortably, watching as Naomi’s hair swished from side to side as her gaze moved between us.

“Wait . . .” she began, holding up her palms at us and then waving them around as if she were erasing a chalkboard, “so how is that even possible?”

“We don’t really know,” I told her, not wanting to encourage the continuation of this conversation. “We were somehow separated at birth.”

“So you were adopted by different families? And no one told you that you had a twin?”

“You know, I’d really rather not—”

“Well, she was adopted by a ridiculously wealthy family.” Sam cut me off, hooking a thumb in my direction. “While I grew up in foster care.”

I thought Naomi’s mouth was going to hit the table.

“Oh my God!” she squealed excitedly, causing several people to stop speaking and stare in our direction. “Is this for real?”

“Totally,” Sam assured her with a crooked grin. “Nuts, right?”

“Why haven’t I heard of you before? You should be, like, all over social media!”

God forbid.

"I think I'm gonna call it a night," I said, getting to my feet and picking up my tray.

"You done already?" Sam asked, looking at my half-eaten meal. "You know it's going to be all camping food in another couple of days, right? You should get the good stuff while you still can."

I looked at her pointedly. "I've lost my appetite."



I was reading in the upper bunk of our tiny room when my sister returned a couple hours later, reeking of weed and cheap beer.

"You smell like a frat house," I muttered as she flopped onto the bed below mine, unlacing her sneakers.

"Jesus fucking Christ—what is your problem?" she shot back, popping up again so she could glare at me eye to eye.

"I'd prefer you didn't say that."

Sam snorted and put her hands on her hips. "Why? Since when are you suddenly Holy Mary of the North Dorm? You don't exactly light candles and chant novenas."

"You have no idea whether I pray," I said stiffly. "And my faith is none of your business."

"Right. Just like what I do in my off-hours isn't yours." She wasn't shouting—just exasperated, sharp around the edges. "For real, Mare, if you're gonna be wound this tight for two months with no decent coffee or internet, we're both gonna die out there."

"Would you prefer I didn't go?" I asked, a little sulky, a little hurt.

She rolled her eyes—big dramatic circles—but her voice gentled. "Relax. I'm just saying you need to breathe. This whole thing is supposed to be life changing. Maybe we try . . . changing our lives?"

"Oh, I think we've done plenty of that already."

She huffed, threw her hands up. "Okay, I'm going to bed before we accidentally kill each other on night one. Breakfast is stupid early, and I want the last hot shower I'll get until, like, August."

I sighed. "Yeah. The hot water and the coffee will be brutal. And losing our phones . . ."

She perked up suddenly. “Speaking of phones—remember that girl we talked to at dinner?”

“You mean the one you were telling our life story to?”

She waved that off. “Naomi. Would you believe she’s some kind of giant influencer?”

I sat up on my elbows. “What, like social media? Which platform?”

“All. Of. Them. She’s got, like, a hundred thousand followers.”

“Wow. But she can’t bring her phone with her, right? How’s she going to post anything?”

“They’re giving her an exception. She’s not paying for the program at all—she’s basically the wilderness mascot in exchange for content.”

“But Rick said only satellite phones work out there.”

“They’ll have some system,” she said, shrugging. “She’ll record, the guide uploads later, her assistant schedules everything. She won’t talk to anyone in real time.”

“Huh. Well, good luck to the team that gets her. I’d hate someone filming me all the time and blasting it all over the internet.”

A sheepish smile crept across Sam’s face.

“Yeah . . . so . . . about that.”

I sat fully upright. “Don’t tell me.”

“Yup.”

“No! How? We’re not supposed to get assignments until tomorrow.”

She wiggled her brows. “I have my ways.”

“Oh, God. Please don’t tell me what you did.”

“Nothing illegal,” she said breezily. “Anyway, it’s you, me, Naomi, and this girl named Nantucket—yes, seriously. Then Izzy, a surfer dude from Puerto Rico. Martin, gap-year Harvard Law kid. And Richard, who seems like a walking middle finger. Our guide is Leo. He’s—well, you’ll see. Very seeable.”

Despite myself, I smiled. Watching her rattle the names off like trading cards was . . . weirdly endearing.

“I think this is the happiest I’ve ever seen you.”

Her shoulder lifted in a small shrug. “Yeah. Maybe. I just—I really wanted this. For so long. Didn’t know how I’d make it happen,” she said, voice dipping softer. “I, uh . . . really appreciate you using your tuition reimbursement so we could come. You didn’t have to. I didn’t expect—”

“Sam,” I interrupted gently. “We’ll figure it out.”

Her eyes flicked up to mine. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You’re not alone anymore, okay? You’ve got me.” I paused.
“We’ve got each other.”

She held my gaze for a beat, something warm and surprised crossing her face.

“Yeah,” she murmured with a tentative smile. “I guess we do.”

Chapter Seventeen

JENN

Friday afternoon

“So how did you leave it?” Gabe asks, echoing the same question he asked after Braithwaite first called me back home in New York.

“Well, I met her, and I did my best to earn her trust. Now it’s up to her.”

“I wonder how Kellogg and Braithwaite are going to feel if they brought you in and she doesn’t even agree to meet with you.”

I shrug to myself in the car. “Not my problem. She’s a grown woman; no one can force her to undergo treatment if she doesn’t want it. We don’t even know for sure that she needs it.”

“‘We’ who, exactly?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is ‘we’ you and Julian? Or you, Julian, and Kellogg? Or are you doing the ‘royal we’ now?”

“What are you getting at, Gabe?” I ask, starting to feel a little grumpy about the direction this conversation is headed. “Like it or not, it is me, and Julian, and Kellogg. That’s what I signed on for.”

I hear him sigh. “Point taken,” he agrees. “I’m just worried about you. Don’t want you getting too comfortable around those people. Leopards don’t change their spots, Jenn.”

I start to argue, then stop. Maybe he’s right. But if Julian Braithwaite hasn’t changed, I need to find out which way his spots still run.

“I’m headed out to meet Ruth for lunch,” I say, trying to get us back on neutral ground.

It works.

“Ruth! I love that woman. You tell her our guest room is waiting any time she wants to come up for another visit. And that I’d like a rematch on poker. She took three hundred bucks off me last time she was in town!”

I happen to know it was more like five but don't press the point.

"I'll extend the . . ." My thought is hijacked by an unexpected laugh.

"What?" my husband wants to know. "What's so funny?"

I shake my head, grinning as I pull into the spot next to a gleaming black Lexus.

"Nothing—it's Ruth's car."

"What about it? And how do you even know what she drives?"

"The license plate is R-U-T-H-L-S-S," I explain and am treated to Gabe's hearty guffaw.

I'm still chuckling after we exchange goodbyes, and I get out of the car.

Barely five feet tall and built like a hummingbird, attorney Ruth Wang earned the nickname for her ability to bring the most hardened, most badass of witnesses to tears over the course of a cross-examination.

After my sister Jess's death, there was a carousel of personal-injury attorneys who cycled in and out our front door, each one slicker than the last. I hadn't understood the meaning of the expression "dollar signs in their eyes" until then. All these people could talk about was the money, the money, the money. The punitive money, the compensatory money, the blood money. Ruth showed up at our kitchen table, wiping tears from her eyes as Lita showed her pictures of my sister. She became a part of our family, sharing our meals and sharing our grief.

And, in the end, no one fights harder for you than family.

Years later, when it became clear that no one at the hospital was going to help me, I knew I had to help myself. I knew I needed Ruth.

Administration moved fast—ten days from incident to disciplinary hearing. Too fast. Ruth and I waited in the medical center lobby for the elevator. It was my first time back since the night Cami died. My badge was gone, replaced with a guest sticker that might as well have read *pariah*. Colleagues glanced, whispered, turned away.

"I'm going to say this again," Ruth said quietly. "You should have a health-care attorney. I do personal injury."

"I trust you."

That ended the discussion.

The hearing room was a windowless bunker in the basement, all fluorescent buzz and burnt-coffee smell. A long white conference table dominated the space. On one side sat the panel: Associate Dean Steve

Cortez, ER Chief Dr. Nila Kumar, a pediatric psychiatry attending, and the hospital's legal counsel—Joyce Danner.

Ten years ago she was every bit as composed and commanding as she is now—only younger, sleeker, her power newly minted instead of burnished by time. The effect was the same: control, confidence, perfection down to the smallest detail.

Across the table, Ruth was her opposite in every conceivable way—compact, kinetic, and radiating the kind of energy that made people lean back a little. Joyce projected mastery through stillness; Ruth through motion. One ruled the courtroom with a raised brow, the other with a raised voice. And in that sterile little basement, I was suddenly grateful to have the louder one on my side.

Ruth began, calm but lethal. “We request a postponement. Ten days isn't due process—it's ambush.”

Cortez didn't even look up. “You can appeal later.”

And that set the tone.

They read out the charges. I gave my account—precise, restrained, stripped of emotion. From the moment I was paged to when Kellogg threw me out, I stuck to the facts.

When I finished, Dr. Kumar slid a chart across the table: Cami Miller's intake form. My handwriting filled the top half. But farther down was a section that should have been blank—and wasn't.

Patient discharged with instructions to follow up with the outpatient psychiatric clinic in the morning for further evaluation.

The handwriting wasn't mine. Neither was the signature.

“Is this your handwriting?” Dr. Kumar asked.

“The top portion. Not the treatment plan or the signature.”

Joyce's pen didn't pause. “So you're alleging falsification of a medical record?”

“I'm saying *I* didn't write it,” I replied evenly.

There was a long pause. The only sounds were pens scratching and paper rustling.

The temperature seemed to rise several degrees.

They picked at my answers for the next two hours—word by word, breath by breath—until Dr. Kumar finally said, “Let’s break for lunch.”

Ruth didn’t miss a beat. “Is that when Dr. Braithwaite will join us?”

Cortez took off his glasses and cleaned them with slow, deliberate care. “My understanding is that Dr. Braithwaite has declined to participate.”

I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Declined?” Ruth snapped.

He nodded. “No written statement either,” he added. “His choice entirely.”

That choice hit harder than any accusation. Julian’s silence said more than his words ever could.

When the panel filed out, I opened my mouth to speak, but my attorney shook her head sharply, gesturing toward the still-running recorder on the table.

“Holy hell,” she muttered once the recorder was off. “These people aren’t even *pretending* to play fair!”

“It’s over,” I whispered, as if they might be lurking in the hallway, ears pressed to the door. “Julian’s absence says everything they need to hear.”

“Stop.” Her voice cracked like a whip. “They expect you to fold. Don’t do it.”

“Ruth, if they find me negligent, my career’s done. Appeal or not, it sticks.”

My attorney leaned forward, eyes sharp. “*Now* I understand why you felt like you needed me to handle this and not another attorney. You don’t need a defense—you need an offense.”

That steadied me. “Okay. So what’s the move?”

“We find something that puts Kellogg on the defensive. He’s not clean—no one is. Fraud, misconduct, a lie in the paperwork—something.”

I picked up the photocopied chart again, scanning each line once again from the top. Patient name, address, insurance . . .

“What?” Ruth asked, noticing my expression. “What do you see, Jenn?”

I shook my head slowly. “Nothing here. But . . . I don’t know . . . I have a hunch . . .”

“Hunches are your subconscious’s way of telegraphing you a message. What is it trying to tell you?”

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“I can’t.”

“You can’t what?” she demanded. “Your life is on the line here! What can’t you do?”

My eyes snapped open.

“I can’t call them.”

“Can’t call who?”

“The Millers. Cami’s parents. If what I *think* might have happened happened, it’s got to come from them. From their paperwork.”

Her lips curved, feral and pleased. “Then that’s where we start.”

I hesitated. “I can’t call them, Ruth. Not after the funeral. Not after what they’ve lost.”

Her expression softened for half a beat before she reached into her bag for her phone. “Then good thing I can.”

And she did.



The smell hits me the instant I push open the café door—strong coffee, buttered bread, frying plantains. And there she is at the counter, slight and sharp as ever, her narrow shoulders squared, her smooth dark hair shot through with a single elegant streak of silver. She moves with that hummingbird snap—fast, focused, impossible to ignore—rattling off instructions to a barista who looks like he’d rather face a firing squad. She spots me before I can wave, smiling and shaking her head.

“What’s that look for?” I ask as we embrace.

“You always said you’d have to be out of your mind to come back to Miami,” she says, pushing me back to arm’s length so she can get a good look at me. Like I might be an imposter. “And yet—here you are. You look pretty grounded to me.”

“Just for the weekend.”

“Weekend, week, lifetime—it starts the same way.” She thanks the man who slides a tray with two cortaditos and a pair of foil-wrapped Cubanos across the counter, then nods toward the corner. “Come on. Sit. You look like you could use caffeine and carbs.”

We carry our food to a booth with cracked red leather seats and a window view of the street. The café hums around us—spoons clinking, conversations overlapping, the steady hiss of the sandwich press. It feels

weirdly comforting, like stepping back into a past life. A simpler one without all the baggage.

Ruth's already halfway through her coffee by the time I unwrap my sandwich. The smell hits me first—roasted pork, melted Swiss, pickles, mustard, and that buttery pressed bread that could make a believer out of anyone.

“God, I missed these,” I murmur, taking a bite. The crunch echoes through the café. “I’m going to eat as many of these as I can while I’m here.”

Ruth gives me a look. “Don’t tell me you can’t get a Cuban sandwich in Manhattan.”

“Not one that tastes like this,” I say with a grin.

She stirs the sugar at the bottom of her cup and eyes me over the rim. “So. How is it? Being back at Miami Killian after all this time?”

I take another bite to buy a few seconds before answering. “Surreal,” I admit finally. “The building’s been redone, but the ghosts stayed. Some faces changed; others should’ve.”

“Meaning?”

“Julian’s still there. Still walking around like he invented compassion.”

“And Kellogg?”

“Still an arrogant son of a bitch. Only now he’s the boss.”

Her brows shoot up. “Of course he is. That man could trip upstairs and call it a promotion.”

I laugh. “You’re not wrong.”

She takes a slow sip of coffee, eyes narrowing in thought. “You can’t tell me details, I know. But what kind of case brings you back there after all these years? You could’ve said no.”

“Could’ve,” I say, wiping my fingers on a napkin. “Didn’t. It’s . . . complicated.”

“Complicated how?”

“High profile. Sensitive. Someone in trouble who reminds me a little too much of who I used to be.” I toy with the edge of my sandwich wrapper. “Let’s just say I’m in a unique position to help—and unique enough that those bastards actually asked me to come back.”

She tilts her head, reading between the lines. “So not just any patient.”

“No. Not just anyone.”

“Well,” she says, sitting back with a little grin, “good. Let them choke on their own hypocrisy for once. You’re exactly the kind of ghost that place deserves.”

I smirk. “You’re the only one who thinks that. Gabe and Stef both tried to talk me out of it. Said I was asking for trouble.”

“That’s because they think trouble’s a bad thing.” She waves a hand. “I say it’s about damn time. You spent years letting that hospital—and those men—write your story. This is you taking it back.” She leans in, eyes bright. “You can’t rewrite what happened, but you can add an epilogue. The ‘happily ever after, you sons of bitches’ chapter. You’re not there to relive it—you’re there to reclaim it.”

I smile despite myself. “You always did know how to weaponize optimism.”

“Not optimism,” she corrects. “Ownership.”

We fall into easier conversation after that, catching up on everything from her brother’s new law firm to her latest batch of high-maintenance clients.

“A hedge-fund manager sued a golf resort because the caddy handed him the wrong club and cost him a charity tournament,” she says, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin. “That one settled for seven figures.”

She takes another sip of her cortadito, eyes gleaming. “And a politician’s wife sued her plastic surgeon for making her too symmetrical. Said it ruined her relatability.”

I laugh so hard I nearly choke on my sandwich. “Please tell me you didn’t actually take that one.”

“I did better than that,” Ruth says. “I won.”

I shake my head, grinning. “Still Ruthless.”

“Always,” she replies, lifting her coffee in a toast. “But only for the greater good—and the greater payout.”

I wipe my fingers, still smiling. “Speaking of payouts . . . Gabe says to tell you our guest room’s waiting if you ever make it up to New York again. He’s anxious to win back his three hundred.”

Ruth snorts into her coffee. “Three hundred? Please. It was five—and I’d love to see him try.”

“Between the two of you, I’ll have to start charging admission.”

She chuckles, then fixes me with that shrewd lawyer’s gaze again.

“Have you been by the cemetery?”

I pause, still chewing. “I drove by.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“It’s as close as I can get for now.”

“You sure about that?” she asks, her tone softening. “You keep skirting around it, like maybe distance will make it disappear. It won’t. The only way out is through.”

I trace a fingertip through a smear of mustard on my plate. “Maybe someday.”

“Someday’s a start,” she says, letting it go.

My phone buzzes on the table. I glance down, expecting Gabe—or maybe Stef—but it’s neither.

Mary is ready to see you.—DK

I don’t recognize the number with the 301 area code, but I only know one person with those initials. David Kellogg.

Ruth watches me. “Work?”

“Something like that,” I reply even as I’m typing back.

Give me twenty minutes.

Then I hit send before I can overthink it.

Ruth tilts her head, reading my expression. “Trouble?”

“Maybe,” I say, gathering my things. I take the last bites of my sandwich, unwilling to leave a single crumb behind. “But at least this time, it’s not mine.”

She gives me that lawyer’s smile—the one that’s half encouragement, half warning. “Let’s hope it stays that way.”

I drop a few bills on the table and grab my bag. “Yeah. But sometimes helping someone else find their way out is the only way to prove you still can.”

And with that, I step back into the Miami heat—toward another woman’s ghosts, and maybe a chance to make peace with my own.

Chapter Eighteen

MARY

Four and a half years ago

The first ten days were a whirlwind of basic training—from navigation and wilderness first aid, to campcraft and outdoor cooking. By the time we hit the two-week mark, we were experts in choosing, setting up, bear proofing, and breaking down a camp. We knew our way around a compass, could make a serviceable fire, and even knew the ins and outs of human-waste disposal. Yuck.

Through it all, my twin sister flourished—totally in her element. When it was her turn to serve as team navigator, she led our little band of merry campers on a hike through rough terrain with ease. It didn't come quite as naturally for the rest of us, but we managed to hold our own with the help of our guide, Leo. The mental and physical concentration required daily was exactly what I needed to get out of my own head.

After hiking for miles on end—oftentimes through snow—we barely had the energy to pitch our tents, build the fire, and help fashion together some semblance of a meal. By the time I crawled into my sleeping bag, I couldn't have cared less about my parents or my life back home, leaving it to my subconscious to work through the chopped salad of emotions at war within me. It also seemed to have a therapeutic effect on Sam and me—both individually and as a pair. We saw the best in each other. And we saw the worst.

“This is the river we'll be rafting on tomorrow,” Naomi said as she held her camera up high enough to catch the bubbling rush of water in the background. “It'll be the eight of us against the sheer raw power of Mother Nature,” she told her invisible minions dramatically.

Sam and I just rolled our eyes as we worked over the camp stove, boiling water for our vegan mac and cheese—with a side of sausages for

our meat eaters. Our teammate made videos at all our campsites, recapping our excursions and laying out the plan for the next day.

“I’ll bet she gets, like, a million likes and little floating heart thingies when she posts this shit,” my sister muttered.

“She’s not nearly as annoying as I thought she’d be,” I admitted.

Sam nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. At least she’ll jump right in and help clean up, unlike that asshat over there,” she said with a nod to where our teammate Richard was plundering our stash of trail mix.

He was a real piece of work—always disappearing whenever there was any work to be done and making all kinds of vulgar comments when Leo was out of earshot. I was also fairly certain he was the reason little “mishaps” kept occurring with our gear—like a tent that somehow got unzipped just enough to let a thousand mosquitos in, or a rain flap that mysteriously became unattached, so someone woke up in a puddle of dew. And then there were the disappearing supplies.

“Hey, Richard,” I called over to him, “if you’re not busy, we could use a little help chopping up veggies to go with dinner.”

He snorted. “Yeah, that shit’s for the girls.”

Naomi seemed to think he was required to be there. Like by court order. Which might have been fine if he hadn’t been such a tool all the time.

Sam nudged me.

“Watch this,” she murmured with a wink just before responding to him loudly enough for everyone to hear. “Dude, stop being a lazy piece of shit and start pulling your weight. Or aren’t you allowed to handle a knife while you’re on probation?”

Everyone stopped where they were and stared, including Leo, who’d been on the other side of the camp, helping Izzy sort out a tent problem.

Richard stomped up to her in a matter of seconds, standing close enough that the toes of their hikers were touching. This was not the first time they’d had words, but he’d never gotten this close to her before. It made me all kinds of nervous, but my twin didn’t so much as blink.

“Wanna say that again, bitch?” he growled.

She frowned, as if confused. “Which part? That you’re a lazy piece of shit or that you’re on parole?”

“If I were you, I’d watch my mouth, little girl,” he said low enough that only Sam and I could hear him.

“Or what?” she taunted.

His face was growing progressively darker.

“Sam,” I murmured softly as a warning.

Not that she listened. Not that she ever listened.

“Go ahead, *Dick*,” she spat back, using his name as a weapon against him. “You think I’m afraid of a lowlife poser like you? C’mon, we all know you’re just pretending to be a tough guy. I’ll bet at home you’re just a weak-ass little—”

I don’t know how she was going to finish that sentence because she never made it that far. When Richard’s closed fist connected with Sam’s face, she flew backward, taking me to the ground with her. Someone screamed, and suddenly Naomi and Nan—of Nantucket fame—were peering down at us with concern while something loud and venomous was taking place nearby between the men on our team.

It took a minute to get us back on our feet, mainly because my twin was bleeding profusely from her nose, and it was covering both of us by the time we were upright.

“Jeez, Sam! What the hell were you thinking?” I demanded, even as the other women were fluttering around us, holding a bandana to her tipped-back face.

“You’ll see,” she said, reaching over to pat my arm.

I couldn’t believe her. She was smiling—actually grinning through bloody teeth.

Before I could comment, Leo was there, looking very concerned. “Sam? You okay?”

Her smile evaporated, and she blinked up at our guide dazedly.

“What-what happened?” she asked in a shaking voice.

I gaped at her, too stunned to say anything.

“Richard hit you,” Leo told her grimly.

“He . . . he did?”

Holy hell, she was good at this. It made me wonder how many times she’d manipulated me into believing something. I hoped I was less gullible—and hotheaded—than this guy, but still . . .

“Sam, I’ve called headquarters. They’re sending a couple of rangers to arrest him for assault, and they’re asking if we need to medivac you out to the hospital.”

“What?” she gasped convincingly, shaking her head, even as she pressed the bloody bandana to her nose. “Oh, no, no . . . I’m fine, really. I

don't want to leave. If they could maybe get me an ice pack, though, that'd be great. Arresting him—that's really serious." My sister lowered her voice. "I think I might have provoked him. You know, unwittingly. I mean, I thought it was just some good-natured ribbing, but . . ."

Leo's face was stony as he took in Sam's rapidly swelling mouth. "I don't care what you said to him—putting hands on another person is strictly prohibited. It's NAWA policy to file a police report and, if warranted, press charges. This is warranted. Besides, no way he can stay here. No one will feel safe with him. No, he's out of here."

I watched him walk away, returning to the spot where Richard sat on the ground, glowering in our direction as Izzy and Martin stood scowling down at him. He'd be gone before nightfall.

So evil! So brilliant!

I had never been prouder to have Sam for a sister than I was at that moment.

Chapter Nineteen

JENN

Friday afternoon

Hospitals have a rhythm I understand: the hum of fluorescent lights, the squeak of sneakers on linoleum, the whispered gossip at nurses' stations. They're full of pain, but also of people trying to make sense of it. That, I guess, is what keeps me here.

People assume psychiatrists choose this field because they're fascinated by the mind. Maybe some are. I chose it because I've lived with the aftermath of trauma long enough to recognize it when I see it. After my sister died, I became the walking embodiment of what everyone else was too polite to call survivor's guilt. I wanted answers no one could give me—why her and not me, what made one life tip over the edge while the other went on.

At first, I thought medicine might give me control over chaos. Psychiatry, though—that was different. It wasn't about saving lives so much as salvaging them. The mind is a mess of bruises you can't see. But if you listen closely enough, you can sometimes trace where the damage started.

That's what drew me to adolescents and young adults. They're still pliable, still forming, still at that fragile point where one decision—or one person—can change everything. They remind me of who I was before everything broke, and of who I might've become if someone had known how to reach me.

My grandparents raised me to believe that helping others was how you paid rent for your own second chance. They never said it in so many words, but I knew what they meant: Do some good with the time you've been given. I try. Some days, it even works.

I'm kicking myself all the way up the elevator for leaving the hospital in the first place—rookie mistake. The farther I go, the longer it takes to get

back. And the more time that passes, the greater the chance she'll change her mind.

When I stick my head into the partially open door of the Hibiscus Suite, Nurse Shannon is waiting.

"Go right on in," she says with a kind smile—kinder than the one she gave Julian. "Mary's expecting you."

That alone feels like progress.

Her room is quiet, the curtains half drawn against the afternoon glare. She's moved from the armchair to her bed, a tray on her lap with the remains of a ham sandwich and a few untouched chips. The crusts are stacked neatly to one side, the meat picked apart, as if she lost interest halfway through. Her skin's still sallow, lips cracked, hair limp and uneven where someone's brushed it out but not styled it. There's a rawness about her—something both feral and fragile.

When she sees me lingering in the doorway, she looks wary but not openly hostile.

"You can come in," she says finally.

"Thanks." I stop beside the empty chair near the window. "Mind if I sit?"

She shrugs. "Go ahead."

I lower myself into the seat, keeping my tone light. "I really appreciate you agreeing to talk today. I know you've been through more than most people could handle in a lifetime."

She shifts the tray off her lap. "I'm not sure how much talking I can do. I'm just . . . tired. And my head won't stop pounding."

"Yeah, that's normal. You were severely dehydrated. It'll take time for your body to even things out. I'll check with your doc about getting you something for the headache."

After a long silence, I add softly, "I'm so sorry about Sam."

She studies me, cautious but curious. "Thank you," she says at last. "You're the first one to say that." Her gaze drops to her lap. "It's like I keep forgetting it happened. Just for a while. But then it hits again—like a gut punch."

When she reaches up to wipe her tears, I notice the IV line taped to the back of her hand—a quiet reminder she's far from well.

"You're in shock," I tell her gently. "Not just over her death—over everything you survived out there. If the ranger hadn't found you when he

did . . . well, it's miraculous you're here at all."

She shakes her head. "No miracle. Just luck. It's always been that way between us. I'm the one who gets the breaks—first in life, and now in death."

There's no textbook for this. No baseline. I'm meeting her where she is, trying to read her in real time, knowing every word could be the wrong one.

"You should know," I tell her, "whatever you say stays between us. I don't report to Dr. Braithwaite or your parents. I'm here for you."

She arches an eyebrow. "They're paying you, though. Right?"

"Indirectly. The hospital bills them, but that's not the point. My loyalty's to you. But I did meet with them this morning."

Her tone goes dry. "Yeah? What'd they want?"

"What do you mean? They didn't want anything. They're worried about you."

"If you say so."

"Why do you say it like that?"

She shrugs. "There's always an agenda with them. If they want to talk to you, they want something. Probably information."

"Well, they won't get it."

She exhales, almost amused. "Can we maybe not talk about them right now?"

I lift my hands in surrender. "Of course."

After a pause, she glances toward the door. "Hey . . . are the police around here somewhere?"

"Um, I don't know. I haven't seen any. Why?"

She shifts uneasily. "I think I talked to a woman cop in the ER, right after they brought me in. But I was so out of it."

"You don't remember what you said?"

She shakes her head slowly. "Not really. I was hallucinating out there—I couldn't tell what was real."

I make a mental note to follow up with Joyce about her statements. "Did they scare you? Threaten you?"

Her lips press together, as if the wrong word might break her.

"It's okay," I say. "You don't have to tell me."

She exhales. "No, they didn't. It was fine. They were the ones who told me Sam was dead. I didn't know until then. I'd hoped—but . . ." She

swallows hard. “They did want to know about our relationship.”

“What about it?”

She hesitates. “We didn’t always get along.”

“That’s not unusual for siblings, especially when you’ve lived such different lives. You’re making up for years you didn’t get to have together.”

“God, we were so different,” she says, more animated now. “Not just the money—the way we thought, what we wanted.”

“How so?”

She squints at me. “I don’t know you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Why should I tell you any of this?”

“You don’t have to,” I say evenly. “But maybe it’ll help that I get a little of it. I’m a twin too.”

Her head tilts, skeptical curiosity overtaking suspicion. “Yeah? What’s her name?”

“Jessica. We called her Jess.”

“Called,” she echoes. “She died?”

“She did. Accident, when we were fifteen.”

“Did you get along?”

“Not always. We were close, but we were opposites. She was the easy one—the rule follower. I was . . . the other one.”

Mary smiles faintly. “That’s exactly how it was with us. Sam would’ve been the rebel. I was the good girl.”

“Golden child,” I admit, grinning. “She hated that nickname.”

Her expression darkens. “Yeah, well, Sam wasn’t anybody’s golden anything.”

“Why do you think that was?”

“She was rough. Blunt. Didn’t know how to soften things. My parents couldn’t handle that.”

“So she didn’t make it easy for people to like her,” I say.

“Nope.”

I nod, thoughtful. “You know, a lot of kids who grow up in foster care learn that softness is a liability. You can’t survive if you don’t fight for everything. Sometimes it takes a long time to learn what safety even feels like.”

There’s a long beat. When she finally speaks, her voice is so low I almost miss it.

“I do,” she says. “I know what she went through.”

The air between us goes still.

I study her face, but she doesn’t look at me—just traces the IV line along her hand like she’s following an old scar.

“I know exactly what she went through.”

And something in me knows she isn’t talking about the Everglades.

Chapter Twenty

MARY

Four and a half years ago

At the start of week five, we traded in miles of hiking and sore feet for miles of paddling and sore arms. This was where Sam's confidence faltered—in the water. And this was where we ran into problems because an insecure Sam was a nasty Sam. Nobody liked a nasty Sam, especially not me.

It had been six months since my twin and I discovered each other, and the honeymoon was most definitely over. I had been willing to overlook every little irritating thing she said or did, chalking it up to her tough upbringing. But spending twenty-four seven together under grueling conditions for weeks on end—without a single hot shower—can drive even the most patient, mild-mannered person to consider homicide. Today, for whatever reason, she'd woken up on the wrong side of the tent, and I found my stomach clenching tighter in anticipation of the meltdown I could feel coming a mile away.

Because of the amount of gear we towed, the seven of us split up in two large rafts—me, Sam, and Izzy in one, and Nan, Martin, and Naomi in the other. Leo alternated between the two. We perched up on the sides of the mammoth blue inflatable, one hand on the T-bar grip of the paddle, the other several inches down the shaft, pulling the blade forward through the water.

“Use your whole body, ladies!” Leo yelled at us from the back of the second raft. “If you just use your arms, you're gonna be hurtin' later!”

“Yeah, I'll use my whole body to club him in the head with this thing, then we'll see who's hurtin',” Sam muttered.

“He's right,” Izzy commented. “Spend eight hours doing it the wrong way, and you won't even be able to lift your water bottle tonight.”

“Gee, thanks, Captain Obvious. Got any more tips and tricks for me?” she shot back at him.

Still clutching his paddle, Izzy held up his hands in surrender but didn’t offer any further comments.

“I think once we get into some dry clothes and have a hot meal, we’ll all feel better,” I said in my best diplomatic tone.

“Whatever you say,” my sister sneered.

“What’s up?” I asked evenly. “You’re super grumpy. Are you not feeling well today or something?”

“I feel fine!” she snapped loud enough to catch the attention of our teammates in the other raft. “Not everyone has a great day every day, Little Fucking Mary Sunshine.”

I couldn’t see her eyes through the sunglasses, but I could tell from the way her brows drew down into a deep V that they were narrowed in a glare. “I don’t know what the hell your problem is but—”

She cut me off, her tone turned mocking. “Wow, listen to you dropping the old ‘h-e-double-hockey-sticks’! Ooooh, you must be really mad! Good thing ‘Mother Theresa’ can’t hear you!”

“You need to stop it. Right now,” I gritted out.

“Or what?”

“Or what?” I echoed, incredulous. “What are you, like nine years old? Do you even hear yourself?”

I caught Izzy glancing at us over his shoulder nervously, but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

“Mary, Mary, quite contrary . . .” she taunted in a singsong voice.

“Sam . . .” I hissed out a warning.

“How does your garden grow?”

“It’s no one else’s fault that you’re not comfortable in the water. Just because you’re not the camping, hiking superstar anymore doesn’t mean you get to act like a bitch to the rest of us.”

The taunting smile slipped from her face, and she wasn’t mocking my choice of expletives now. “Yeah, well, not everyone had access to a heated saltwater pool twenty feet from their back door,” she countered.

“You know what? I’m done,” I told her coolly. “I’m sick and tired of hearing all about poor little Sam and her miserable life. I’m sorry it sucked for you—I really am. But I’m not going to spend the rest of my life

apologizing for something I had no control over. So either get a better attitude or just shut up already, because I'm not listening to this anymore."

I knew I'd gone too far as soon as the words were out of my mouth. Not that they weren't true, and not that she didn't deserve them. But because I'd just backed a wild creature into a corner. And, as I should have anticipated, she came back at me, claws and fangs bared.

Literally.

There weren't more than a few feet between us when she threw down her oar and launched across the raft at me, but she somehow managed to gain enough momentum to propel us both to the bow—with me pinned underneath her on the raft floor. Before I could react, she had my braid wrapped around one hand, while scratching at my face with the other.

"Get off me!" I yelled, struggling to buck her off.

She was like a rabid animal, and I could feel the raft listing to one side as Izzy jumped up to try to separate us. Meanwhile there was a lot of shouting from fairly close by as the rest of the team watched the events unfold. I heard Leo demand Sam let me go, but she just doubled down, shouting in my face as we wrestled on the raft floor.

"You have no idea! No fucking idea, you—"

I don't know how she planned on finishing that insult because I pushed at exactly the same moment that Izzy pulled. And then my sister was in the water. With some effort, I hauled myself upright again and scanned the white-capped current of the river. It took a few long seconds, but she eventually popped up to the surface sputtering and coughing. The life vest would keep her from drowning if she stayed calm—which was not a given.

"Sam!" Leo called out from the other raft. I saw him pull out a throw bag, preparing to toss it. "Rope, rope, rope!" he yelled as he sent it flying in her direction, just as we'd practiced in training.

With Sam wild eyed and flailing, there was no way she could get to it.

"Damn it!" I spit, already shucking my jacket and unlacing my hikers.

"Are you out of your mind?" Izzy asked. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to get her—see if you can maneuver the raft closer to us," I instructed over my shoulder a second before jumping in. I was a strong swimmer, and thankfully, the current wasn't overpowering. Once I was close, I called out loudly over the water. "Sam!" I needed her to hear me and what I was saying so she didn't grab on to me in her panic and take us both down. "Sam, look at me!"

“Mary! I-I can’t do this. I’m going to drown!”

“Nope, no, you’re not. When I get close enough, I want you to grab on to the back of my life jacket, okay? I’ll pull us in. But you have to calm down. Can you do that?”

She nodded. “I-I think so!”

I swam closer, holding out my hand to pull her toward me. “Okay, grab on, now!” I yelled, giving her my back.

By the time I felt the pull of her grip, Leo’s boat was close enough for him to extend an oar, leaving Nan and Naomi to back paddle, slowing the raft long enough for me to grab his outstretched offering, allowing him to pull us to within reach. I grabbed the perimeter line in one hand before turning my back—Sam included—to Leo so he could hoist her up by the lapels of her life vest and into the raft.

“We got ’em!” Nan screamed over to Izzy once I had joined Sam in the middle of the floor.

“Here, this should help,” Leo said as he pulled two emergency thermal blankets from their bags and draped them over our trembling bodies. “Are you okay?” We both nodded, teeth chattering too hard to speak. He let out a long sigh. “Then let’s get moving.”

For the last two hours of our trip, our guide didn’t say another word about what had happened, but I could feel the anger radiating off him. Richard had been kicked out two weeks earlier. Now I wondered if we might be next.



She came with me to collect firewood, falling into step behind me without asking. We walked like that in silence for a few minutes before I heard her voice. It was soft with a hint of a warble.

“I-I’m sorry.”

I stopped, closed my eyes for just a second to prepare myself, then turned around to face her. “For what, exactly?” I asked, my expression impassive. “For attacking me verbally? For attacking me physically? For risking our lives? For maybe blowing up our dream by getting us kicked out of here? Which part of it are you sorry for, Sam?”

“All of it,” she replied without hesitation. “I can’t . . . I can’t explain why, but today, this date? It’s just a really shitty day for me, and I couldn’t

deal.”

I put my hands on my hips and tilted my head. “Really? What could possibly be so ‘shitty’ that it’s worth trying to claw my eyes out over?”

“Please, Mary,” she replied softly. “I mean it, I can’t talk about it. But . . . just know I’m so, so sorry, and it won’t happen again.”

“Damn straight it won’t,” I agreed with a nod. “Because I’m not putting myself in that position again.”

“No, don’t say that . . .”

“What do you want me to say, Sam? That it’s okay? It’s not. You could have gotten us both killed today.”

When her eyes dropped to the ground, I saw tears start to roll down her cheeks. It was the first time I’d ever seen my sister cry.

“I know that. And I swear to God, Mary, I’ll do better.” She reached out and grabbed my hand, squeezing it tight. “You have given up so much for me, you’ve defended me, you’ve . . .” She sniffed, using her free hand to wipe away some of the dampness. “You’ve loved me. No one’s ever loved me before you. No one.”

It’s hard to stay furious with someone when they say something like that to you—especially when you know it’s not an exaggeration. This was a rare glimpse behind the iron mask Sam wore every day. Her battle armor.

Finally, I sighed in resignation and squeezed her hand back. “Yeah, okay, fine. But if anything like that ever happens again—”

“It won’t!” she jumped in, a grateful grin transforming her face. “I promise you, it will never happen again.”

I knew instinctively this wasn’t true. It would happen again. Not because she wanted it to, but because she was helpless to stop it, to stop herself.

Chapter Twenty-One

JENN

Ten years ago

When the hearing reconvened, I felt the shift immediately—an electric tightness under my ribs at the thought of the looming confrontation. Lunch had been anything but restful; Ruth and I had spent the entire break tracking down the one thread that might save me. Now, sitting back at that long white table, I wasn't sure whether to be terrified or hopeful.

That's when David Kellogg strode in—three-thousand-dollar suit, hand-tooled shoes—every inch the egoist who expected gravity to shift when he entered a room.

Ignoring his assigned seat, he claimed the head of the table like a king surveying his fiefdom. When our eyes met, the son of a bitch smiled.

That was the moment I knew I stood a chance. People like him tend to overestimate their power and underestimate the advantage they hand you by doing so.

“Dr. Kellogg, thank you for joining us,” said Joyce Danner.

“Of course. It's crucial that nothing like what happened to Cami Miller ever happens again.”

And there it was—he was coming for me with both barrels.

He spun his version of the night: smooth, confident, completely false. “I was not made aware of the extent of Miss Miller's despondency. Dr. Flores lacks the judgment to assess vulnerable patients and could endanger others.”

By the time he finished, the panel was nodding along. I was toast if Ruth's plan didn't work.

“Thank you, Dr. Kellogg. We appreciate you taking the time—”

Joyce couldn't get the sentence out before Ruth cut in.

“Oh, no—we're not done. Unless you'd prefer your counsel present, Dr. Kellogg? To protect your best interests?”

It was a dare. His grin said he'd taken it.

"No need," he said grandly. "I'll make sure Dr. Flores understands she won't be practicing medicine much longer."

"Excellent," Ruth said, all honey.

He gave his colleagues a "can you believe this chick?" shrug. If I knew my attorney, he wouldn't be smiling long.

"Doctor Kellogg," Ruth began, "is it your testimony that Dr. Flores alone released Cami Miller?"

"Yes."

"So you never saw her? Never spoke to her or her parents?"

"No, no, and no," he snapped. "I wouldn't know them if they walked in here and started a conga line."

Ouch. That would age badly—especially with three recorders running.

"Perfect," Ruth said, flipping open a folder. "Are you familiar with the Code of Federal Regulations §415.172?"

He rolled his eyes. "Seriously?"

"It's the rule about physician billing. You can't charge for a service if you weren't present." She slid a fax down the table. "Recognize this?"

He snatched it up. "An EOB."

"Which stands for . . . ?"

He sighed. "Explanation of Benefits."

"And its purpose?"

"To show what was billed and paid."

"Good. And whose name is listed as provider?"

He hesitated.

"Right," Ruth said, consulting her copy. "Provider: Dr. David M. Kellogg. Charge: \$7,000—of which \$1,692 was yours personally. So if you never saw Cami Miller, why bill her parents?"

His color drained. "How did you get this? HIPAA violation, Flores?"

I smiled. "HIPAA doesn't apply. The Millers gave it to me."

It hit him then—full force.

"You billed them," I said quietly. "You sent that girl home after I warned you she was suicidal, and then you billed her parents for treatment."

"There must be a coding error," Dr. Kumar, the head of the ER offered weakly.

"Shut up, Nila," he growled.

Her eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

“I said shut the fuck up!”

Ruth’s eyebrows rose. “Well, that clears that up.”

The room went still. It was over, and everyone knew it but him.

“Good luck getting another residency after this,” he sneered.

Ruth stood, smoothing her jacket. “Dr. Kellogg, are you familiar with the False Claims Act?”

He glared, silent.

“I’ll take that as a no. Once Dr. Flores reports this, she’ll have whistleblower protection—and maybe a tidy percentage of whatever the state recovers. Were I you, I’d stop talking before you end up on the sticky end of a lawsuit. The kind insurance won’t cover.”

She leaned forward, palms flat, voice low and deadly. “You have a lot to lose, Doctor. I suggest you stop lying. Right now.”

His face turned thunderous.

We saw his pride. Then we saw his fall.

And it was glorious.



Friday afternoon

Julian and I are sitting at the small table in Dr. Kellogg’s office when he arrives, and we’re already disagreeing.

“Jenn, I think you need to slow down—” Julian is saying.

Again.

Frustrated, I cut him off.

“Yes, I heard you the first two times you said it. But I don’t agree . . .”

“Now, now, Doctors,” Kellogg chides as he sits down to join us. “No need to get so excited.”

“David,” Julian says, turning to him, “can you please back me up here? I’m not trying to stonewall. I’m saying we should be careful—for Mary’s sake and for the hospital’s. If we rush in half cocked, we risk making a painful situation worse.”

Kellogg leans back in his chair, legs crossed, fingers steepled, and looks at me. “So do you actually believe what Mary told you about

Samantha? That she was sexually abused while in the foster care system? Because that's a pretty serious accusation."

"Exactly," Julian says quickly, seizing the opening. "Too serious to jump on without something more solid. Mary is vulnerable right now. If we push her toward a conclusion that isn't supported by evidence, we could do real harm."

"I wasn't asking you, Julian," Kellogg says, his eyes never leaving mine.

I take a deep breath and begin cautiously, half expecting him to cut me off at the knees before I can get my thought out.

"I believe that Mary believes it happened. She seems totally convinced Sam was telling her the truth."

Julian exhales through his nose, the sound heavy with disapproval. "You're assuming she isn't confused. Grief, trauma—they distort memory. We risk doing more harm than good if we start validating delusions. Or worse, accuse someone who doesn't exist."

"It's not about accusation," I reply evenly. "It's about context. If Mary can remember any of the details—the time frame, a place, a name—we could narrow it down and either prove it or disprove it."

He shakes his head. "Jenn, that was ages ago. The foster system was a disaster back then. Files lost, homes unregulated—no one could track every child. I'm saying we should ask ourselves if this even matters anymore."

"It matters to her," I say. "And it should matter to us."

"Okay, okay. Let's call a ceasefire here, shall we?" Kellogg suggests, sitting up straight once more. He doesn't wait for an answer from either of us before moving on. "How's the patient doing?"

"She's fragile," I tell him, forcing my tone steady. "But she's talking . . . about Sam, anyway. A little bit about her parents. I tried to tease that out a little, but she shut me down pretty quick and changed the subject."

"Good," Kellogg says. "Anything about what happened out in the Everglades?"

I shake my head. "Not specifically, but I think she's starting to trust me. And she agreed to meet with me again tomorrow morning, so that's a good thing . . ."

Julian's jaw tightens. "We still have to consider the implications, David. If this gets mishandled, it could damage reputations—"

“Reputations,” Kellogg interrupts quietly, “aren’t our priority. Patients are.” His tone is calm, but there’s a sharpness underneath it. “Dr. Flores is establishing trust, and I don’t want anyone disrupting that because they’re nervous about headlines or liability.”

Julian stiffens. “All I’m saying is, we don’t know if this actually happened. We have one secondhand account filtered through trauma. I could talk to Mary—gently—see what she remembers. Maybe clarify. I’ve known the girl her whole life, after all . . .”

Something in me tightens. “I appreciate the offer,” I say carefully, “but I don’t want to muddy the waters at this point. I promise I’ll ask for your help if I need it.”

When hell freezes over.

Julian gives that patient, placating smile I remember from residency. “Of course. I only meant to help.”

Kellogg closes his folder decisively. “Here’s what we’re going to do. On Monday, Joyce will request Samantha Kinski’s foster care records. We’ll bring in CPS and a forensic social worker. Dr. Flores continues working with Mary. No interviews, no direct questioning, no unsupervised contact. If anything indicates a criminal act, we escalate. Until then, we stay clinical and contained.”

Julian frowns. “And if the records are gone?”

“Then they’re gone. But pretending this didn’t happen isn’t an option,” Kellogg replies, getting to his feet and pushing his chair in. “Now, if you’ll both excuse me, I have a fire to put out over in pediatrics.”

Once he’s gone, Julian turns to me, a pained expression on his face.

“Jenn, I hope you understand, I’m not trying to be difficult about this. Of course it’s a gravely serious matter.” He leans forward a little as he speaks, his voice lower and softer. “It’s just that I saw a colleague—a good friend, really—destroyed over a false allegation. The child recanted eventually, but the damage was done, and that cloud hung over him. In the end he took his own life.” He pauses for a moment. “Of course a child’s safety is our first priority. Always. But since this occurred, I’ve exercised an abundance of caution when it comes to this type of unfounded speculation.”

I sigh, pushing aside my irritation in favor of a little empathy. It’s not the first time I’ve heard a story like this one. And I’ve been practicing medicine for a fraction of the time he has. You see and hear a lot of things. Disturbing things.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Dr. Braithwaite. I understand. And I promise you I will handle this as delicately as possible.”

“I-I do appreciate that.” He stands and considers me for another moment. “And good work so far. I knew Mary would trust you.”

As I walk back down the hall to my office, my thoughts turn back to Kellogg—and how deftly he handled the situation. Calm. Commanding. Even handed. Nothing like the self-important egotist I know him to be.

For a fleeting moment, I almost admire him.

Then I remember who he is—and everything he’s done—and the feeling evaporates just as quickly as it came.

Chapter Twenty-Two

MARY

Four and a half years ago

I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop—for Leo to call in the reserves, the rangers, the backwoods po-po or whoever it is you're supposed to call when identical twins land a catfight in a raft on Class IV rapids. But he never did, even though he probably should have. It didn't look good, him coming down hard on Richard for putting his hands on Sam, but not on Sam for putting her hands on me. Not that it would have been just Sam. If she went, we went. After everything that we'd been through, I wasn't about to leave her on her own while I finished the course without her. Instead, we got off with a stern warning and having to travel in separate rafts for the remainder of the course—which came faster than I could have imagined.

Halfway through week ten, we were preparing for our final test, a thirty-six-hour solo expedition. Everyone would be on their own to implement all the skills we'd learned over the course of two and a half months. We had to plot a route to our assigned spots, navigate our way there, set up our own camp, cook our own meals, and spend the night before hiking on to a predetermined meeting spot, where we'd have one last night together before heading back to North American Wilderness Academy headquarters.

"I don't want to go out alone," Nan (a.k.a. Nantucket) whined as she stirred the big pot of vegetarian chili. She'd turned out to be considerably less pretentious than her name, but she was a serial fretter. "What if something happens?"

"What do you think's gonna happen to you?" Sam asked from the table where she was preparing a box of brownie mix. "Are you afraid aliens will abduct you? Or that there'll be some disfigured, hatchet-wielding murderer waiting to carve you up like a Thanksgiving turkey?"

"Not helping, Sam," I muttered.

“No,” Nan said, “of course not . . . Well, okay, maybe the axe guy—a little. But what if there’s a bear? Or if I accidentally set my sleeping bag on fire? Or—”

“Oh my God, Naaaaaan!” Sam groaned, drawing out the other woman’s name in exasperation. “Stop already! You know where you’re going and how to get there. We’ll all be within a quarter mile—we’ll probably be able to see one another’s campfires! Hell, we’ll probably be able to hear you if you yell, and Leo even said he’s going to hike around and check on everyone. Besides, wasn’t this the whole point of the last ten weeks—to be able to do this on our own?”

“Yeah, but I get it,” Martin interjected as he brought over another armload of firewood. “It’s different out there alone. And if we don’t find our way back to base camp, we don’t pass our solo excursion. If we don’t pass our solo excursion, we won’t get our credentials—”

“Oh, for fu—” Sam threw up her hands in irritation, stopping herself before she could drop the f-bomb—another condition of our probation after the river brawl. “Will you all please just chill already?”

“You got this, Nan,” Martin agreed as he sidled up beside her and draped one of his arms across her shoulders.

Sam and I looked at each other.

“Uh, something you guys wanna tell us?” my sister asked.

Nan looked besotted. Martin looked sheepish.

“Yeah, we’ve been kind of together for a few weeks now. We didn’t want to say anything till we were at the end, though. It’s kind of frowned upon—having relationships while you’re out on the course.”

“Three weeks?” I echoed incredulously. “How on earth did the two of you keep it quiet for so long?”

“My question exactly,” Sam piped up, waggling her eyebrows suggestively. “How did you keep it quiet? I mean you’re never farther than ten feet away from someone out here.”

Nan’s face heated with the inference.

“Where there are woods, there’s a way,” Martin quipped with a wolfish grin.



Out here—on the final solo test of the program, miles from the rest of the group, with no instructor hovering nearby, the silence had a way of loosening memories I'd spent years packing down tight. Maybe it was the high Oregon air or the knowledge that, for the next two nights, every decision was mine alone. Maybe it was just the strangeness of being out here without anyone else's fear or expectations pressing in.

But something about the sharp, resinous smell of the pine needles under my boots cracked open a door I hadn't touched in ages.

I suddenly remembered the night my dad pitched a tiny tent in our backyard because I'd announced, with very serious fourth-grade conviction, that I was "old enough to camp." The wilderness in question was forty feet from our sliding-glass door, but he treated it like the Cascades. Mom brought us hot chocolate in mugs with cartoon bears. Dad taught me how to check for "wild animal tracks," which turned out to be the neighbor's cat.

He never laughed at me.

Not once.

He took my big, brave idea seriously.

He made it real.

I hadn't thought about that night in years. Maybe I hadn't let myself.

But here—under real trees instead of the backyard maple—I could finally feel what it had meant:

They'd seen me.

They'd supported me.

We had been a family that worked, once.

Before everything fractured.

Before reputation and fear and other people's voices got between us.

It had been a very long time since I'd had a memory of them that didn't ache.

It steadied me.

It was still warming something in my chest as I stepped into the small clearing along the riverbank—my assigned campsite. I pitched my tent, stowed my gear, then circled the perimeter, gathering firewood. I wanted to be sure there was enough so I wouldn't be stumbling around the forest in the middle of the night after the fire died out.

I made myself a nice pot of beans and rice and chased it down with a cup of campfire cocoa and a few s'mores made with some freshly charred marshmallows. After a little stargazing, I put out the fire and retired to my

tent with a headlamp-style flashlight strapped to my head and a book. I'd only been able to bring a few thinner volumes along on the course, and it was my third time through this particular steamy billionaire romance.

I'm not sure when I dozed off, but I awoke with a start, the book on my chest, lamp still on, illuminating the corner of the tent where my head was facing. Sitting up, I took a moment to reacquaint myself with my situation and my surroundings. Thanks to Sam, every little creak and crunch conjured images of ravenous bears and horror-movie-style bad guys lurking in the depths of the forest. I hadn't been creeped out before, but I was now as I waited for whatever it was that had pulled me out of a sound sleep to reveal itself. I didn't have to wait long before I heard a low, throaty groan that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up on end.

But what the hell was I supposed to do? Ignore it? Pretend I didn't hear it and try to go back to sleep? Hope it didn't happen again?

Too late. There it was, but more desperate this time. Like someone in pain.

I had to do something.

Slipping back into my boots as quickly and quietly as I could, I threw on my jacket and grabbed the can of bear spray I had tucked into my pack on the off chance I came in contact with the rare insomniac bear during hibernating season. It took a few minutes to locate the direction of the noise, but once I locked onto it, I moved through the trees as quickly and quietly as I could. My heart felt like it was going to pound right out of my chest, but all I could think about was . . . What? What was it that had me rushing toward the scary frightening sound in the middle of the woods in the dark?

Sam. It sounded like Sam.

Once the thought took hold, it wouldn't let go, sending my imagination into a downward spiral of gruesome scenarios and images . . . She'd had an accident—maybe broken her leg and was trying to crawl toward help. There really was a murderer out here, or a wild animal. I drew the line at the possibility of aliens, but that still left enough to spur me on, crashing through the leaves, ducking low-hanging branches and dodging fallen trunks until I was within a hundred feet of the noise, which had grown to a fever pitch.

Moaning. Groaning. Panting. Grunting.

When I came bursting out into the clearing, I looked from side to side, the beam of my headlamp sweeping the area until I located the source.

I'd been right: It was Sam, and she was in trouble.

A primal scream ripped from me as I raised the can of bear repellent and ran straight for the hulking figure who had her pinned to the ground, shirt up around her neck, pants down around her ankles as he pumped away on top of her. He looked up, shocked, just in time to get a face full of the repellent. And then he was the one screaming, hands on his face as he managed to disengage from my sister and stumble a few feet away before sinking onto his knees again, wailing in agony.

"Mary?" Sam shrieked. "Oh my God, what did you do?!"

She crawled, half naked, across the frozen ground—toward her assailant.

Toward him?

That's when it hit me like a frying pan to the head.

My stomach lurched. Horror gave way to something far worse: confusion, betrayal, a sick disbelief that made the edges of my vision blur.

Leo wasn't her assailant. He was her lover.

Chapter Twenty-Three

JENN

Twenty-three years ago

The difference between grief and rage is that, in most cases, time will temper rage, allowing it to cool and subside. Grief, on the other hand, has infinite patience. It can lie dormant for years—decades, even—awaiting its opportunity to rise out of the ashes of that smoldering fury. You can delay grief, but you can't put it off forever because it will wait you out every time.

Thanks to national news outlets and a heartfelt glossy spread in *People* magazine, what should have been a private, deeply personal time was hijacked by thousands of well-meaning strangers who felt moved by—and somehow connected to—this horrific tragedy. Suddenly our grief became everyone's grief. Our rage became everyone's rage.

My home life turned into a never-ending onslaught of phone calls, knocks on the door, and letters in the mailbox. Reporters wanted quotes, neighbors wanted to comfort, strangers wanted to sympathize. All the while, we simply marked time from dawn until dusk, each of us waiting until the time we could retreat into the dark and our own isolated solace.

Looking for a different angle, one reporter glommed onto the image of identical fifteen-year-old girls clinging to each other as a chasm opened between them, literally ripping them from each other's arms. It was heartbreaking and devastating, and it made for damn compelling reading.

Not that I was even remotely aware of the attention I was getting at that point. I existed in the no-man's-land between the living and the dead—a walking, talking ghost haunting the rooms of our house, the halls at school, the darkened kitchen of the restaurant.

Home had always been a noisy place—pots clattering, the smell of garlic and onions in Lita's skillet, my grandfather's radio humming boleros from the 1950s. After Jess died, all of it stopped. The radio stayed silent,

the kitchen cold. Even the phone, which rang constantly with reporters and “well-wishers,” sounded muffled, like it was underwater.

Stef tried to pull me into life again—dragging me to the beach, forcing café con leche into my hands, talking enough for both of us—but her voice was background noise. My grandparents moved through the days like actors in a play they no longer believed in: Lita cooking and cleaning in silence, Lito sitting at the table for hours, staring at the empty chair that used to be Jess’s.

Little by little, they began to nudge me forward. Lita would press food into my hands—arroz con pollo, her cure for everything—and tell me, “Eat, *mija*. Jess wouldn’t want you fading away.” Lito took me out to the garden one afternoon and placed a tomato seedling in my palm. “You plant this,” he said. “You take care of it. Something good should grow in this house again.”

It wasn’t much, but it was life—slow, fragile, and persistent.

It was nearly two years before the silence finally cracked again.

Ruth came over one afternoon carrying a leather portfolio instead of her usual tote. She’d been our lawyer for only a couple of years, but by then she knew my grandparents like family. She set the portfolio on the table as if it might explode.

“It’s final,” she said softly. “The settlement’s been approved. There are two accounts—one in Jenn’s name for her education, and another for you both, as Jess’s guardians.”

Lita crossed herself. “We don’t want their money.”

Ruth’s tone was patient but firm. “Lita, this isn’t charity. It’s what they owe—for the negligence, for the lives they ruined.”

Lito’s jaw tightened. “What they owe can’t be paid,” he said quietly. “That money’s cursed.”

Ruth hesitated, then nodded. “All right. Then we’ll leave it where it is. Let it grow until Jenn needs it. No one has to touch a cent.”

They both looked at me then—as if there were anything left in me to decide. I stared at the papers on the table, the neat lines of numbers that seemed to mock the mess we’d become.

Lita reached over, closed her hand around mine. “*Mija*, promise me you won’t let this destroy you,” she whispered. “We already lost one child. We can’t lose another.”

I nodded, because it was easier than speaking.

Ruth packed her things quietly and left us there in the fading light. The accounts were opened, the statements arrived once a year, and life went on—or tried to. But the time, the money, the legal closure—none of it brought them any peace. None of it brought Jess back.

People said time would help. What they didn't tell me was how it stretches when you're waiting for someone who's never coming home. Days blurred into nights. I ate when someone put food in front of me. I slept when my body gave out. I was there, but not there, as on and on the dumpster fire raged around me.

Over the years, grief learned to hide itself—tucking neatly beneath work, ambition, and the quiet comfort of routine. After Lito and Lita passed, Ruth called again, her voice just as gentle as the first time. She told me they'd never touched the settlement, not a single cent. They'd left it all to me.

That money paid for my education, my office, the small home Gabe and I built together. But sometimes, when I walk through the halls of the hospital, I can still feel the weight of that envelope in my hands—proof that even devastation can become the foundation for something new.

All these years later, the world is a different place.

I'm a different person.

But at least my hellish experiences can do someone some good. That's what I'm hoping anyway.



Saturday morning

The solarium is located on the hospital's fifth floor. With its floor-to-ceiling glass, it provides the perfect bird's-eye view of the vibrant gardens below. Even after all this time, I don't love heights. The glass makes me feel exposed, the ground too far away. My fingers find the pink elastic band around my wrist and snap it once—sharp enough to bring me back to earth.

I'm surprised when Nurse Shannon wheels Mary out to join me in a wheelchair.

"Hey, are you okay?" I ask.

“No. I’m perfectly capable of walking, but they’re making me use it anyway,” the young woman says, sulking.

“Doctor’s orders for whenever she leaves her suite,” Shannon tells me over her charge’s head. “She’s still a little weak.”

“Are you sure you’re okay to be out here?” I ask, thinking about her bandaged and abraded skin. “We could go someplace with less direct sunlight.”

And this view. I don’t suffer from full-on agoraphobia, but open vistas from high places never fail to make me queasy. Even now I have to keep my breaths coming slow and deep so I don’t break out in a very noticeable cold sweat.

“Whatever. It’s fine,” Mary tells me with a dismissive wave. “I just had to get the hell out of that room. I was so sick of staring at those walls.”

Shannon helps her transfer to a white-cushioned chaise longue, dropping a light cotton throw over the girl’s legs.

“Right, just gimme one more second . . .” the nurse tells us, holding up her index finger.

She’s back a minute later to set down two tall tumblers with straws on the table between us.

“Protein drinks,” Shannon explains. “Mary asked for them. I hope you like strawberry.”

I smile. “Love it.”

Once she’s left us, I pull a rattan rocker close to where Mary is stretched out. When my companion pulls a pair of pink tortoiseshell sunglasses from her pocket and slips them on, I follow suit, rummaging around in my bag until I find the overpriced pair I picked up at the airport. I’d forgotten just how brutal the South Florida sun can be.

“So I told you I spoke with your parents yesterday,” I start slowly. “They’re very worried about you.”

She scoffs. “Yeah, I’ll bet they are.”

There’s something different in her tone today—an edge that wasn’t there when we were together yesterday. Of course, her shock is likely wearing off. And God only knows what cocktail of grief and trauma is swirling around in her veins right now.

“You do know they’re the ones who arranged for you to be moved here, right? They had you transferred from Everglades General so you could get the best care possible.”

She pulls her shades down the bridge of her nose and looks at me over the frames. “So they could get Uncle Jules to spy on me is more like it.”

Even though I’ve been told of the connection between Julian and the Langstons, hearing Mary refer to him as her “uncle” doesn’t land right with me.

“So how well do you know Dr. Braithwaite?”

She lets out a little puff of air. “He’s been around as long as I can remember. Holidays, parties. I even worked for him for a while on weekends sometimes. And summers.”

“Worked for him? Doing what?”

“Mostly filing papers and organizing. He’s so disorganized! And he refused to use a computer.”

“Still does,” I inform her with a small smile.

She pauses for a moment, considering the past.

“But I think he was lonely too. After Aunt Rose died, I’d go over to help straighten his office. That man always seemed to be *buried* in paper!” I chuckle at the spot-on characterization, and she continues. “But more than anything he really seemed to like the company—liked hearing about what was going on in my life.”

This gives me pause.

“Mary, was Dr. Braithwaite like a therapist?”

She shrugs. “I guess. In some ways. But not officially or anything.”

I’m probably overthinking this. After he withheld the fact that he was involved in Mary’s adoption, I’m on the lookout for other factual “oversights.”

“He wants me to encourage you to see your parents,” I tell her. “Is that anything you’d consider?”

“No.”

She says it so simply and easily—as if I’ve just asked her if the sky is purple. There’s no anger there, no malice. There’s just . . . nothing.

“Not even if Dr. Braithwaite or I was there to support you?”

She doesn’t look at me as she shakes her head, instead facing forward, staring through the expansive panes of glass toward a huge clock tower off in the distance.

“And why is that?” I press gently.

Mary shrugs her narrow shoulders, refocusing on the drink in her hands, twirling the green straw so that the ice spins around the perimeter of

the tall cup. “There’s nothing they have to say that I want to hear.”

“And what about you?”

She turns her attention back in my direction. “What about me?”

I wish I could see her eyes behind the dark lenses.

“Is there anything that maybe *you’d* like to say to *them*?”

Her chapped, cracked lips twist into a smirk. “Oh, I’ve already said everything I had to say to them.”

There it is again, that hint of saltiness that wasn’t there when we met yesterday.

“May I ask what they did that you decided to just cut them out of your life?”

“They didn’t tell you?”

“No. I asked, but your mom changed the subject.”

This makes her chuckle, brows raising above the pink frames. “I’ll bet she did!” When I don’t offer a response to the comment, she sighs, and the smile fades. “It wasn’t what they did to me. It was what they did to Sam. According to them, everything is her fault.”

“Yeah, I kinda got that.”

“Right? In their minds, were it not for Sam, we’d still be the picture-perfect family. Because, you know, it’s all about the picture.”

“I don’t know what that means. Can you explain it to me?”

She huffs and throws up the arm that isn’t holding her shake. “Just that appearances mean a lot to my family. Sam wasn’t good for optics.”

“How so?”

“She was a little too rough around the edges—too coarse, too direct. She didn’t sugarcoat anything, and she didn’t treat my parents with the deference they thought they deserved. Which was interesting. They didn’t want her for a daughter, but they sure as hell expected her to treat them like parents. The whole thing was ridiculous.”

I latch onto something in that statement. “Why, was Sam *hoping* they’d treat her like a daughter?”

“If you’re asking if she was trying to get money out of them, no. She never asked them for a thing.”

Her voice is stony.

“And you? Did she ever ask you for money?”

“No,” the young woman snaps a little too sharply. She pauses and takes a deep breath, her tone more even when she continues. “Look, it’s like

I told you before—Sam had a shit life, and when she came to stay with us, she finally had a chance at a family. But there were my parents being all ‘She’s not our daughter. You are.’”

I have to suppress a smile at her spot-on imitation of Terry. “So, then, not the reaction you were hoping for.”

“What I was hoping was that they’d react like the kind, generous people they supposedly were.” Resentment drips from each word like acid.

“You don’t believe that anymore? That they’re kind and generous? I mean, you just told me Sam came to live with you. That was pretty generous of them.”

“They only did that because they felt guilty—after the accident.”

“Right. She fell out of the moving car. They said she got hurt pretty badly.”

Mary nods. “Yeah, she broke some ribs, I think, and her pelvis. The worst, though, was the road rash. It was unbelievable—I was amazed she wasn’t permanently disfigured. Anyway, that’s when I guilted my parents into letting her come and recuperate at our house. I mean, we lived in a fucking—sorry, freaking—mansion. I don’t know, I guess I figured that maybe once she was there, and we all had a chance to get to know one another . . .”

“What?” I coax gently. “What did you think?”

She huffs in frustration. “I just wanted to share some of what I had with her: having a family, living in a nice, stable home. Movie night, vacations, stuff like that. It would have been so easy to bring her in. Instead they tried to pay her off.”

I was just extending my arm, reaching for my iced tea, when she says this. I retract it and shift toward her. “How do you mean?” I ask slowly.

Mary’s head tips back against the cushion behind her with a jagged little laugh that I find vaguely alarming. “How do you think I mean? My parents offered Sam a two-hundred-thousand-dollar check to leave and cut off all contact with me. Nice, huh? What an epic crock of shit.” She mumbles the last sentiment under her breath, her face turning stormy as she shakes her head, clearly disgusted by the memory.

I sit back hard enough that, for a brief moment, the rocker feels as if it’s going to flip over onto the terra-cotta tile below our feet. Maybe this was what Doug and Terry were holding back from me. It’s pretty damning if it’s true. “Are you sure it wasn’t some kind of misunderstanding?”

She scoffs. “Oh, there was a misunderstanding, all right. I’d just gotten my hair cut short like Sam’s, and my mother thought that’s who she was talking to. You should have seen the look on her face when Sam—the real Sam—walked in and Mom realized she couldn’t tell us apart. She’d had no idea who she’d been talking to. That was when we packed up our shit—sorry, our stuff—and got the hell out of there. We’d been planning to leave anyway. This just pushed up the timeline. And it made me decide I didn’t want to come home again. Like ever.”

I consider this as I start rocking again slowly, my eyes drawn out to the view of palm trees lining the main drive into the hospital property. It’s really lovely what they’ve done to this place—so much nicer than the facility I remember. For a split second, I wonder how much of it was made possible by the Langston family. Then I shake my head at the thought. There must be hundreds of donors supporting Miami Killian. And so what if it was them? The ultrawealthy need ultra tax write-offs, don’t they?

“Did your mother have trouble telling you apart all along?”

“No, because my hair was long, and Sam’s was short. That morning I’d gone to see my stylist and showed her a picture of my sister. By the time I got home, we were identical. *Identical* identical. If we’d grown up together, we could have totally fooled people.”

She says it with a trace of pride, like the trick itself was a small act of rebellion.

“And you were able to fool her like that? She didn’t notice a difference in your speech pattern and mannerisms?”

She waves a hand at me dismissively. “By then we’d nailed each other’s voices, movements, even signatures. It was a game to us. A challenge to see who could do a better job of ‘becoming’ the other.” She pauses for a moment, something flickering behind her sunglasses. “Did you and your sister ever do that?” she asks. “Pretend to be each other?”

I smile faintly at the memory. “Once or twice. Jess could do my voice perfectly, and she thought it was hilarious to confuse people. But we never tried it on our family. They knew us too well. Plus, she was terrible at lying.”

“Sam wasn’t,” Mary says. “She could make you believe anything if she wanted to.”

There’s an edge there now, the warmth from earlier leaching away.

She's quiet for a moment, then asks—not sharply this time, but with a kind of tentative curiosity I haven't heard from her before—“Did you and your sister ever talk about . . . you know. The future? Getting married, having kids, all that stuff?”

The question catches me off guard, not because it's too personal, but because of the way she asks it—sideways, like she's testing a thought she hasn't quite named.

“When we were little? Constantly,” I say with a faint smile. “Jess had our whole lives planned. Matching houses. Kids the same age. Coordinated Halloween costumes for the rest of eternity.”

A breath of warmth flickers through me, then dims.

“And after she died?” Mary asks quietly. “Was that still something you wanted?”

The answer rises automatically—no—but it snags on something in my chest, catching like a loose thread pulled too hard.

A small, startling ache opens up beneath my ribs, so unexpected it makes me blink.

“I . . . didn't think about it after that,” I admit. It's the simplest truth I can give her without handing over the whole psychology behind it. “It just stopped being something I could picture.”

Mary's gaze drops briefly to my left hand, to the thin gold band I never mentioned.

“But you still got married,” she murmurs. Not judgment—just observation. “So some of the future still fit. Just . . . not all of it?”

Something in me shifts—barely, but undeniably. A flicker of something I don't have the space or clarity to examine—not here, not now.

“Something like that,” I say softly.

She studies me for half a second longer, then pulls off her sunglasses and says, “I googled you, you know . . .”

And just like that, the moment slides away—but the flicker stays, tucked somewhere under my breastbone, waiting.

I blink at the whiplash. “Did you?”

“I read about your sister.”

Of course she did.

“When you said she died in an accident, I thought you meant a car accident,” she continues. “Not an amusement park ride.” Her voice drops. “That was . . . my God. That was horrific. And it was all over the news.”

I nod once.

“Yeah,” I say quietly.

She tilts her head.

“So you can understand why Dr. Braithwaite thought you and I might be a good fit. Not just because I lost a twin too, but because the worst experience of my life played out for the whole world to see. Not a lot of people share that, do they?”

“Not many,” I admit.

“Do you ever feel responsible?”

“Every day,” I tell her honestly.

Mary leans back, assessing me. “Why?”

“Because I let go.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

MARY

Four and a half years ago

It took the both of us to help a writhing Leo to his feet and guide him, stumbling, to my campsite and the river. After using some dish soap to mix up a pot full of cold, sudsy water, we rinsed and dabbed at his angry skin in an attempt to break down the oils causing him so much agony. Finally we led him to the bank and helped flush his face with the icy river water until our hands went numb from the cold. For over an hour, the only words spoken were our soft reassurances, periodically punctuated by his profanity. When, at last, he felt a slight improvement, we sat him down by the fire, and I wrapped gauze around his swollen eyes.

My sister was the first one to broach the subject—loudly enough that I’m sure her voice carried for a good mile in the still night.

“What the *actual* fuck, Mary?!”

It wasn’t a question so much as a demand for an explanation—and that really pissed me off.

“No! No, no, no!” I shook my head violently. “You do *not* get to do that. You do not get to go screwing around in the woods five minutes from my campsite—with our guide, no less!—and then ask *me* what the actual fuck!”

“Wow, look at you throwing around the big nasty f-bomb! What would Mommy and Daddy say if they heard that word come out of the mouth of their precious little ‘Marebear’?” she taunted. “Oh, no! They might cut off your trust!”

I’ve never been so angry as I was at that moment. So angry that I went completely still with a rage powerful enough to render me unblinking, unbreathing, and unseeing for several heartbeats.

She must have sensed it because she immediately shifted from the offensive to the defensive. “I’m sorry, Mary,” she said in a much softer,

much more contrite tone. “I was just . . . I’ve been really lonely, and Leo and I hit it off—”

He scoffed from next to us.

I’d almost forgotten he was there.

“What? Have you got something to add? ’Cause, last time I checked, relationships between team members are ‘frowned upon,’ but relationships between team members and guides are explicitly forbidden.”

Leo, who, with his gauze-wrapped head looked more like a World War II hospital patient than an outdoor adventurer, swung his blind gaze in my direction. “Yeah, your sister over there already lobbed that little Molotov cocktail my way when she threatened to report me if I had you two kicked from the course after that shit show on the river.”

My turn to demand. “Wait, what? What is he talking about, Sam?”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head as if she couldn’t believe we were having such a ridiculous conversation. “I just . . . I mean, we’d already, you know, hooked up. Just because we wanted to . . . And maybe after the thing with the raft, I might have mentioned that it wouldn’t be great for him if anyone happened to find out . . .”

“You *blackmailed* him?” I yelped, my voice pitching higher on the offending word.

“Yes!” Leo agreed, nodding. “Yes, that’s exactly what she did! She blackmailed me!”

“Don’t you even try to pretend you’re a victim here,” I spat at him. “It was against the rules in the first place, and for good reason! You have a position of power over her, and her credentials are in your hands. Besides, clearly a little blackmail wasn’t much of a deterrent, because here we are!” Our guide dropped his head in defeat. He knew I was right. But I wasn’t quite done yet. “And why on earth would the two of you decide to do it out in the woods? And so close to my campsite? Couldn’t you have done your shagging in one of your tents instead of out in the middle of the forest? And in winter, no less!”

Sam looked guiltily at Leo, who I could tell was turning red under the bandages.

“I was doing my check on your campsites,” he explained miserably. “When I came across Sam out in the woods.”

“I’d caught sight of your campfire,” she jumped in, “and I was planning to sneak over here and scare you—you know, scratch on your tent

like a bear? But I ran into Leo and . . . well . . . you know . . .”

I didn’t know. And I don’t mean because I was a virgin, but because it seemed so incredibly stupid that I couldn’t fathom it.

“Look,” Leo said, “there’s no reason this has to go any further, okay? We’ll just all meet up tomorrow, as planned, and pretend none of this ever happened.”

I snorted. “Really? And how do you plan to explain the fact that your eyes are swollen shut?”

“The swelling will wear off by then, and I’ll put on sunglasses to hide the redness.”

I threw up my hands and paced in front of the fire for several more seconds before stopping and pivoting to face him. As if sensing my gaze, he tilted his head in my direction.

“You’re a damn good guide,” I told him sincerely. “And I can’t believe I’m here lecturing *you*. I’m eighteen. You’re thirty! But, my God, this was a bad decision. You’re lucky all you got was a little bear spray in the face. Next time it might be someone mistaking you for the bear. Or, God forbid, it might be the bear himself!”

“I know,” he muttered. “I know that, Mary. And I’m sorry. Everything you’ve said is spot on. I’ll do whatever you guys want. I can turn myself in right now if you want . . .”

“Right. You get fired. Sam and I get booted with no certification! Months of time and thousands of dollars down the drain.”

“Okay,” my sister began, taking a rare turn at being the peacemaker. “Let’s all just go back to what we’re supposed to be doing. I’ll walk back to my own camp, you try to get back to sleep, and Leo can . . . Ah, hell . . . I don’t even know what to do with you, dude. You couldn’t make your way to your own camp, let alone check in on anyone else’s.”

“No, I was done. You were the last because . . .”

“Because you figured you’d finish your rounds and spend the rest of the night in her tent?” When he didn’t respond to my accusation, I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose between my index finger and thumb. “Okay, look—Sam and I will walk you back to your camp.”

“No,” he protested. “I don’t want you two wandering around out here by yourselves.”

“Seriously? You’re worried about that now?” I asked, not waiting for an answer. “Okay, then she’ll just come back here with me so we’re

together. And tomorrow morning, when the sun's up, she can go back to her own camp and pack everything. We all make our own way back to the rendezvous site—alone. No one speaks of this again. Like *ever*. Deal?"

"Absolutely," Sam agreed with a nod.

"Yes." Leo joined her, then added, "Thank you, Mary."

"Don't thank me," I grumbled. "We're not out of the woods yet."



The next morning, as I started out on the five-mile hike to the team rendezvous point, the damp, moist air transitioned into something heavier and darker. The sun disappeared behind thick cloud cover, and I was surprised at how quickly a chill set in once it was gone. At around mile three the sky turned an angry shade of grayish green and began to spit out tiny pellets. Sized somewhere between rain and hail, they peppered my face. Ping, ping, ping, ping. The incessant pelting went from mild annoyance, to discomfort, and, finally, to a relentless stinging that was infuriating and maddening by turns. It was like something that you see on television when the bad guys, and sometimes the good guys, are trying to "break" an enemy—a twisted mashup of water torture and death by a thousand cuts. By the time the camp revealed itself with a smudge of smoke on the horizon, I already had a fire burning in my gut—a simmering ball of rage stoked with the recollection of the night before. And while I did have to swallow it, I didn't have to be happy about it.

Sam and Leo were both already there when I arrived, as were the rest of the team, save for Nan, who came hiking in a half hour behind me, not having been mauled by a bear or molested by a psychopath. If only my night had been so uneventful! I tried to enjoy our last evening together as a group, but it was hard. I couldn't look at Leo the same way ever again, and I wasn't sure I even wanted to look at Sam again. Certainly not in those final hours. So I made a point of discreetly avoiding her as I spent a little time with each member of our team, reminiscing about how much we'd changed during our time together and already making plans to come back for the "veterans'" trip offered to NAWA grads in the fall.

When the van picked us up the next morning, Sam managed to grab the seat next to mine, despite my best efforts to thwart her. I angled my body away from her, staring out my window, neither of us uttering a word

during the ninety-minute ride back to headquarters. By the time we were a mile out, I'd already plotted my escape from the van. The plan was to dart into the building before either my sister or Leo had the chance to corner me. We were just through the gates when the van came to an abrupt stop, the driver cursing under his breath.

"What the . . . Who the hell are all these people?" he asked no one in particular as he started forward again, slowly navigating around a crowd of what must have been two hundred people—all cheering and clapping as we drove by.

"Oh my God!" Naomi exclaimed from her spot in the third row of the van. "They're here! They actually came out to meet us!"

Leo, still wearing his sunglasses, twisted around in the passenger seat to look back at her. "Wait a minute—are you saying these people are here because of you? These are your followers or whatever? The ones you've been posting for all these weeks?" he asked, incredulous.

She had a huge smile as she nodded, brows raised in confirmation. "Yes! I told them when we'd be back and where so they could come out and meet us if they wanted to. But"—she paused, peering out the window a little closer—"I don't think they're here just for me . . ."

I followed the direction she was pointing. A group of at least a dozen people were standing together holding signs that read things like:

REUNITED AT LAST!

DOUBLE THE ADVENTURE, DOUBLE THE LOVE!

SISTERS BY FATE, ADVENTURERS BY CHOICE!

"Wait . . . what?" I murmured, gaping at the crowd moving toward the building and our parking spot.

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!" Naomi squealed, looking down at her phone. "TwinPower is trending number one!"

"What the fuck does that even mean?" Sam demanded, ducking her head to get a better look past me and out the window.

"It means the two of you have gone viral!"

For the first time in nearly a day, my eyes met Sam's.

I knew right then and there that I didn't have the luxury of staying mad at her because it was going to take both of us to face this. Whatever "this" was.

Chapter Twenty-Five

JENN

Saturday evening

“Oh my God, this is *amazing!*” I murmur into my drink—a new cocktail Stef has been working on for her restaurant. “You have raised sangria to an art form!”

She nods, flashing me a knowing smile. “I know, right? It’s the cinnamon stick.”

“Wait, really? That’s it? A cinnamon stick? That’s so . . . not sexy. I thought maybe you were going to say prickly pear or kumquat or some crazy kind of plum . . .”

“Nope. Just your garden-variety cinnamon stick. It’s very Spanish—as in Spain—so that’s kinda sexy, I suppose,” she offers with a shrug, reaching for an empanada.

We’re sitting out on the deck of her condo in Little Havana, just down the street from the restaurant.

I take another appreciative sip, licking my lips when I’m done. “Yeah, okay. I’ll buy that. Sexy Spain. And hey, I appreciate you taking a Saturday night off from the restaurant. I know you like to be there to keep an eye on things on the busy nights.”

“Mama, ever since the Food Network did a feature on us, every night is a busy night! I got myself an excellent manager to pick up some of the slack so I can spend more time at home . . . with my girlfriend.”

I sit up straight on the couch and set my drink down on the glass-top side table next to me. My cousin is notoriously fickle about partners. I learned a long time ago not to get too attached to any of them. I can’t even remember the last time she threw around the G word!

“Really? An actual *girlfriend* girlfriend? Like the kind who stays all night and has breakfast with you in the morning? That kind of girlfriend?”

She shrugs, offering a cryptic smile. “Maybe. Sometimes.”

“And her name is . . . ?” I fish.

“Bertha.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Bertha?”

“Yes, Bertha,” she repeats. “Hey, not everyone can be a Jennifer or a Jessica—”

We both freeze.

For a moment we’re suspended together in companionable regret, neither knowing how to proceed. If we pretend it didn’t happen—that Stef didn’t just invoke my dead sister’s image by murmuring her name—then it’s like pretending she didn’t happen. But if we make a thing of it, then it’s like it still hangs over us. And it does. It absolutely hangs over both of us, but not in the way it once did.

My cousin sighs heavily. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to . . .”

I wave a hand at the sentiment she can’t finish. “No. Of course she was going to come up. How could she not? Me being back here in Miami doesn’t just dredge up my past as an adult. It takes me right back to . . . you know . . . to that time. To before . . . and after.” I take a breath and then a long sip before I pivot our topic of conversation to something a little less emotionally challenging. “So, uh, do I get to meet Bertha while I’m here?”

She shrugs as she picks up the pitcher of sangria and tops up my glass before doing the same for herself. “Maybe. Depends.”

“On what?”

When she sets the pitcher back down, her dark eyes find mine, and I see Lita there in her features. The long lashes, the slightly sleepy lids, the delicate nose, and the full rosy lips—Stef has always been the one who most resembles our grandmother.

“On how this trip goes for you. I want to be available if you need someone to decompress with while you’re here.”

Decompress.

I recognize one of my husband’s favorite buzzwords.

“When did you talk to Gabe?” I ask.

To her credit, my cousin doesn’t deny the accusation. “We exchanged texts this afternoon. I wanted to ask his advice about something.”

I quirk an eyebrow, my interest piqued. My husband didn’t mention this when I spoke to him a couple of hours ago. “Oh? About what?”

She shifts a little uncomfortably. “There’s something I wasn’t sure I should tell you. So . . . I asked him.”

“Huh. And what did he say?”

“He said you’re a big girl, and you don’t need protecting.”

My God, I love my husband. “He’s right. So what is it that’s got you so reluctant? I mean, I think we’ve just about covered it all since I got to town—my work, my marriage, Jess, *los abuelitos* . . .”

I stop short because suddenly I know the answer.

“Lorena,” my cousin says, confirming my suspicion.

I sit up straight, nearly spilling the amazing sangria all over my favorite white blouse. It’s been so long since I’ve heard the woman’s name spoken aloud that it’s like taking a bucket of ice over the head—it’ll leave you stunned, speechless, and furious all at the same time.

My mother was barely sixteen when she gave birth to me and Jessica—a baby having babies, really. Always boy crazy, she’d gotten knocked up by a much-older waiter at Cuba Libre who skipped town before Lito could turn him into gator chow. Lucky for her, my grandparents—while initially shocked, angry, and disappointed by turns—were all about having multiple generations under one roof. And it didn’t hurt that Jess and I were unbelievably adorable. *Muñecas*, Lita called us. Dolls. But just because we looked like toys didn’t mean we were toys, as our mother found out soon enough.

It didn’t take long for her to grow tired of staying home with two crying, colicky babies while all her friends were making plans for homecoming dances, movie dates, and weekend parties. The more she felt she was missing out on, the more she left our daily care to Lito and Lita, as if we were a couple of goldfish that she could fob off on them to feed occasionally. My grandparents believed that it was around this time that she found her way to a drug habit. She came home later and later, occasionally disappearing for days on end. Until one day she disappeared for good. I have very few memories of her—just a few hazy images that may or may not be a product of my imagination. Not that it matters. Lorena was never real to me.

“What—what about her?” I ask now.

“My father called to tell me the police had been in touch—the Alabama police. She was . . . your mother—Lorena, I mean—she’s . . . she’s dead, Jenn.”

I stare at her, trying to wrap my head around the words. “What?”

“She died. It was an overdose.”

“I don’t understand . . . How did they know to call your father?”

There’s a beat of silence in which I’m certain she’s debating whether or not to tell me the truth.

“She had his number in her phone.”

“In her . . .” I press the heel of my left hand to my forehead, as if it will somehow open my mind to the understanding it’s so desperately clawing to get at right now. “His number was in her phone? So . . . they were in touch, then?” I ask, hearing my own voice grow more brittle.

She nods once, solemnly. “I guess, yeah. Not often, but from time to time. Usually when she needed money. I didn’t know about it before . . . this.” My cousin shifts uncomfortably. “Dad said she looked really tired and beat down, like someone who’s had a tough life.”

“Looked?” I practically shriek. “Looked? Are you saying he actually saw her?”

Stef looks away toward the Miami skyline, then back at me. “He did. He took her to rehab about nine months ago. But . . . obviously, it didn’t take.”

I knock back the rest of my drink so fast that I choke in the process, grabbing a handful of napkins and spluttering into them.

“Whoa! Slow down there before you choke on a piece of fruit!”

By the time I’ve caught my breath, there are tears running down my cheeks—though I couldn’t say if they were because of the little asphyxiation episode or emotion. Both, I suppose.

“I’m sorry to upset you, but I thought you should know,” she says as she leans over and puts a hand on my forearm.

“When did this happen?”

There’s an awkward pause before she replies, “A few weeks ago.”

I sit up so abruptly that I actually drop the glass this time, sending ice cubes and orange slices sliding across the concrete balcony floor. “Damn it!”

“Jenn—”

“Why didn’t you tell me when it happened?”

“Dad didn’t think it was a good idea. Not right then, anyway. And it’s not like there was a service or anything. She was cremated and buried with Lito and Lita.”

At this I nearly start choking once more. “Are you fucking kidding me? This just keeps getting better and better!”

“Jenn—”

I shake my head harshly. “No. No, no, no. I can’t believe you all would do this—keep it from me and then . . . Why? Why would you disrupt their graves to put her there?” My hand flies to my mouth as I realize what else that means. “Oh! Oh, no, you put her there with Jess! How could you do it, Stef?” I demand.

She stands up so that we’re eye to eye, her dark eyes locked onto mine. She holds them for a beat before responding. “Because it was what Lito and Lita *wanted*.”

She is completely calm in the face of my incredulity, releasing the words slowly, one by one, as if I need the time to process the complete thought.

She’s not wrong.

The huff of air that escapes me isn’t so much an exhalation as the involuntary response of someone who’s just been punched in the gut. My finger goes instinctively to the elastic hair tie around my wrist, and I give it a quick snap. It has the desired effect, forcing me to focus and not allow my emotions to take over. I have to look at this rationally.

Of course, it was what my grandparents wanted. In spite of everything, they never stopped loving their only daughter.

And, really, how many times in my own practice have I seen variations on this same story? Parents unwilling to give up on a child who had fallen prey to addiction. Even if it meant the rest of the family was destroyed in the process.

Not that our family suffered—quite the opposite. Unbeknownst to my mother, by walking out the door and taking her vices with her, she spared us all years of suffering the direct fallout of her drugs and booze and men. Or maybe I’m wrong; maybe she did know. Maybe abandoning us was the last good thing she could do for us.

Whatever reason she did what she did, she’s gone now, and by rights, I should at least try and afford her the same grace I would a stranger in the same situation.

The rage leaves me, and I drop back down onto the couch, both deflated and defeated, though I’m not sure why the latter.

“She knew, then, about my sister? When it happened, I mean?”

Stef shrugs and sits again too. “I don’t know, mama. I’m sure she did, but I don’t know when or how. It was everywhere at the time, so, yeah, I’d

guess she found out not too long afterward.”

And still she didn’t come back. But then, why would she? And what would I have done if she had? I don’t know the answer to that—because I never knew her.

Everything I’ve ever been told about this woman came from my grandparents, who never spoke a word against their child, always framing her absence through the lens of her illness. As a psychiatrist, I understand that addiction is a disease, not a choice. But that knowledge doesn’t blunt the sting. Knowing why someone leaves doesn’t make it hurt any less when they do.

And then there are those few gauzy images—snapshots so faint they might just as easily be artifacts of my imagination as real memories. Maybe that’s part of why I’ve never wanted children of my own: growing up in the crater someone leaves behind is enough to make you swear you’ll never risk creating one.

This news changes nothing.

My mother was a ghost to me long before her death.



The phone barely rings once before he picks up.

“Are you mad at me?” Gabe asks by way of greeting.

I sigh and drape an arm over my eyes, blocking out the lamp’s glow from across the room. I’m too wiped to get up and turn it off.

“No. But you could’ve given me a heads-up about what I was walking into.”

“Stef only called me this afternoon.”

“Plenty of time for you to let me know my mother’s dead—her ashes desecrating the sanctity of my grandparents’ grave.”

“Jenn . . .”

“No, seriously, Gabe. In what world is that okay?”

“Is what okay? The part where I didn’t tell you? The part where Stef did? Or the part where your family honored your grandparents’ wishes?”

“All of it,” I mutter. “None of it. I just—I feel like I got ambushed tonight.”

He pauses, long enough that I can almost hear him choosing his words. Then, softly:

“Wanna know what I think?”

“Not really.”

He goes on anyway.

“I think you walked right back into the haunted house that used to be your life—only you didn’t expect there to still be ghosts living in it. But they’re there, Jenn. Right where you left them. And you know better than anyone they’re not going anywhere. The only thing you get to choose is whether you keep running from them . . .”

A breath.

“. . . or you finally turn around and face them.”

For a moment, I don’t say anything. I just lie there, staring at the ceiling through my forearm, my chest heavy with the kind of exhaustion that goes way beyond physical.

He’s right, of course. This is exactly why he didn’t want me to come down here—too many ghosts, too many memories waiting in the dark.

“Get some sleep,” he says finally, his voice softening. “You can fight the ghosts in the morning.”

I nod, though he can’t see me.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “Good night.”

When I end the call, the lamp is still burning across the room.

I’m still too tired to turn it off.

Sleep takes me fast and hard. Too deep. Too dark.

I drift downward into the undertow I’ve been fighting for a decade, letting it pull me back to that time. To that day when the sun is a white coin burning overhead.

The air smells like funnel cake and suntan lotion.

Jess is beside me, bouncing on her heels, ponytail swinging. “One more ride!” she begs. “The new one—Freefall Fury!”

“No way.”

“Oh, c’mon! Don’t be such a chicken. I dare you.”

I roll my eyes. “Fine. But we’re getting funnel cake after.”

The line snakes forward, inch by inch, metal railings scorching our palms. The heat makes everything shimmer. When it’s finally our turn, we’re strapped into the circular gondola—fifteen seats all around the tower, bright-red harnesses clicking into place.

I nudge her with my elbow and hold out my palm.

“Hey, I lost my hair tie. Let me have one of yours.”

She rolls her eyes even as she pulls the pink elastic band from the bottom of one of her braids.

“What is it with you? I swear, it’s like you can’t hang on to one of these for a single day!”

Before I can comment, the ground falls away beneath us, and we’re silent—mesmerized as the world becomes smaller, quieter.

The air thins, the city shrinking to a map.

“You okay?” Jess calls over the sound of the wind.

“Yeah,” I lie.

We’re suspended now, four hundred feet in the air, the ocean glinting in the distance, and for a heartbeat, it’s beautiful.

Then—clank.

A metallic groan, deep and wrong.

Someone screams.

“Jess?”

The seats jerk. My stomach flips. To my right, the harnesses rattle; to my left, Jess’s seat tilts at a horrifying angle. A jagged crack snakes between us, splitting the platform.

She’s still smiling at first—confused, disbelieving.

Then she realizes.

“Jenn—”

I grab her hand, both hands, our fingers interlocked, sweaty and shaking. The metal screams again, louder this time, and I feel her slipping.

“Hold on!” I shout. “Hold on, Jess!”

Her mouth forms my name. Then she’s gone.

The seats crash back into alignment, the brakes slam, the world lurches, but she isn’t there anymore. The harness digs into my shoulders, and my hand burns. I realize I’m still holding the pink elastic—twisted around my wrist so tight, it’s drawn blood.

Below, I hear sirens. I see flashes of color, people running.

And somewhere in the noise, I swear I can still hear her scream.



I jerk awake, gasping. The light is still on, the air conditioner steady and indifferent. My heart hammers so hard I can feel it in my throat.

The clock on the nightstand reads 3:47 a.m.

I close my eyes, press the heels of my palms to them.

For a second, I think about calling Gabe. Just hearing his voice would help, the steady calm of it, the grounding. But I know what would happen. He'd want me to come home—or worse, he'd get on a plane himself.

So I stay quiet.

I lie there in the dark, counting my breaths until they even out again.

When I finally reach for my water glass, I catch sight of the thin elastic around my wrist.

Still there.

Always there.

Chapter Twenty-Six

MARY

Three and a half years ago

You have no idea what “going viral” means until it happens to you. It’s like being in a car traveling at ninety miles an hour down a long, twisting, narrow road. On a steep mountain. With no guardrail. And no brakes. You have no control over your speed and no ability to stop. You’re having to navigate hairpin turns as well as the occasional passing car. It’s both thrilling and terrifying, and it’s nothing I would have ever chosen for myself.

And yet there I was.

There we were.

Turns out that the entire ten weeks we spent together out there in the woods and away from civilization, our teammate Naomi wasn’t just documenting her adventures; she was also documenting me and Sam. From our “origin story,” to the near disaster on the river, and plenty of snapshots in between. Her dispatches from the backcountry blew up almost overnight.

Out there, away from all mainstream communication and technology, we had no idea of the tsunami building with hashtags like #WildernessTwins and #SistersFound trending across all platforms of social media. I don’t think Naomi herself expected the kind of interest—the kind of obsession—that brought out hundreds of people to greet our returning van. When I looked back at some of the extensive video posted from those first hours back at the NAWA headquarters, I could see so clearly the loop of emotions that Sam and I had been experiencing. Over and over again, we cycled through confusion, suspicion, terror, and incredulity.

That moment was a game changer—but it was the *People* magazine cover story that launched us to a whole new level. Pictures of us together spread across several glossy color pages, telling the story of how we came to find each other. The guy from the college ID line was quoted, as were the

manager of the hotel where we lived for three months and that asshole Richard, who got booted from our team for punching Sam. Even Leo offered a statement on behalf of the North American Wilderness Academy talking about how, despite moments of “typical sibling discord,” we had been stellar team members who proved ourselves to be tough and resourceful in the most challenging of situations.

Uh-huh.

Sam certainly had been “resourceful” when it came to Leo, but all that fell away almost immediately as we were caught in the powerful undertow of instant celebrity. Dubbed “The Serendipity Sisters,” we had an agent to handle all the requests for interviews and appearances. *Good Morning America*, *The Late Show*, *60 Minutes*—we were everywhere. At her suggestion we made the move to LA, where we rented a loft apartment on Wilshire Boulevard. It was a long way from our initial plan to stay there in Oregon working as guides, but it wasn’t without its pluses. Like Brad.

I met him in the lobby of our building when the elevator doors started to slide shut before I could reach them. He stuck out his hand—still clutching a cell phone—at the very last second, triggering the sensor. When they opened again, I was face-to-face with my tall, broad-shouldered, green-eyed neighbor. By the time he got off on his floor—two below ours—we had a date set for the next night.

An entertainment lawyer, Brad dealt with celebrities—and the intricacies of their very unique world—on a daily basis. Over enchiladas and sangria, he regaled me with hilarious antics of unnamed actors and directors. The next night we continued the conversation over dumplings and sake, and the night after that, over chicken marsala and wine. And the morning after that, over breakfast in his apartment.

Reluctant to introduce him to my sister, I made all kinds of excuses for my evenings out—yoga, coffee with friends, a play. But there was no getting around it when she caught me sneaking in at five in the morning like some wayward teenager after a night of swilling hard seltzer and groping in the back seat.

Within a month I was in love, and Sam was incensed—not that she had any right to be. Reveling in our newfound pseudocelebrity status, she’d taken to clubbing all night and sleeping all day. Our home became a revolving door of “stands” ranging from one night to one week.

She definitely had a type—men old enough to know better and usually too smug to care. I woke regularly to find some strange guy not much younger than my father standing in our kitchen, drinking my organic OJ and eating my Eggos in his underwear. I wasn't thrilled about any of it, but I tried to keep my thoughts to myself.

She, however, had no problems disparaging my new boyfriend openly and frequently. It was becoming a growing source of tension between us because, while my twin wanted to be free to do as she pleased with whomever she pleased, she'd become very possessive of me. If I wasn't going to go out and party with her, she liked to know I was at home in my pajamas and fluffy slippers—streaming romances rather than experiencing them.

"I just don't like him," she complained again and again.

"I just don't care," I replied again and again.

What seemed to bother her most was the fact that Brad, unlike virtually everyone else we knew, could tell us apart on sight from day one and every day thereafter.

"Of course I can," he said when I commented on this fact. "You're the most beautiful woman in any room. In *every* room. I could pick you out of a thousand identical women."

As far as I was concerned, Brad wasn't going anywhere. And who had time to argue anyway? Within a year of completing the NAWA course, we'd been featured in a few local commercials, which led to a runway show, which led to bit parts in an Adam Sandler movie. That became the springboard to our biggest deal yet, the Mirror Image fashion brand, who hired us for a huge national ad campaign.

The night that the first ad was set to air, the three of us sat on the couch in our apartment, watching the wall-mounted TV for signs that the show was about to cut to commercial. Next to me, Brad had an arm draped loosely over my shoulder. He smiled, giving me a quick squeeze as my sister scowled from the other end of the sectional.

"You guys are going to be amazing!" he said.

"Okay, okay—shut up, you two," Sam barked when the screen finally faded to black.

And suddenly, there we were, standing, facing each other through a mirror frame, both dressed in the same strapless pink dress. Then I stepped out of the "mirror" and turned toward the camera, except now I was

wearing boot-cut jeans with a white cowl-neck sweater. Sam did the same thing, appearing to step out of the mirror, but now she was wearing a tight, short black cocktail dress. And we went on like this for a few more rounds of different outfits until we stopped, turned, and walked away from the camera, arms around each other, pausing once to look back over our shoulders. The company logo popped up on screen with a voiceover from a young-sounding woman with a gravelly voice.

“Mirror Image. Fashion that suits every side of you.”

“Oh my God!” my sister squealed, when it was over, jumping off the couch and onto her feet. “That was amazing!”

I looked up at her, grinning so wide that I thought the corners of my lips might actually touch my ears. “I know, right?!”

Sam held out her hands, and I took them so she could pull me up to my feet and have an impromptu dance party right there in the middle of our living room.

“I’ll crack open the bubbly!” my boyfriend declared, getting up to pull the bottle out of the fridge. Then he poured it into flutes, handing one to each of us before taking a glass for himself. “To Hollywood’s newest ‘it’ girls!” he declared, lifting for a toast.

Sam rolled her eyes but clinked glasses anyway.

“So how ’bout you try sleeping in your own bed tonight?” she suggested to Brad.

“Great idea!” I piped up before he could respond. “The TV in his room is huge, and I love curling up in there with a bowl of popcorn to watch *The Late Show*.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed on me. “I was hoping we might have some time together. You know, alone,” she said pointedly.

Brad set his glass down on the coffee table and held up his hands in surrender. Always the “bigger man,” he made a point of not engaging in any of my sister’s petty assaults. “This sounds like a discussion for you two ladies to have privately,” he said.

“Gee, thanks, Captain Obvious,” she snarled.

He just shot her a smile before giving me a quick kiss. “Call me later and let me know what you want to do. I’m fine with anything—if you want to be on your own or come over or whatever.”

“Thanks, I will,” I agreed, waiting for the door to close behind him before spinning on my twin. “This has got to stop!” I spat.

“Yes,” she agreed, “it does. That guy is nothing but a leech.”

“A leech?” I countered incredulously. “He’s got more money in the bank than both our earnings combined! And he knows every A-lister in town. What on earth do I have that he could possibly leech off?”

She looked pouty that I’d called her on her BS.

“Emotions,” she said finally.

I picked up Brad’s glass and took it, along with mine, to the kitchen, setting them in the sink. Sam followed me, cornering me against the cabinets.

“Emotions?”

“Yes. He’s an emotional vampire. I know the type, Mary. You need to ditch him before he drains you dry.”

I put my hands on my hips and quirked an eyebrow. “Of my emotions.”

She nodded somberly. “Absolutely. Trust me on this, the guy’s bad news.”

“And what about you and all your hookups? They’re not emotional vampires?”

“No! They’re just sex. I know how to separate the emotional from the physical. But not you. You give yourself over completely, and that’s just . . . well, it’s naive, Mary. And it’s going to get your heart broken. Take it from me—you don’t want to hang your happiness on anyone else because, in the end, they’ll let you down when you need them most. Every. Time.”

I took a step forward so we were only inches apart, and when I spoke again, it was with a softer, gentler tone. “Sam, what happened to you?” I asked for about the hundredth time. “Who hurt you—who betrayed you so badly that you won’t trust your heart to anyone? That you don’t want me to trust mine to anyone either?”

Because that’s what it boiled down to. I didn’t, for a second, think that Sam Kinski was innately opposed to love. But I believed she was honestly concerned something awful might happen to me too. This wasn’t about Brad specifically; it was about men generally.

She recoiled backward, as if I were a snake about to strike. “Stop trying to change the subject!” she demanded, not quite able to hide the warble in her voice. This subject always rattled her. “You know I’m right about him!”

“I know you’re out of your mind,” I countered coolly.

That was the button—the one that made her turn fifty shades of scarlet.

“One of these days, Mary, I’m going to show you just *how* out of my mind I can get,” she threatened.

I quirked a challenging eyebrow. “Really? You mean it gets worse? ’Cause you seem pretty unhinged to me.”

That was when she slapped me.

“You really are out of your mind!” I spat, palm pressed to my stinging cheek.

“Go ahead, Mary, Mary, quite contrary!” she taunted. “How *does* your garden grow?”

She also knew exactly which buttons to push. I felt my resolve to remain calm crumble to dust at my feet as I shoved her shoulders hard enough to send her stumbling back several feet across the tile floor.

“You bitch!” she screeched, lunging for me.

But I ducked out of the way just in time, and she hit the counter with a grunt before rounding to find me already back in the living room, coffee table between us and phone in hand.

“Come near me again, and I’m going to call the police,” I threatened, thumb poised over the big green button that would connect me to a 911 operator.

That was when she dove at me across the table, dragging me forward by the collar of my shirt and sending the phone flying under the couch. We hit the floor, rolling around, pulling hair and throwing punches, scratching, and cursing. All around us lamps, books, and assorted crap rained down from the tables and shelves above whenever we crashed, tumbled, stumbled, or fell. Neither of us paid any attention to the pounding on the door, and I remember thinking vaguely that someone had probably called the police. I didn’t care. At least, not until the moment the door flew open with so much force that it banged against the opposite wall with a cracking noise that stopped us both in our tracks.

Sweaty and panting, I found myself staring across the room at two pairs of shoes. As my eyes traveled upward slowly from feet to shins, shins to thighs, thighs to waist, I grew more certain of what—or rather, who—I was going to find when I finally ran out of body parts.

“Hello, Mary,” my mother said stiffly. Then she nodded at Sam, who lay flat on her back, chest heaving. “Samantha.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

JENN

Sunday morning

After Jess died, everything in my life spun loose for a long time. I know what it looks like when someone's coming apart. And I won't stand by and watch that happen to Mary Langston. Not if I can change the trajectory.

As I stroll through the hospital parking lot toward the entrance to the building, I walk right past several journalists. They clock me, give me the once-over, decide I'm not someone who can offer them any intel, and return to their phones and their conversations. Which was the whole idea of dressing down this Sunday morning. I'm not very doctorly in well-worn jeans and Sketchers, hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Mission accomplished.

I smile, amused by the idea that they have no clue who I am and that I'm the one person—outside of Mary herself—who could give them the scoop they're all so desperately looking for.

Up on the VIP floor, I find Mary sitting up in bed, reading. And while the scabs and abrasions on her face are healing nicely, her big icy eyes are ringed with deep, dark circles.

"Good morning," I greet her softly and hold up a white bakery bag, shaking it. "Up for a little sugar/carb infusion? I've got fresh pastry from the Cuban bakery down the street."

"Oh God, yes," she agrees, and I set it on the tray table that hovers over her bed. She peers inside and pulls out a flaky morsel filled with sweet cheese and guava paste. She nibbles on the point of it, closing her eyes. "Mmm. Thank you. I needed this. I slept like shit last night."

"How come?" I ask, pulling up a chair so I can sit at her side.

"Ugh. Nightmares. All night long. At one point I got so twisted up in the sheets, I had to call for a nurse to help me get untangled."

"Do you remember what they were about?"

She pauses with the cup poised halfway to her chapped lips. “I dreamed about her,” she tells me after a beat of silence has passed between us.

“About Sam?”

She nods. “It was really upsetting. And . . . it made me remember some of what happened. Not all of it, but a lot more than I knew before.”

I have to be careful here, not wanting to spook her by seeming too interested. Or dissuade her by being not interested enough. But inside I’m doing a fist pump in the air. I knew it was in there somewhere; it was just a matter of time before it came floating up out of her subconscious.

“Okay. Can you tell me about that?”

“Well, I don’t remember all of it,” she tells me again quickly.

I hold up a reassuring palm.

“That’s totally fine. Anything is good. Sometimes things like this come back to you in flashes, like little pieces of a puzzle. You just keep collecting and sorting them until you have enough to put it all together.”

She nods thoughtfully, and when she speaks again, I get the sense she’s weighing her words. “I remember it was getting dark. And she was . . . weak, I guess? Sick, maybe. I, uh, I tried to paddle us out on my own, but, yeah, it was like pitch black, and I didn’t have a headlamp for some reason. But there were all these downed trees and branches everywhere. And then we lost the tide, and I knew we weren’t going anywhere for hours. Sam was just getting worse and worse.”

“Do you know what was wrong with her?” I prod gently.

Her brow furrows as if she’s willing her memory to go back. But it won’t. Not yet, anyway.

“I think . . .” She shakes her head as if trying to dislodge a thought or an image within it, then sighs in frustration. “I don’t know,” she says at last. “But I know I held her in the canoe. And we talked in the dark, trying to keep warm. And at some point, she was just . . . gone. I guess I must have tried to hike out, because they said the ranger found me about a quarter of a mile from the boat, where I’d left Sam. But I don’t have any memory of how it was that I got there.”

I reach out and pat her arm. “Hey, it’s going to be all right. Whatever it is. Whatever happened. Mary, you have to keep in mind you’ve experienced a multilayered trauma here. Not only did you experience your sister’s death,

you had to fight for your own survival. And now you're having to figure out exactly what happened right along with everyone else."

She shakes her head slowly, blond hair slipping back and forth along the back of her shoulders as she does. "I-I'm not so sure everyone sees it like that," she murmurs.

"Listen, it was my job to come here and assess you—your mental state. Wanna know what I think? What I'm going to write in my report?"

She nods but doesn't speak, so I continue.

"I think that you're an extraordinary young woman who loved her sister but didn't always like her. That you're grateful to have found her but sometimes resented the way she upended your life. And that you were desperate to give her something that only you could—a family." I shift slightly and take the young woman's small hand in mine, giving it a squeeze. "I don't know you very well. And I don't know what happened out there. But I've got good instincts, and they're telling me you had nothing to do with Sam's death."

Mary Langston stares at me for several heartbeats before shifting her focus to something on the other side of the room. Something that nobody can see except for her. "Do you ever wish it had been you?"

The question comes out of nowhere, and I don't immediately understand the context.

"Wish what had been me?"

"Have you ever—even once, even for a single, fleeting moment—wished it had been you . . . and not her? Not Jess."

There's an explosion of air from my lungs.

Jesus!

First Stef, now Mary. For the second time in twelve hours, someone has managed to give me a violent physical reaction without laying so much as a finger on me.

Eyes that were wild and frantic only moments ago are cold and flat, and they're trained on me—on every inch of my face. And they're waiting for an answer.

Somewhere in the time it takes me to open my mouth and utter a response, it all comes flooding back. Like a towering wave that crests and breaks, catching me in its powerful undertow and dragging me—drowning me in my own memories. Not the memories of that day but the ones that came *after* that day.

High school, college, career, marriage—I have continued to grow and age, develop and change . . . but not Jess. I surpassed innumerable milestones, the excitement and joy of each overshadowed by the looming presence of her absence and the excruciating volume of her silence. For decades now, my sister has remained frozen in time, just a skinny teenager with a long, dark ponytail hanging down her back.

It will be different for Mary, but also the same. They never got to share all those childhood experiences. And now they won't get to share most of the adult ones. They existed together, as a complete unit, for the slimmest slice of time. And it wasn't nearly enough.

Of course she wishes it were her. She's the one left behind to shoulder the burden of living out a life filled with question marks and regrets, blank spaces in pictures, a missing name in conversations. She now has to live for the both of them . . . just as I have had to do for the last twenty-three years. An honor wrapped in a burden.

"Yes."

The single word hangs between us for what feels like a long time, the spell broken only when she reaches for a box of tissues beside her, plucks one out, and hands it to me.

I hadn't even realized I was crying.

When Mary Langston starts to speak again, it's with the slow, weighted, intimate tone that signals the imminent arrival of something important, something serious.

A confession? An admonition?

"Dr. Flores, I trust you. And there's something—"

I'll never know how she was going to finish that sentence because just then, there's a sharp sound in the otherwise silent room—a rap on the door. We both jump, startled, as Julian Braithwaite sticks his head inside, his expression grim.

"Ladies, the detective is here with an update, and he'd like to see us. All of us."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

MARY

Three and a half years ago

My parents sat on the couch, watching silently as Sam and I made our way around the living room, hurriedly righting everything that had been tipped over, knocked over, or thrown over during our little melee. Splintered picture frames, overturned lamps, a broken mug. The front door hung crooked on its hinges, the lock plate split clean through. They'd had to kick it in after hearing the noise from the hall—crashing, shouting, maybe the sound of something heavy hitting the wall.

"Maintenance is going to love that," Sam muttered, rubbing her bruised shoulder as she stooped to pick up a throw pillow. "Guess that's coming out of our deposit."

"Or mine," I said under my breath, stacking books back on the shelf. We didn't look at each other once, and when we'd finished, she headed upstairs without another word to any of us. "Excuse me just a second," I murmured, slipping into the kitchen where I'd left a hoodie draped over a chair. I pulled it on over my short-sleeved T-shirt so they wouldn't catch sight of the Gemini tattoo I'd gotten to match Sam's several months ago.

"Can I get you something?" I asked as I walked back out into the living room. "Some water? A cup of tea, maybe?"

"What, out of booze?" my father asked with a pointed look toward the empty champagne bottle.

I sighed wearily. "Dad, please. Just . . . just don't, okay? If you've come here to criticize my life, you can just turn right back around and head home because I'm not doing this."

My mother shot him a warning glance before picking up the discussion. "Mary, what's going on? This isn't like you. What on earth were you and Sam fighting about? It looked as if you wanted to kill each other!"

“It’s nothing,” I replied flatly, signaling, once again, that I didn’t care to discuss it.

Not that my mother ever paid attention to signals.

“It was most certainly not nothing,” she said. When I didn’t respond, she continued. “Honey, we’re worried about you. We’d like you to consider coming home, even if it’s just for a visit. A week or two? Perhaps a little distance would do you girls some good right now.”

It was such a struggle to keep my rage freshly stoked, especially when I’d just expended so much on my sister. The simple truth was that I had missed them. That I *still* missed them. That, in spite of everything, I still loved them. But, tempted as I was to try and smooth out a few of our ruffled feathers, I had to stand firm. There was a reason my parents were sitting here, in my apartment, nearly three thousand miles from home.

Which begged the question . . .

“How do you know where I live?” When they didn’t answer immediately, I filled in the blanks myself. “Ah, right. You had one of your security guys track me down,” I said with a nod. “Nice, guys. *Real nice.*”

“I’m not going to apologize for being concerned about you,” Mom said. “If you’d responded to any one of our calls, emails, texts, if you’d sent up smoke signals, *anything* to let us know you were okay, then we would have respected your request to leave you alone. But barring proof that you were okay, I needed to lay eyes on you for myself.”

“In person,” Dad added before I could point out the obvious. “Not on some late-night show or tacky TV commercial.”

His choice of words was a direct insight into their presence here now.

“Okay, so that’s what this is about?” I chuckled incredulously, my brows raising high into my forehead. “You don’t like my new public persona?”

“Mary, that’s not what—”

I cut him off sharply. “What’s wrong? Are your PR people telling you my ‘tacky commercials’ are tarnishing the pristine Langston Pharma brand?”

When they shifted a little uncomfortably, I knew I’d hit at least part of the nail on its head.

“What happened to being a wilderness guide?” Mom asked. “Isn’t that what you were working so hard for? Isn’t that what you came out here to the West Coast for? And now what? You’re just trading on your notoriety.”

“Notoriety? Funny, I’m not aware that I’m notorious for anything.”

“No?” Dad challenged. He reached around to the messenger bag that was on the floor by his feet and pulled out a stack of photocopies. When he held up the first one—an article from a trashy supermarket tabloid—I felt my stomach lurch.

“Twisted Twins!” he read aloud dramatically. “The Secret Sibling Rivalry Boils Over—Public Fights, Boozy Nights, and Chaos Ensue!” He dropped that one onto the coffee table and held up another. “Double Trouble: Separated at Birth, Now Spiraling out of Control! Twins’ Drunken Brawl Stuns Onlookers. Oh, look, here’s a good one—Wilder Than You Think! Viral Twins in Public Meltdown—Fist Fights, Feuds, and Too Much Booze.”

“All right!” I said, holding up my palms when he reached for another. “Okay, okay, I got the idea already.”

“No, I don’t think you do,” Mom countered. “This isn’t about our reputation, Mary. Or the company’s. It’s about yours. Keep it up, and no college will take you!”

“Who says I want to go back to college?” I demanded, my voice growing louder. “I’m doing just fine without it, thank you very much.”

“You call this doing fine?” Dad asked, gesturing to the pile of lurid headlines. “You’re out of control. Both of you. Whether you want to believe it or not, we don’t want to see all this affect Sam’s future either.”

I scoffed loudly. “Oh, so *now* you’re worried about Sam? Seriously?”

My mother’s jaw tightened, and when she spoke again, it was through gritted teeth. “Mary Louise, I don’t know how many ways we can tell you we love you and we’re worried about you. *Both* of you. You don’t have the life experience to know that you’re headed down a very rocky road. How you proceed from here will affect the choices you have the rest of your life.”

I took a long, deep breath and tried to calm down before I spoke again. “I appreciate your concern, but it’s not necessary. What you’re reading about are overblown stories taken out of context—”

“Out of context?” Dad echoed, incredulously. “The two of you were arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct! And what we just witnessed here in this apartment makes me think the context is spot on!”

“Okay, so we didn’t start it,” I told him, not wanting to get into the details of the night Sam had one too many shots of vodka and picked a fight with an entire bachelorette party. “And we weren’t charged with anything. Besides,” I continued, gesturing around our loft, “as you can see, I’m not living in some hovel. I have an agent and several contracts for commercials and appearances. No one is concerned about the publicity. In fact, it’s only increased our visibility. And if you doubt that, ask our publisher! There’s even talk about a book deal and selling the rights to our story to a producer here in Hollywood. So you see? I’m doing quite well out here in the big bad world—even without the life experience.”

My father stood, offering my mother his hand so she could join him. The two of them looked at me for a long beat before my mother spoke softly, reverently.

“Remember your Proverbs 16:18, Mary. ‘Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.’”

Then they turned and walked out.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

JENN

Sunday morning

The meeting is in the small private conference room adjacent to David Kellogg's office. When Julian and I wheel Mary inside, we find Joyce Danner already seated with Doug and Terry Langston—and their attorney, Paul Crane. He's a tall, thin man in a charcoal suit, his legal pad open and pen poised as if he's been taking notes since dawn. The moment they see Mary, Doug and Terry jolt to their feet. It's painfully clear how much effort it takes for them not to rush across the room.

"Oh . . . baby," Terry whispers, hand flying to her mouth as she takes in the bruising, the swelling, the dried cuts along her daughter's cheeks.

Crane rests a steadying hand on Terry's shoulder, murmuring something low—likely reminding her to stay seated. Julian and I position Mary across the oblong table from them. Kellogg claims the head of the table; Detective Luis Rivera sits opposite him, young and sharp in his Sunday-duty attire—dark slacks, rolled sleeves, a loosened tie. His dark hair is neatly trimmed, his eyes steady and kind as he observes the tense almost-reunion with cool, clinical calm.

Not that there is a reunion. Mary doesn't look at them. Not once. She keeps her gaze on her folded hands, face carefully blank. Once everyone has settled, Kellogg begins.

"Detective Rivera has spoken with Mary, her parents, and their attorney," Kellogg begins. He gestures toward me. "This is Dr. Jennifer Flores, who has been consulting on Mary's care. Dr. Julian Braithwaite is the attending overseeing her treatment."

Rivera offers a polite nod around the table, then leans forward, forearms planted on the glass surface.

"Let me get right to it," he says. "The medical examiner has ruled Samantha's death an accident. No indication of foul play."

Terry releases a strangled sob.

“So . . . how?” Doug asks, squeezing her hand.

“Anaphylaxis,” Rivera says. “Specifically? Snakebite.”

A ripple of shock travels the table in a wave.

Mary looks stunned too—eyes glassy, lips parting softly.

“Dear God,” Julian mutters, rubbing under the bridge of his glasses.

“A snakebite?” Kellogg repeats incredulously. “And this took three days to confirm?”

Rivera doesn’t rise to the bait.

“Given the decomposition, it wasn’t obvious. Mary was incoherent when she was found—talking about leaving Sam in the canoe and trying to hike out alone. Toxicology identified the venom. Diamondback rattler. It would’ve taken hours for systemic collapse.”

He turns to Mary. “Does that sound familiar?”

She shakes her head, tears slipping down her cheeks. “Not yet. But . . . it fits. She was getting sick.”

“It’s a slow process,” I tell Rivera gently. “She’s coming out of shock and dissociation.”

Doug leans forward, voice trembling. “Oh, Mary, sweetheart. It’s going to be okay. Once you’re ready, everything will go back to the way it was—before . . .”

He trails off, realizing too late that sentence has no safe landing.

Mary lifts her head. Her expression has gone cold. Sharp. Defined.

“Before what, Dad? Before Sam showed up?”

“Your father didn’t mean it like that,” Terry rushes in. “We’re just . . . we’re so sorry this happened to you.”

“Me?” Mary barks out a humorless laugh. “I lived. Sam is dead. And you still can’t cut her a break.”

The silence afterward is suffocating.

Terry recovers first, voice soft but too steady. Controlled.

“Of course we’re sorry Sam is gone. We never would’ve wished—”

“Wouldn’t you, though?” Mary snaps. “Now you can pretend none of this happened. Pretend she never existed.”

“Mary,” I murmur, “I don’t think—”

“No!” she shoots at me, eyes blazing. “You don’t know what they did.”

“I do know,” I say gently. “You told me.”

Doug and Terry's gazes swing in my direction.

"She told you *what*, exactly?" Doug asks.

Next to him, Paul Crane stiffens noticeably, tapping his pen once on the legal pad. The motion is soft but pointed.

"That you tried to . . . encourage Sam to leave," I reply carefully. "And to end her relationship with Mary."

Their relief is instant—and telling.

If that wasn't the thing they were scared we knew . . .

What else is waiting under the floorboards?

"Is there something els—" I begin.

"You know what?" Julian cuts in, abruptly rising. His chair screeches across the floor. "This is too much for Mary. We need to get her back upstairs—"

"I said I'm fine," Mary interrupts, breath hitching. "I just . . . I have a splitting headache."

"I'll have the nurse bring something," I tell her softly. "But for now . . . more coffee might help. Caffeine?"

She nods.

I reach for the carafe. "Light and sweet, right?"

"Yes, please."

I'm halfway through opening the tiny creamer cups when Terry's voice slices through the room.

"Since when do you drink creamer?"

I look up. "Is there a problem with creamer?"

"Well, yes," she replies, tightening. "She's been vegan since she was a toddler."

Mary meets her mother's gaze and deliberately takes a long, slow sip.

"I haven't been for a while," she says. "Not that it's your business."

Rivera rises. "I'll leave you folks to talk. We'll release a statement in a few hours. And Mary—the ME needs your decision regarding Samantha's remains."

"Cremate her," Doug blurts, a little too loudly.

Rivera's eyebrow lifts. "It's Mary's call."

Mary's face reddens beneath the bruising.

"Jesus fucking Christ! You can't even give her a funeral?" she spits. "What happened to those Christian values you're always preaching?"

The room goes very still.

If Mary's reaction is a furious outburst, her mother's is a silent, quaking rage.

Terry Langston's eyes narrow, her lips draw thin and tight, and her brows pitch downward sharply. "What did you just say?" she asks in what has to be the most menacing whisper I've ever heard.

I sense rather than see Mary still.

"Terry?" Doug murmurs from next to his wife, clearly thinking he's missed something.

"What did you just say to us?" she demands again, louder.

Paul Crane leans over to whisper something to Terry, but she doesn't seem to notice.

She's begun to tremble—but not in a way I've ever seen before. Even Terry's teeth seem to be chattering as she stares Mary down, unblinking, her chest starting to rise and fall more quickly.

"I didn't . . ." Mary starts quietly, then stops, shaking her head. "I mean, I don't know . . ."

Something's happening that I don't understand.

"Terry? You need to calm down, sweetheart—"

His wife spins on him so quickly that he actually rolls back a few feet in his chair to put some distance between them.

"Don't you see it?"

"See what, honey?"

When Terry speaks again, her voice pierces the entire room.

"That is *not* our daughter. That's. Not. Mary!"

Chapter Thirty

MARY

Three years ago

My mother had been right. The epic fall she predicted came about seven months after their unannounced visit—and it arrived in a very biblical sense.

Walter McFurrypants needed a walk. Over the months that Brad and I had been seeing each other, I'd often step in as the de facto human in his schnauzer's life, wearing the hats of dog walker, feeder, cuddler. That night I was already in the lobby, just getting home from yoga, when I heard the ping of a text. Brad was stuck in a late meeting; would I please stop by his place to tend to the pup? Easy enough. I just hopped off the elevator two floors earlier than usual and let myself into his apartment with the key I had for exactly this reason.

My four-legged bestie was all over me the second I walked through the door with tail wags and kisses.

"Who's the good boy?" I cooed. "Were you a good boy today while Daddy was at work? Good boys get cook-keys!" I drawled, breaking up the word *cookies* into two as I made a show of reaching into the jar that housed his treats.

That was when I heard voices coming from the bedroom, where Walter often napped during the day—and often rolled onto the TV remote if it happened to be on the bed.

I put my hands on my hips and looked down at him. "Were you watching *Jeopardy!* again?"

His nails clicked on the hardwood floors as he followed me out of the kitchen, through the living room, and down the hall to the bedroom, where I pushed open the unlatched door.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

For a moment, I genuinely thought I was looking at a reflection—some trick of angles or mirrors or fluorescent glare.

Brad was sitting on the edge of the bed.

A woman was standing between his knees.

Her hands were in his hair.

His were on her hips.

Her face was tilted toward his.

Her mouth was pressed to his.

And she could've been my twin.

Because she was my twin.

Sam jerked back when she heard the sound I made—some awful little animal noise in the back of my throat. Brad blinked up, dazed, lips still parted from the kiss he hadn't stopped.

Then the recognition hit him, hard and ugly.

"Mary?" he choked out, scrambling to stand. "Mary—wait—I didn't—she—"

Sam swiped her thumb over the corner of her mouth, like brushing away proof.

"Relax," she muttered. "It was just a kiss. I was proving a point."

Brad rounded on her. "A point? Sam, what the hell—she's your—"

"My sister," Sam cut in sharply, not at all ashamed. "Exactly. Which is why it took you way too long to figure out who you were kissing."

He paled, looking between the two of us. "I thought it was you—she said she was you!"

"Really?" I asked. "What about that text?"

He looked perplexed. "Text? What text?"

I saw then how it must have happened. My twin knew exactly when I'd be home from yoga. She was probably tracking my phone, waiting for the right moment to text me. Or, rather, to pretend to be *Brad* texting me.

"What'd you do—wait till he went to the bathroom and take his phone?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Whenever he comes to our place from work, he heads straight to the kitchen for a beer. He didn't disappoint."

"And the code to his phone?"

Sam scoffed. "Please. Pathetically easy. Your birthday. *Our* birthday, actually," she corrected.

Brad stared at her, horrified. "Christ, Sam, you're out of your mind."

Her expression flickered—something hurt and furious and fragile all at once.

I didn't give either of them a chance to say more. Walter was barking somewhere behind me, picking up on my panic. I scooped him up, turned, and left.

It was the only way to keep from screaming every hurt I'd swallowed since the day she showed up.



Walter and I took a long, slow walk around the neighborhood so I could untangle and process what had happened. More than an hour later I was able to return home—my home, not his. The apartment was dark except for a single lamp in the living room. Sam sat curled on the couch, socked feet tucked under her, twisting a tissue between her fingers.

Her eyes were red.

Mine probably weren't much better.

"Hey," she said quietly. "I wasn't sure you'd come back."

I bypassed her, went straight to the kitchen, and poured myself a shot of rum. Then another. Then a third.

Only when I felt something like steadiness return did I sit across from her, Walter crawling into my lap.

"I'm done," I said softly.

Sam's face tightened. "Done with what?"

"This," I said, motioning between us. "Us. Whatever this is."

"I didn't sleep with him," she blurted. "I didn't—Mary, I wouldn't—"

"You kissed him," I said. Calm. Too calm. "You put on my clothes. You acted like me. And you kissed him."

"That's all it was," she insisted, voice cracking. "One kiss. One! I pulled away first! I only wanted you to see—"

"What?" I asked. "That he's human? That he's flawed? That he can make a stupid split-second mistake when a beautiful girl throws herself at him?"

Her chin trembled. "I wanted you to see that he didn't deserve you."

I stared at her for a long, heavy beat.

"And what if I'd married him?" I asked quietly. "What if he'd been part of my future?"

Her mouth opened and closed.

And then I saw it—all of it:

The fear of being left.

The fear of not mattering.

The fear of losing the only bond she'd ever had.

Her tears spilled over. "Where am I in that life, Mary? You only just found me. We only just—God, I thought maybe we were finally—" She swallowed. "I don't want to lose you."

And damn it, that almost broke me.

But I couldn't save her at the cost of myself.

"I'm going home," I said. "To Florida. To my life."

"This is your home!" she shot back, but her voice wobbled. "With me. We're supposed to—"

"No," I whispered. "Not anymore."

Her face crumpled for half a second before she rebuilt it brick by brick.

"Fine," she said, too bright, too brittle. "Good luck with everything, then."

But her voice betrayed her. It wasn't anger.

It was devastation.

I clipped Walter's leash on.

She stood, fists tight at her sides. "Where are you going?"

I didn't turn around.

"To say goodbye to the love of my life," I muttered, walking out before she shattered completely—and took me with her.

Chapter Thirty-One

JENN

Sunday morning

Here in South Florida, the storms can be terrifying—ear-splitting thunder, blinding lightning, walls of rain that feel biblical.

But there's this moment right before the sky splits open.

A thin, electric silence where the air tightens, the birds go mute, and even the insects seem to hold their breath.

And then all hell breaks loose.

Just like right here. Right now.

"That's not our daughter!" Terry shrieks again.

Detective Rivera blinks at her, thrown completely off script. "I'm sorry—come again?"

Yeah. Welcome to the club, buddy.

Terry stands—no, erupts—to her feet, arm outstretched, finger aimed at Mary like a divine accusation.

"You're not our Mary!"

Across the table, Doug surges up beside her, one hand pressed between her shoulder blades as if she might blow straight through the ceiling. "Terry, sweetheart, you don't know what you're saying. Of course that's Mary—"

I glance at the young woman next to me.

She's gone chalk white.

Her blue eyes look too big for her face.

"Mary . . ." I murmur.

"Don't call her that!" Terry screams at me. "Don't you dare call her that!"

Now everyone is on their feet—Kellogg, Julian, Rivera, even Crane—like they all know they should intervene but none of them has the faintest clue how.

Joyce, seated behind Crane in her quiet hospital-counsel role, looks horrified. I don't blame her.

"Show me your shoulder," Terry demands, voice shaking with rage.

Mary flinches. "Wh-what? Why?"

"Do it! Or so help me God, I'll come across this table and do it for you!"

"Mary, you don't have to—" I begin, but it's too late.

Mary opens the robe, pushes the collar of her silky pajamas off her bruised shoulder—

There it is.

A tattoo.

Two simple line-drawn figures that, up close, resolve into something unmistakable:

Gemini.

The Twins.

I lean in without meaning to.

Of course. Of course that's what it is.

Terry's voice breaks open like a fault line.

"My daughter doesn't have tattoos. She"—she points with a shaking hand—"she does. That is Samantha. That's Samantha." Her voice collapses, shredded by grief and fury. "What did you do to Mary? What did you do to my daughter?"

Suddenly I'm moving without thinking, dropping into a squat so my eyes line up with the girl's. She's trembling, breath ragged, shoulders caved inward like she's trying to disappear.

I take her hand and squeeze.

Quietly. Carefully.

"You can tell me the truth," I whisper. "Are you Mary? Or . . . are you Sam?"

Her eyes fall to the table.

There's my answer.

I straighten and turn to the others. "Okay. We need to stop this. Right now. She's in no condition—"

"I want her arrested!" Terry screeches, nearly coming out of her skin. "She killed Mary!"

Doug's grief hardens into something sharper. "We want the investigation reopened," he says tightly. "We want charges."

Rivera looks like he'd rather walk blindfolded into a nest of hornets.

"With all due respect," he begins, rubbing a hand over his scalp, "no one killed anyone. The ME ruled the death accidental. Snakebite. No signs of foul play."

Julian slams his palm on the table hard enough to rattle the water glasses.

"Why would you do this?" he demands, leaning over Mary—no, Sam—with fury he's barely containing. "Why would you pretend to be Mary? What were you trying to accomplish, Samantha?"

She recoils so sharply, she nearly curls into herself.

"Julian, enough!" I snap. "You're scaring her."

Doug cuts in viciously. "She did it for the money! You wanted the trust fund, the house, the lifestyle—you wanted to steal Mary's life!"

"Can't you arrest her for identity theft?" he fires at Rivera.

Rivera exhales slowly. "Identity theft can be a felony . . . if she used the identity for financial gain over five thousand dollars."

"The hospital bill alone"—Doug jabs a finger toward Sam—"is ten times that!"

"Actually," Kellogg interrupts loudly, "the hospital is comping the bill. So there's no monetary loss."

Crane finally steps forward, calm and collected, a lawyer in full command of his clients' meltdown.

"Mr. and Mrs. Langston," he says softly, "this is no longer productive. It's time to go home."

"No!" Doug protests.

Crane leans in, murmurs something only the two of them hear. Whatever it is, it stops Doug cold.

Terry chokes back a sob. Her eyes never leave Sam's face.

Rivera straightens. "You're free to go. I recommend the side exit—reporters are thick as vultures outside."

Crane nods, then turns to Sam—who is slumped forward, blond hair curtaining her face.

"Ms. Kinski," he says, "you're in possession of documents removed from the Langston safe. You will return those—along with any copies—and sign a nondisclosure agreement. There will be no interviews, no media deals, no publication of this ordeal. In return, you may keep the remainder of the trust distribution you already received."

Sam lifts her head.

Just barely.

“Yes,” she whispers. “Okay.”

Crane gives a crisp nod, escorts Doug and Terry out, Joyce trailing behind him.

When they’re gone, the silence is thick enough to breathe.

Sam whispers, broken, “I’m sorry I lied.”

“This wasn’t your fault,” I tell her. “You didn’t kill Mary. You saw a chance at a better life. A family. But you can still start over.”

She nods, exhausted. “Can I lie down now?”

I wheel her upstairs myself, help her into bed, tuck the blanket around her bruised legs.

“You hungry?” I ask. “Want a burger from my cousin’s café? Best secret sauce in Miami.”

She touches my arm gently, eyes full of something small and raw.

“Thank you. For not hating me.”

I smile softly. “You can call or text me anytime. Day or night. I mean that.”

Her eyes droop. “Maybe . . . later . . . yeah. Fries too . . .”

Sleep steals her before she finishes the sentence.

Chapter Thirty-Two

MARY

Two and a half years ago

There are some things you never come back from.

For me and Brad, that was him making out with my twin sister. Even if he thought it was me. Even if I knew Sam and what she was capable of—and how she'd gone to great lengths to make sure he thought it was me he was sleeping with.

I was at an emotional stalemate: unable to blame him but unable to forgive him.

There was simply no way forward with us, so I moved forward with myself. Back in South Florida, I rented a small apartment and took a new job at the Everglades Wildlife Education Center, giving talks and tours to school kids. In my free time, I kayaked the Wilderness Waterway for hours on end, letting my subconscious do the work of sorting through all my emotional baggage while I pushed myself to my physical limits. I didn't see my parents until my twenty-first birthday—our twenty-first birthday. I'd been in touch with our family attorney, Ken Swaddle, about collecting the trust fund my grandfather had set up for me. When he'd mentioned that my parents would be joining the meeting, I hadn't thought much of it at first. Maybe they wanted to wish me a happy birthday in person. Maybe this was their olive branch, a way to smooth things over after everything that had gone down in California.

But when I walked into the conference room and saw them sitting there in their tailored suits, postures perfect and expressions carefully neutral, something in my gut twisted.

This wasn't a family reunion. This was an ambush.

"Mary, it's good to see you again," Ken said with a warm smile.

"Thank you," I replied, not volunteering any other pleasantries.

He got the idea and got down to the details. “Right, well, we’re here to discuss the trust set forth by your grandfather Lloyd Langston.”

Something about the way he said *discuss* didn’t sit right with me.

“You mean distribute, don’t you?” I asked carefully. “It’s my twenty-first birthday, and I’m due my first distribution.”

When his eyes darted nervously toward my parents, I knew. They were going to fight it.

“Mary, your parents are contesting the release of the trust funds.”

I leaned forward, placing my forearms flat on the table. “Really? And why is that?” I asked, working hard to keep my tone even and my words measured.

Ken cleared his throat. “They, uh, they’re asserting you’re not competent to manage the funds and are requesting to be made trustees . . .”

“Excuse me?” I interrupted, incredulous. “Not competent? Seems to me I’ve done just fine on my own for the last three years now. I haven’t asked you for a penny.”

“Yes, well . . .” Ken began, but my mother jumped in.

“Mary, since you left for California, your life has been a hot mess.”

“What? Are you kidding me?”

“You were arrested—”

“I wasn’t charged!” I protested, but she kept going as if I hadn’t spoken.

“You’ve been all over the tabloids. Before, you could argue that it was all part of your new public persona—but not now. Now you’re back here without a degree, without a job—”

“I do have a job!”

“Barely making minimum wage,” Dad pointed out. “And now you’re running out of money to pay for that place you’re staying in.”

“How the hell would you know that?” I demanded, then held up a hand. “You know what? I don’t even want to know. Just tell me. Tell me what it’s going to take for you to sign off on this.”

My parents looked at each other in surprise. They hadn’t expected the question.

Dad shrugged before answering. “Um, well, we’d like you to move home—just until you can get back on track.”

I hated the idea, but I also knew what they knew—that I didn’t have the resources to fight them on this. Hell, I didn’t even have a copy of the

trust document, and somehow I doubted they were going to make it easy for me to get my hands on it.

No, if I wanted to get what I wanted, I was going to have to play their game, their way. At least for a little while.

“And exactly how long do you think that’s going to take?”

Again they exchanged questioning looks. Clearly they’d figured they’d have a few more rounds of sparring with me before they had to hammer out the details. They were winging it.

“Uh—a year . . . ?” Dad was asking Mom. She nodded. “Right. A year,” he repeated, more firmly.

I considered this for a few moments before nodding. “Fine. One year. But I come and go as I please. I’ll decide if I want to take classes or work—and where. You’ll release enough of my money for me to buy a car, along with a stipend. At the end of the year, you sign off without any stipulations.”

“We’ll sign off if you haven’t taken any actions that we deem destructive,” Mom countered, finally getting them in the game with demands of their own.

“Too vague,” I replied, rejecting her choice of words. “I don’t like the idea of you deciding what is and what is not destructive.”

“Okay, fair enough,” she agreed, surprisingly. “We can work out those details here with Ken before we leave if you like.”

I didn’t like that I didn’t really have a choice.

Then again, I didn’t really have a plan either.

Not yet, anyway.

Chapter Thirty-Three

JENN

Sunday afternoon

When I return downstairs, I find David sitting at his desk, rubbing the bridge of his nose as Julian stands, looking out the window, jiggling his leg nervously.

“Ah, Dr. Flores, come join the shit show!” Kellogg says brightly, motioning me to one of the chairs in front of him. “Julian, stop pouting over there and have a seat.”

Julian spins around, red faced. “I’m hardly pouting, David,” he huffs, stomping over to drop into the other chair. “I just can’t believe this! The manipulation, the deception! Imagine if she’d actually gotten away with it!”

I feel a little stir of defensiveness on Sam’s behalf. “Well, you’re the one who has such a long history with the family,” I remind him. “If anyone should have spotted the difference, it’s you.”

“She’s right.”

My glance cuts to Kellogg for a second. Those are two words I never thought I’d hear coming out of his mouth. Not about me, anyway. Meanwhile, to my right, Julian is having a full-on meltdown.

“I-I hardly think that’s fair!” he splutters. “I haven’t seen Mary for about five years now, since the last time I had Thanksgiving with the family. And that was also the one and only time I ever met Samantha, who apparently did an excellent job at imitating Mary. You know, I think we should be discussing invoking the Baker Act.”

I sit up straight in my chair and gape at him. “The Baker Act? Are you kidding me?”

Also known as the Florida Mental Health Act, the Baker Act is a Florida law that provides emergency mental health services—by way of temporary detention—for people with mental illness. He wants to have Sam committed involuntarily.

“No, Jennifer, I assure you I’m perfectly serious. There’s no telling what that young woman might do next if left to her own devices.”

“Julian, that does sound a bit extreme,” Kellogg says. When he turns his attention to me, I brace myself for the worst. None of this was my fault, but there’s an excellent chance I’m about to become the scapegoat. Again.

“And you?” he asks.

I wait for the rest.

“And me . . . what?”

“What do you propose we do?”

“Do? I don’t think we can do anything. I don’t believe she’s a threat to herself or to anyone else—”

“I think Doug and Terry Langston would beg to differ,” Braithwaite cuts in.

I shoot him a glare. “Well, I think if anyone is hurt here, it’s that girl upstairs.” Julian scoffs, but I continue. “She’s been through a horrible ordeal . . .”

“Not as horrible as Mary,” he grumbles.

I shift in my seat to face him, my anger rising. “Okay, you really need to shut the fuck up now.”

Both men stare at me, wide eyed.

“I’m sorry, what did you just say to me?” Julian demands, echoing Terry Langston’s earlier question.

“I’m pretty sure she just told you to shut the fuck up,” Kellogg replies, folding his arms as he sits back against the back of his chair, an amused smirk pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“I cannot believe you—of all people—would speak to me that way!” my old mentor spits back at me.

“Why? Because I owe you something for bringing me down here to this clusterfuck of a situation? I don’t owe you anything. Not a damn thing.” I turn back toward the desk and Kellogg. “You want my opinion? Well, here it is—this woman’s been through enough. She’s got a life to rebuild, and we should be helping her get out there, not locking her up against her will.”

“At least here I could treat her. I could keep an eye on her,” Julian counters to his boss, ratcheting back on the theatrics.

David looks between us, no trace of the smile on his face anymore. “Julian, even if I thought it was a good idea to admit Samantha Kinski to

the psych ward for observation—which I don’t—I sure as hell wouldn’t allow you to do the assessment. You’re way too close to this already. And this . . . this chip-on-your-shoulder thing that you’ve got going on right now? Yeah . . . no. Not gonna happen.” He looks to me. “Dr. Flores, once you’ve written up your report, we’ll put it in the file. Feel free to finish it here or do it when you get back home to New York. Just send it to me along with your invoice. I’ll see it’s paid.”

I wait a long, awkward beat for him to add something else. Something snarky. Something insulting. Something belittling. But it doesn’t come, and I have no choice but to respond.

“Um . . . Yes, of course. I’ll do that.”

“Well, I object to this—all of this. I want that noted for the record,” Julian declares, standing up so he can glower down at me.

I keep my own expression impassive. “Duly noted,” I say.

When he stomps out, slamming the door behind him, I turn back to Kellogg.

“You won’t let him . . .”

“Admit her? No.”

“What if he gets another doctor at another hospital to do it?”

“No, that’s not going to happen, Dr. Flores. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to do a video call with our PR people so we can figure out how we’re going to handle the press.”

I stand. “Right, thank you again . . . for Sam . . .”

He nods curtly. “Not to worry. I’ll see Julian keeps his distance until she’s ready to leave.”

And just like that, the man who’s starred in two decades’ worth of nightmares evaporates. I walk out the door feeling, inexplicably, as if I’ve lost something.

Chapter Thirty-Four

MARY

Two years ago

I'd been living at home for about six months when Sam showed up.

She must have been keeping an eye on the calendar—as well as the house—because she turned up at the gate shortly after my parents left for Langston Pharma's annual retreat in Key West. She knew the housekeeper would be off and I'd be home alone for the weekend. I saw her on the camera feed as soon as she buzzed the intercom.

"What do you want, Sam?" I asked from my end of the two-way speaker.

"To talk. Let me in?"

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"Mary, please, let me just say what I have to say, then I swear I'll leave you alone. I won't bother you again."

I rolled my eyes and shook my head, silently berating myself even as I pressed the button allowing her entry. A few minutes later, she was standing in front of me on the porch steps. I didn't invite her inside.

"What is it? What do you want to say? Because I have to get to work."

"Right, um, okay. So . . . I've had a lot of time to think about . . . well, everything. And I'm really sorry. I mean, truly. I do regret everything I did to . . ." She paused and swallowed. This was hard for her. "I regret everything I did to sabotage your relationship."

"Fine. You've said it. Now please go," I replied dispassionately.

"No, wait—what I'm trying to say is that I realize what I did. You maybe could have had something permanent with Brad if I hadn't worked so hard to destroy it." She hesitated, eyes on the floor. "I hurt him too. He didn't deserve that—being pulled into our mess. I used him to prove

something to myself, and all I proved was how broken I was.” The statement made me pause. She sighed and continued. “It’s like, after so many years of being on my own, I’d gotten used to having you all to myself. And I liked it that way. In my mind, no one was ever going to be good enough for you. In my mind, it was always going to be just us—you and me. The two of us against the world.”

She took a step forward and took both my hands in hers. I didn’t pull away.

“I swear to God, Mary, I will never interfere with your life—with your happiness again. It’s not healthy, and it’s not right. I think . . . maybe I need to see a therapist. Not just about this, but about all the crap that’s constantly churning around in my head. I’m so tired of not being able to control it, but I need help. I don’t think I can resolve any of it on my own.”

“You said ‘crap,’” I observed.

“Um . . . yeah?”

“Why didn’t you say ‘shit’?”

She shrugged. “Because your parents don’t like it.”

“They’re not here, and you know it,” I pointed out.

She nodded. “That’s true. But I’m standing in front of their house, and it would be disrespectful to them. I’m willing to do better—with you and with them. Because you love them . . . and I love you.”

It was the first time she’d said the words, and against all odds, I was incredibly, inconceivably moved by them. When I opened my arms, she flew into them, holding me tight as she buried her face in my shoulder.

It occurred to me then there weren’t just things you don’t come back from. There were people you don’t come back from too. And for me, Sam Kinski was one of them.

We moved inside eventually, both of us nursing cups of coffee at the kitchen island. I told her about the agreement to move back home and how my parents and I had managed to maintain a cool but civil relationship for the last half year. Now she tilted her head, considering me curiously.

“Something’s changed in you,” she observed.

I nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

“You still care for them . . .”

“I do,” I agreed.

“But you’re not happy with them.”

Another shrug from me. “I resent them using my own money against me, but I don’t have much of a choice at the moment.”

“Why not fight them? Like in court?” she asked.

“That’d cost tens of thousands of dollars—none of which I have on me at the moment. And there’s no guarantee some crotchety old judge won’t agree with them. Hell! They’ve probably financed campaigns for half the elected officials in this state!”

“Okay, I get that. But what happens if they decide you’re not ready at the end of the year? What if they want another year?”

“That’s why I had Ken put everything in writing,” I told her. “Every term, every condition. I wasn’t about to give them an inch. One year, a fixed stipend, and written confirmation that I’d get full access to my trust documents. If they try to stall, they’ll have to go through my lawyer—and a judge—this time.”

Sam raised her eyebrows, half impressed, half wary. “Good. Because you know they’ll try it if they can.”

“Oh, I know,” I said. “But at least now they’ll have to work harder to screw me over.”

She studied me for a long moment. “Still, you shouldn’t have to fight this hard for what’s yours.”

“Welcome to being a Langston,” I said dryly. “Every gift comes with a leash.”

She frowned. “You have seen the trust itself, right? The full document?”

I hesitated. “Not yet. Ken said he didn’t have the original on hand—it’s locked in the safe in the study. He promised I could review it later.”

Sam’s brow furrowed. “And you believed that?”

I sighed. “At the time, yeah. The whole meeting caught me off guard. I thought I was there to sign for the distribution, not to defend myself. They had their lawyer, their folders, their script. I just wanted to get out of that office before I lost it.”

Sam pushed back her chair and stood. “Well, you’re not off guard now.”

I looked up at her, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“You said the trust is locked in the safe here, right? So let’s go look at it.”

“What? Sam, no—”

“Why not? They’re out of town. We’ve got a whole weekend before anyone’s back. You said you wanted to know the truth.” She was already walking toward the study. “Seems to me this is your chance.”

I stared after her, heart thudding with a mix of adrenaline and disbelief.

“Sam—”

She looked back over her shoulder with that familiar crooked grin. “You coming, or you want me to do the breaking and entering solo?”

And just like that, I found myself following her down the hall toward my father’s study, the taste of coffee and guilt bitter in my throat.

Chapter Thirty-Five

JENN

Sunday evening

It's after six by the time I return to the VIP floor with a bag of food from Cuba Libre in tow. I'm already thinking through how to coax Sam into eating something—anything—when the empty sitting room stops me cold.

Shannon stands just inside the bedroom doorway, arms folded, expression tightened with something like apology.

“Dr. Flores?” she says softly. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

A ripple of dread curls through me. “Is she all right?”

The nurse exhales. “She’s . . . not here.”

My pulse ticks upward. “Not here meaning what, exactly?”

“She left. She asked me to take her down to the garden for air. Then she sent me inside for a bottle of water. When I came back, the chair was empty.” She hesitates before adding, “Security checked the area, but she wasn’t under a hold. And she didn’t owe a bill. She was free to leave anytime.”

Sam must have been as desperate to get away from this place as I was.

And who could blame her? Who was she trying to get away from with all of us buzzing around her, picking apart her lies, her motives, her life.

Julian. Kellogg. Even me.

Shannon shifts her weight—a subtle, deliberate movement. She’s watching me too closely.

“I knew you . . . back then. When you were a resident? I’m sure you don’t remember me. I was just a newbie nurse—a floater.”

My mind flips through a hundred faces from the past.

“I’m so sorry, I don’t—”

“I was in the ER,” she says before I can finish. “That night . . .”

The memory snaps into focus at once:

Harsh fluorescent lights.

The sharp scent of antiseptic.

A much younger Shannon hugging a stack of charts to her chest.

Kellogg slamming the phone down so hard the receiver bounced.

The charts flew from her arms and skittered across the tile.

“Oh, brilliant! Just fucking brilliant!” he’d barked, coffee splashing across his sleeve. “Can nobody do their job tonight?”

I blink, the image dissolving.

Shannon gives a small, rueful smile. “Hard night to forget.”

She shifts her weight again, hesitating before continuing.

“I tried speaking up afterward,” she says quietly. “Thought maybe it would help. But he barely even looked up from whatever he was writing in his little notebook and just told me to drop it. So I did.”

She delivers it like a throwaway detail, already moving past it.

“I was young,” she adds. “Easy to scare. But you weren’t. You fought back. I think that meant something to her—to Mary. Or Sam.” A faint, apologetic smile. “Sorry. Still getting used to which name belongs where.”

Her pager chirps.

“VIP physician needs me,” she says, offering a small shrug. “I’ve got to run.”

She turns down the hall, and the moment ends as simply as it began. I reach out to touch the sleeve of her scrubs as she walks by. She looks down at me.

“Thank you, Shannon. For then. And for now.”

She gives me a brief nod and a sad smile before disappearing into the corridor.

The room becomes still in the silence she leaves behind—as if it’s holding its breath. The faint rustle that comes several seconds later feels amplified, out of proportion to its size.

Did I miss someone coming into the suite? I stand up and walk toward the source of the noise and nearly jump out of my skin when an older gentleman in green housekeeping scrubs emerges from the bathroom holding a bag full of trash. I’ve seen him before.

“Oh! Dr. Flores, it’s you,” he says, recognizing me.

“Hello . . . Forgive me, I can’t recall your name . . .”

“Jeffrey,” he supplies. His eyes flick to the takeout bag in my hand, and he brightens. “Cuba Libre café! Best burgers in the city, bar none.”

Despite everything, I smile. A tiny, welcome sliver of normal.

“That’s my family’s place. My cousin Stef owns it. You’re not wrong about the burgers. In fact . . .” I offer the bag. “I brought this for my patient, but it doesn’t seem like she’ll be needing it.”

His face beams. “Well now, isn’t it a small world! Thank you, Doctor—what a treat. Tell your cousin she’s got fans in me and my wife.”

“You’re welcome. And I will,” I promise.

A moment later, his expression shifts. He points toward the empty bed.

“Dr. Flores, was the young woman in here your patient? Mary Langston?”

I don’t bother correcting the name. “She is. Do you know what happened to her?”

“No, ma’am. I was wondering the same. She was so sweet—most patients up here barely look at me. But Miss Langston, she liked to chat. I was happy when she asked me to come twice a day. Just lovely.”

“Yes,” I murmur. “She is.”

“Well, thank you again—I’ll take one of these”—he shakes the bag of food—“over one of these any day.” He lifts the trash bag in his other hand.

Something about the way it shifts catches my attention.

“Wow, that seems pretty heavy for bathroom trash,” I say, instincts prickling.

“Oh, that’s just the food,” he says casually.

“The . . . food? In the bathroom trash?”

He nods. “Yes’m. Picked it up twice a day. Poor thing couldn’t stand the smell.”

“Right,” I say, though nothing about this feels right. “Every day?”

“Well, she was only here a few days. But yeah. Once after lunch, once after dinner. Figured she couldn’t stomach heavy meals. Thought about suggesting broth, maybe crackers, but I didn’t want to be nosy.”

I search my memory:

A nibbled sandwich Friday.

A protein shake Saturday.

Barely a bite of pastry today.

None of this fits.

“Did you notice what kind of food she was tossing?” I ask.

“Oh sure. Cheese, pepperoni scraped off pizza . . . and a beautiful piece of skirt steak—primo cut! Not a single bite taken.”

And then, quietly, everything begins to click.

Ordering meals a vegan heiress wouldn't touch.

Discarding the evidence.

Maintaining a performance Julian would recognize instantly if she slipped.

Clever, clever girl.

"Thank you, Jeffrey. Enjoy the burger," I tell him.

"Oh, I will!" He gives a delighted wave as he heads out. "Gonna take my break early while it's still warm!"

And then the room feels impossibly empty.

Sam gone.

The bed stripped.

The air scrubbed of any trace she'd ever been here.

I remind myself—firmly, clinically—that this is no longer my case.

I need to let it go.

I gather my purse and leave the suite, a faint unease following me down the corridor, lingering around me like a cloud as I push the elevator call button.

A whisper of wrongness I can't quite pin down.

Once the doors slide closed behind me, I shake my head, trying to reset.

I'll pack up my things and get the hell out of this place with its secrets and lies.

Then tomorrow I'll go home to the safety of my husband's arms and tell him he was right not to want me to come down here.

Some ghosts should be left in their quiet graves. Pull at the edges, and they rise—with their stories and their consequences.

Chapter Thirty-Six

MARY

Two years ago

“I don’t think I ever came in this room when I was staying with you guys,” Sam commented as I opened the double doors leading to my father’s study.

“Yeah, well, he doesn’t even spend much time in here. Not like my grandfather did. Dad prefers to be at the office. But this is where he keeps the important personal documents.”

I walked right up to the big oil painting portrait of the three of us hanging in the middle of the far wall. I’d been maybe seven or eight when my mother had it commissioned. I wore a burgundy velvet dress and bow, my mother in a more adult style crafted from the same material. My father was wearing a suit with a tie in the same shade as our dresses. She was sitting on a chair with me perched on her lap as he stood behind us with a hand on her shoulder. Despite the formality of the pose, we looked happy. Probably because we had been happy back then. The thought sent a wave of sadness crashing over me.

How had we gotten to this point? A part of me still longed for them—for what we’d had. And now we could never go back. Too much had changed.

Carefully, I lifted the painting off the wall to reveal a safe.

Sam whistled. “Well, look at that! You got some gold bars in there?”

“Don’t get too excited,” I warned her with a kidding smile. “This is just where they keep the important papers. The real treasures? The jewelry and cash? They’re in a floor safe downstairs.”

“You got the combination for that one too?” she asked with a sly wink.

“Yup. But we’ve got more important business for now. And believe me, the document I’m looking for in here is worth more than all that stuff put together.”

She frowned. “Seriously? That much?” she asked.

Though they'd never come right out and said it, I was certain my parents thought Sam had been trying to get her hands on my money. But it was exactly the opposite. She rarely asked about cash and had always seemed a little uncomfortable and a lot grateful whenever I used my own bank account to cover our expenses. My bank account just didn't seem to interest her in the way that it would a gold digger.

"Ten million," I told her simply and watched as her eyes bulged.

"I'm sorry . . . how much?"

"Ten million."

She looked so funny gaping at me like that, her mouth hanging wide open. I couldn't help but laugh.

"But . . . I mean . . . Jesus—sorry, jeez—what will you do with all that money? That's enough to buy a small country! Okay, not a country. Maybe an island . . ."

I smiled. "Well, for starters, we're going to get our tour company up and running. After that, I thought maybe we could set up a foundation for wildlife conservation. Maybe . . ." I paused. I hadn't had the nerve to broach the subject with her before this. "Maybe put something in place to support young adults aging out of foster care with no one to help them get established?"

She watched me for so long that I was certain I'd offended her. I was about to apologize when she closed the distance between us and pulled me into her arms for a bone-crushing embrace.

"You're really something, you know that, Mary?" she murmured into my hair. "I'm so sorry I hurt you. It won't happen again."

Then she pulled away as quickly as she'd approached, using the back of her hand to wipe away what I presumed to be a tear. She hated the emotional stuff—giving or receiving—so I knew what a big deal it was, but I played it off nonchalantly.

"Hey, so, how about we divide and conquer?" I started, pulling out stacks of file folders from the safe and handing her half. "We're looking for anything that says 'trust' on it. A last will and testament is good too. Just, you know, anything that looks like it might be estate related."

She nodded, taking her share and having a seat on the leather couch and spreading out the files on the coffee table. I took mine to my father's desk and started to sort through mind-numbing pages of business, house,

and insurance documents. We'd been at it for only about ten minutes when I heard her clear her throat.

"Um, hey . . . Mary?"

"Hmm?"

"I've got something here with your name on it . . ."

I spun around in the big chair to find her sitting up, a single page clutched in her hand. "What is it? Is it the trust?"

She shook her head, eyes glued to the paper. "It's, uh . . . it's your death certificate."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

JENN

Sunday evening

Back in my temporary office, I slump down in my chair and spin around to look out the window. Now that this case pretty much closed itself, I should be packing up my stuff, but I need a second to sort out my feelings. I wanted so desperately to help this young woman—whoever she turned out to be. And maybe I did, to some extent, but I don't believe she has any clue how much support she's going to need in the days to come. I just wish . . . What? Do I wish she'd given me a chance to do more?

Yeah, that's just my ego talking right there. Lita used to say, "People do to you what you let them do to you." And she was right. But there's a flip side of that: You do for people what they let you do for them.

Samantha Kinski let me do only so much before she slipped out of this hospital and out of my life.

And then there's Shannon.

It's all I can do not to fly downstairs and storm into Julian's office. The only thing stopping me is the certainty that Julian will retaliate against the nurse if he knows what she told me.

I'm just starting to sort through my email when my cell phone rings, my husband's handsome face on the screen. I pick it up before the first ring has even finished.

"Hello, my beautiful, brilliant wife," he says in his best sexy-times voice.

I wish.

"Hello, my handsome, heroic husband," I counter in my own seductive tone.

"How's it going down there?"

I sigh the sigh of the defeated, the exhausted, the outraged, and the homesick all rolled into one. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you. And I

can't tell you—not all of it anyway. Which really sucks because God knows I'd give just about anything to get your opinion on all of it.”

“Hmm, okay. Well, just keep it general, then. What's the crux of the problem?”

“Hah! Where to begin? Um, so . . . a lot of things happened. Big things. Like game-changing things that have me wrapping up here early. I'm not sure, but I may try to get a flight out first thing in the morning.”

“You know I'm not gonna complain about that—but why am I getting the feeling that something's not sitting right with you?”

“Because you know me better than anyone else.”

“Well, there is that.”

“Plus, we've got this really weird woo-woo psychic bond going on.”

“Yeah, I'm not so sure about that. I think it's more likely the fact that we're both psychiatrists. We read tone and body language and subtext all day long.”

“I suppose. But I kinda liked the idea of the woo-woo thing. It's very romantic . . .” I say.

“You gonna tell me what's got you so off kilter? Or are we going to dance around it for a while? Because I wouldn't mind pouring myself a glass of wine.”

“Oh, God, you have no idea how much I'd love to join you. Ugh. Right, anyway—so all these big things happened that brought everything to a head and have made my continued services unnecessary. But here I am, feeling like it's still just kind of . . . I don't know . . . unresolved, maybe? I've got this nagging, niggling thing going on, and I'm beginning to think maybe you were right and I should have thought harder on this in the first place. So I just need you to tell me to let it go and come home already.”

When Gabe speaks again, there's nothing sexy or playful in his voice. “Yeah, no. That's not happening.”

I chuckle. “What, you don't want me home?”

“Of course I want you home. Like yesterday. But I'm not going to try and talk you out of whatever it is that your gut is telling you, Jenn.”

“But it's nothing concrete. It's just this feeling of . . . I don't know, unease, maybe?”

“I don't care what it is,” he breaks in. “There's a reason why it's bugging you. Your subconscious sees something that you haven't spotted yet—consciously—for whatever reason.”

Again—the whole “when psychiatrists marry” thing.

“You think?” I ask doubtfully.

“Honey, you have some of the best instincts I’ve ever seen, and I’m not just saying that because you float my boat, light my fire, and ring my bell.” I chuckle, and he continues. “In all seriousness, it’s what makes you such a good doctor. When you see your patients, you somehow know, intuitively, what they need from you and how to give it to them. You don’t second-guess yourself in treatment, do you? You don’t sit there and debate how to proceed, right? I mean, tell me if I’m wrong about that . . .”

“No, you’re right,” I begin a little hesitantly. “I guess this just feels different.”

“Well, yeah. Because this is different. This isn’t the controlled environment of your office. You don’t have weeks, or months, or years to work with this patient. You have days. And there’s a lot riding on it. I think that’s why you’re having a little trouble trusting your gut.”

I sigh. “Yeah, you might be on to something there. But where do I even begin pinpointing what it is that’s not sitting right with me?”

“Pull the thread,” he says simply.

“Excuse me?”

“Pull. The. Thread. Honey, you’re not going to rest until whatever it is has been settled one way or the other. You’ve got your fingers around the thread; now start pulling at it. Everything will begin to unravel from there, and, eventually, you’ll come to the end.”

I’m about to make fun of his choice of analogies when my laptop dings with the arrival of a new email. I skim the contents in the preview pane. It’s from the medical examiner.

. . . Per Detective Rivera’s request, I’m forwarding the finalized autopsy report to you as part of the completion of the investigative file . . .

“Okay, well, I’m going to swing by Cuba Libre, have a few drinks, then maybe . . .” I say, double-clicking on the attachment and giving it a quick scroll even as I wrap up my phone call. The clinical descriptions, the medical jargon, the flat, lifeless photos.

Something makes me stop and loop back to something I’ve just passed. Something that grabbed my subconscious’s attention.

“Then maybe what?” Gabe asks when I leave the thought trailing.

“Umm . . . just hang with me for a sec, honey,” I murmur, tucking the phone between the crook of my neck and my shoulder so I can return to the image—a pale shoulder, inked.

The caption reads: Tattoo, right shoulder: constellation Gemini, twin stick figures.

My mouth goes dry.

“Wait—wait, wait . . .” I whisper, scrolling closer. “Oh my God.”

“Jenn? Everything okay?”

My hand goes to my mouth as I drop against the back of the chair.

“Jenn?” Gabe is starting to sound alarmed.

“Forget about pulling on the threads,” I breathe, still staring at the screen. “I think the universe just handed me a seam ripper.”

“A what?”

“You use it to pull out the threads of a seam,” I say distractedly. “To take something apart. To see how it was really made.”

“Huh. I’m not sure I’m picturing that.”

“Google it, sweetheart,” I tell him faintly. “Because I’ve got some threads to pull apart.”



I reread the medical examiner’s notes, this time actually seeing the words.

A puncture wound is present on the right forearm . . .

Snakebite. Diamondback. Routine, expected.

But then:

Tattoos: The decedent has a tattoo on the right shoulder depicting the constellation Gemini in the form of twin stick figures . . . older ink, well-healed.

There’s the photo—harsh light, pale skin, twin stick figures hand in hand.

The same design Sam showed us this afternoon.

Except this shoulder isn't Sam's.

It's Mary's.

Huh. I'll be damned.

Why didn't Sam point that out when Terry was shrieking at her this morning? She could have easily said that she, "Mary," had gotten a matching tattoo? It was easy enough to prove . . .

I sink back again with a sigh. Surely I'm overthinking this.

I mean, does any of this really mean anything?

Well, if my screeching, screaming, red-flag-waving gut has anything to say about it, then yes. I'm just not sure what. So, as my husband suggests, I keep pulling at threads.

I lean forward again, scanning the rest of the report, but there's nothing else that's notable until I reach the section titled Internal Examination. Skipping past the head, brain, neck, and thorax, I reach the abdominal cavity—specifically the stomach and its contents.

Gastrointestinal Tract Examination: The stomach contains approximately 300 mL of partially digested food material, consistent with recent consumption of a beef stew. The contents include identifiable fragments of beef, potatoes, and carrots, along with a broth-like substance. The degree of digestion suggests ingestion occurred within 2–4 hours prior to death.

I fall back against the chair on a sharp exhalation, folding my arms as if considering the report from three feet away will give me more perspective. And maybe it will. I think about what I know.

Sam Kinski, a known meat eater, was here in this hospital for three days, during which time she ordered meat—but didn't eat any of it.

Sam Kinski had a Gemini tattoo.

Mary Langston got a matching Gemini tattoo at some point.

That's the first strange thing.

Mary Langston, lifelong vegan, is there in the morgue, where they have determined that she ingested beef stew shortly before her death.

That's the second strange thing.

But one tattoo and a stomach full of beef stew aren't enough—not yet.

So I read further and find what I'm looking for three paragraphs down in the musculoskeletal report:

Upon examination of the pelvic region, evidence of old rib and pelvic fractures are observed, characterized by slight deformity and remodeling of the bone at the fracture site. The fractures appear fully healed with no signs of recent trauma or complications. No other skeletal abnormalities are detected at this time. However, a full-body CT scan is pending to further evaluate the skeletal structure for any additional findings.

Suddenly I'm hearing Mary telling me about Sam's accident—when she fell out of the car while it was moving.

Yeah, she broke some ribs, I think—and her pelvis . . .

And there, at last, is the unraveling of the thread I've been pulling on.

One thing is chance.

Two things are a coincidence.

Three things are a conspiracy.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

MARY

Two years ago

My parents didn't see me at first—him dropping their bags in the foyer while she plucked the small stack of mail off the walnut table.

"Ah, home again, home again," he said to no one in particular. "I am so looking forward to sleeping in our bed tonight."

"Mmm. I know. You never do sleep well away from home," she agreed. "Oh, here's the invitation to Jay and Nancy's wedding."

"I was hoping maybe we wouldn't make the guest list," Dad grumbled. "I wouldn't know them if they stood next to me in an elevator!"

"Oh now, come on, Doug," she chided. "He's your CFO's son; it's the least you can do. Besides, the invitations are finally starting to trickle in again since . . . you know, since all the fuss."

They were talking about me. And Sam.

"Oh please," he countered, and I could just imagine him rolling his eyes. "Everyone wants us at their wedding because they know we'll buy the most expensive thing on their registry—just so no one can accuse us of being cheapskates!"

It was clear his attempt at humor wasn't working as she sighed heavily.

"Do you think we'll ever get to do this?" she asked wistfully, waving the invitation around.

"Do what?"

"Announce our daughter's wedding? Walk her down the aisle? Hold our grandbabies?"

I could hear the tears in her voice, and it almost softened my resolve.

Almost.

"I wouldn't hold my breath about meeting those babies," I said, stepping out of the shadows.

They both jumped.

“Mary! Oh, dear Lord!” Mom gasped, startled. “What on earth are you doing lurking in the shadows like that? You scared me half to death!”

“There’s my Marebear!” Dad said, making a move to embrace me.

When I held up a single palm, he halted right in his tracks.

“Don’t,” I said coolly. “Just don’t.”

“Sweetie, what is it?”

When I held up the file folder, I watched the color drain from their faces simultaneously, expressions morphing from confusion, to concern, to horror. I swear I heard my father gulp just like they do in the cartoons. If I hadn’t been so enraged, I might have laughed at the absurdity of it.

“I wanted to get a closer look at the trust documents, so I decided to just have a quick peek in the safe . . .”

“I’m not sure what you think you came across,” Dad began slowly, as if I were a skittish animal he was trying to trap, “but whatever it is, it’s out of context.”

“Oh, there’s plenty of context,” I said as I opened the folder and began flipping through the pages. I held up an official document. “Birth certificate for one Mary Louise Langston, born June ninth, to Douglas and Theresa Langston.” I slip the paper to the back of the stack and hold up the next one. “Death certificate for Mary Louise Langston dated six days later, June fifteenth.”

“Mary, let me explain—” Mom started.

“Don’t you dare!” I threatened. “You’ve been lying to me since the day I was born. Literally! That stops here. Now.” I shuffled the second document behind the first and continued my little game of show-and-tell. “Let’s see what we have here . . . Oh, yes, a *second* birth certificate. Hmm . . . Birth name: Mary Louise Langston. Again. Except this date of birth is June *nineteenth*. Parents: Douglas and Theresa Langston. You actually gave birth to a little girl—a little girl who *died*. Then you adopted another little girl who was born not five days later.”

My mother was crying now, big fat tears rolling down her cheeks as she shook her head, right hand covering her mouth as if afraid something might slip past her lips. My father, on the other hand, was starting to look pissed. As if I cared at that point.

“We never lied to you about being adopted,” he asserted. “Not once.”

I placed an index finger to my chin and pretended to think hard. “Hmm . . . Seeing as how you didn’t tell me until I was seven, that’s kind of a lot of lies, no?” I posited with faux thoughtfulness.

“Oh, come on now. A lot of parents wait until their child is a little older.”

“Or until their own parents die,” I say.

They both froze, and when their eyes met for a beat, I knew I was right.

“What—what are you talking about?” my mother asked carefully.

She was probably thinking I couldn’t possibly have connected the dots. And maybe on my own, I wouldn’t have. At least, not right away. But with Sam’s help, I’d figured it out. Up until that moment, there had still been a part of me that wanted to be with them, to trust them—to trust their love. It made me blind to the ugly truth that had been staring me in the face for so many years.

I pulled out the envelope containing my grandfather’s last will and testament. Then I cleared my throat and began reading.

“I, Lloyd Edward Langston of Coral Gables, Florida, being of sound mind and memory, do hereby make, publish, and declare this to be a codicil to my last will and testament. I hereby revoke Paragraph 27, which previously disinherited my son, Douglas Lloyd Langston. In light of the birth of my grandchild, Mary Louise Langston, I wish to amend my will to include my son, Douglas Lloyd Langston, as a beneficiary . . .” I paused to look up at their horror-stricken faces. “Shall I go on? Or maybe not, because I assume you know how this ends, right?”

“It is not what it looks like—” my mother started, but I cut her off.

“No? Which parts? The part where your daughter—your actual, biological child—was born? The part where Grandpa Lloyd, who wanted to reconcile for the sake of his new granddaughter, agreed to write you back in the will? The part where your baby, Mary, died at six days old? Was it maybe when you adopted me and passed me off as your dead baby so he’d keep you in the will? Oh, I know! It was when you waited till he died to tell me I was adopted! You know, once the will had been executed and you had all the money and the company . . . and nothing left to lose.”

“You have to understand,” my mother began. “We were out of our heads with grief. After trying for so long to get pregnant, we finally had our miracle baby. But then she just . . . She was gone. And with no concrete

reason. They said it was a case of SIDS. We were heartbroken. Your grandfather heard about the birth, but not the death . . .”

She stopped, I suppose realizing that she was just digging their grave a little deeper with every word.

“The point is,” my father jumped in, “that we wanted a baby more than anything. And then there was the chance to have you. Your grandfather was dying, honey. He’d been given six months to live. It wasn’t about getting his money—it was about making him happy for what little time he had left by giving him a granddaughter. And, well, you needed a home, parents who loved you, a chance at a good life.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed with exaggerated understanding. “Oh, I see now! It was a win-win, right? Hmm, except that he didn’t live six more months; he lived six more years. Six years of believing I was his granddaughter.”

“You *were* his granddaughter!” my mother said harshly enough to stop me and my father in our tracks. “You were our daughter! You are *still* our daughter! We could not have loved you more. We gave you everything—a home, an education, and unconditional love. You made a dying old man happy. You made us happy. And we still couldn’t love you more, Mary.”

“But not Sam.”

“What? What do you mean?” she asked, perplexed. “What about her?”

I felt my mouth twist up into a sneer. “Exactly. She was never once in your thoughts, was she?”

“I don’t understand . . .” Dad began.

My mother shook her head furiously, tears spilling. “Mary, that’s not true. We didn’t know. We were told there was only one baby available for adoption.”

“That’s convenient,” I said coldly. “One perfect, paperwork-ready baby—no mention of the other?”

“We weren’t lying to you,” Dad insisted. “We truly had no idea there was another child.”

“Until when?” I shot back. “Until she showed up on your doorstep with me?”

“Mary, that’s not fair,” my mother cried. “We never would’ve abandoned a child. Never.”

I stared at her, that single word—never—echoing in my head. And then, something darker clicked into place.

“Really?” I said quietly. “Because there’s another little girl you left behind, isn’t there?”

She blinked, confused. “I don’t understand—”

“Yes, you do,” I said evenly. “The real Mary. The baby who died. Where is she buried?”

They froze, glancing at each other in that guilty, wordless way that told me everything.

“I don’t think that’s important,” my father managed finally.

“No grave, huh?” I said, voice rising again. “What did you do—scatter her ashes over some bridge somewhere and say a prayer for her soul, then pretend she never existed, same as you did with Sam?”

My father opened his mouth to speak but then thought better of it. I knew then that I’d guessed correctly.

“No, you couldn’t bury her,” I said quietly as the realization of what they’d done washed over me. “There couldn’t be a grave—in case someone got wind of all this . . . in case Grandpa Lloyd got wind of this. No body, no DNA.”

My mother took a determined step toward me. “We love you. We adore you. We’d give our lives for you, Mary. It doesn’t matter how you came to be ours—the fact is you *are* ours.”

I couldn’t even find it in myself to maintain the fury. It had been replaced with the kind of deep, unmovable sadness that comes from betrayal. A wound that cut so deep that you wondered if you’d survive it. That you wondered if you wanted to survive it.

“I’m leaving, and I’m taking these with me,” I said, tucking the papers into my bag. “And you won’t contest the trust distribution.” I started for the front door.

“Wait! Where are you going?” my father asked. “You can’t just leave. Not like this . . .”

“Mary!” my mother called after me, sobbing.

I paused then without looking back.

“Your Mary is dead,” I told them and walked out.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

JENN

Sunday evening

I could walk down the hall to Julian's office. I know he's still there. But we're not exactly on the best of terms at the moment. And, besides, what would I say? How would I explain the wild suspicion that's crept into my mind?

Hey, by the way, you know Sam? The girl who was pretending to be Mary? I think maybe she was really Mary after all.

And there it is.

I think Mary pretended that she was Sam—pretending to be Mary.

It's absurd.

Isn't it?

I mean, what reason could there possibly be? If Mary wanted to assume Sam's identity, she could have done it from the very beginning when they pulled her out of the Everglades. She could have just told the rangers, the EMTs, the doctors—us—that she was Sam and left it at that. I don't know why she would have wanted to “become” Sam, but there were certainly easier ways to do it.

I'm missing something big here. The problem is you don't know what you don't know. Which is why I've got every piece of paper from the Mary Langston/Samantha Kinski file spread across my desk. When my phone dings with a text message, it takes me several seconds to locate it under the haphazard pile. When I've finally got it, my lock screen just shows that it's from an unknown number. I almost don't bother. And then I do.

Meet me @ Blue Heron park. I'll be sitting by the lake till 7.

I text back asking who it is, but there's no reply. Not that it matters. I know. And I'm running out of time.

Twenty minutes later I'm speedwalking down an asphalt path. It curves along the water, lit by low amber lamps that will appear brighter as the world darkens around them. The humidity is thick enough to feel weighty, and by the time I reach the small footbridge, my fingers feel tacky on the railing.

I pause and scan the length of the lakeside path. Save for a few dedicated joggers, the park has mostly emptied with the waning light and waxing mosquitoes. It takes me only a moment to spot her sitting on one of the metal benches facing the water. The hospital loungewear has been replaced by jeans and a hoodie that must be roasting in this warm, sticky air. A Marlins cap is pulled low over her now-brown hair—a soft, warm shade that makes her blue eyes stand out even in the dimming light. Just enough of a transformation that someone could glance right over her without a second thought. Hidden in plain sight.

When she clocks me approaching, her posture changes—shoulders lifting, head jerking slightly as her eyes dart to either side, like she's checking whether I've arrived with backup.

“You left without saying anything,” I say when I reach the bench.

“Yeah, well, I'm not one for the big emotional goodbyes, you know? Never was.”

“You sure about that, Mary?”

She goes very still. “You mean Sam.”

I ignore the correction and take a seat beside her. “Did you really think no one would figure it out?”

“Figure what out?”

“Who you are. Who you really are.”

“You were in that meeting this morning,” she fires back. “Pretty sure we all agreed I'm Sam.”

“I'm pretty sure that's what you wanted us to agree.”

She scowls. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“It was pretty brilliant, actually. You pretended to be Sam—pretending to be Mary.”

She barks a disbelieving laugh. “What the fuck are you on about, lady?”

“I wish I knew,” I say honestly. “Because for the life of me, I cannot think of a reasonable explanation.”

“There’s nothing to explain.”

“By going to Miami Killian, where your family has connections, you ensured your parents would be called in.”

“Okay, no,” she counters. “I woke up there. I didn’t ask to go.”

It’s a fair point, but the momentum has already built.

“And the meat thing was genius,” I say. “Subtle. You were waiting for someone to catch it—that this supposed vegan kept ordering nonvegan lunches. But no one did. What you didn’t plan on was someone noticing you tossed every single one untouched.”

Her jaw tightens. She doesn’t deny it.

“That was my first clue. But when that didn’t work, you leaned harder. This morning? You let the veneer slip. The cursing, the irreverence—the exact things your mother hates most about Sam. You didn’t do that for me. You did it for them.”

She shifts on the bench, agitation rolling off her in waves. “Okay, you know what? This was a mistake. We’re done.”

She keeps glancing toward the footbridge, toward the dark water, as though each direction offers an escape hatch that refuses to open.

“You could’ve declined to see them,” I say. “You didn’t. You wanted them to recognize the wrong twin.”

She snaps her head toward me. “Why would you think I wouldn’t want them to know?”

“Because you’re running from something,” I say plainly. “And you don’t want Doug and Terry to know you’re their daughter. But I don’t understand why. You’re an adult. They can’t make you do anything.”

Her shoulders sag, just barely.

“No,” she says quietly. “You don’t understand.”

“Then make me.”

She looks away, blinking hard, as if weighing how much truth she can risk.

“You think Mary had some perfect life,” she says. “The doting parents, the expectations, the plans. Maybe they love her. Maybe they mean well. But they’ll never understand what she has to do.”

“Is that who we’re talking about? Doug and Terry?”

“Maybe,” she says. “Theoretically.”

“And what exactly does she—whoever—have to do?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she says. “Because Sam? Sam can move through the world without anyone paying attention. Sam can disappear.”

I throw my hands up. “But that’s ridiculous. Mary is a grown woman. She can go wherever she wants. She’s—”

She interrupts, voice suddenly sharp: “Have you ever seen *Die Hard*?”

I blink. The left turn is jarring, but I nod. “Yes. Of course.”

“End of the movie,” she says. “Hans Gruber tells McClane: ‘When you steal \$600 million, they will find you—unless they think you’re already dead.’”

I open my mouth to ask what the hell that has to do with anything—

But then it hits me.

If Doug and Terry think Mary is gone . . .

If they believe Sam survived instead . . .

Then Mary—the Mary she truly is—can slip off the map entirely.

Oh my God. It’s tragic. And it’s brilliant.

She gives a small, weary smile when she sees the understanding finally settle into me. “Not easy, though. Pretending to be someone pretending to be someone else. Leaving breadcrumbs—just enough to follow, not enough to question.”

I stare at her. “Why am I here?”

She takes a breath, steadying herself. “Because I need help.”

“Then come back to the hospital,” I say. “Whatever this is, we’ll—”

“No,” she says sharply. “I’m not going back.”

“What? But why?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“How can I help you if I don’t know?”

She reaches down and hauls up a cobalt shopping bag. It thuds heavily on the bench between us.

“You begin here.”

I open the top and feel my breath vanish.

Red leather.

Dozens of journals. Julian’s journals.

Realization flashes through me like a bolt of lightning, and suddenly Shannon’s words echo in my ears:

“. . . he barely even looked up from whatever he was writing in his little notebook . . .”

A notebook.

Kellogg never used one.

Not when I was a resident.

Not now.

He typed, dictated, tapped at tablets.

Always digital. Always efficient.

But Julian . . .

Julian wrote everything down.

It wasn't Kellogg she went to after that night.

It wasn't Kellogg who told her to keep quiet.

My mouth goes dry.

"Oh my God," I breathe. "Not Kellogg," I murmur to myself more than her. "Julian."

Her brow wrinkles.

"You mean Dr. Kellogg? No. He doesn't have anything to do with this. He's been very kind to me, actually."

My mind races as I stare down at the bag full of secrets.

"H-how did you even get these? He keeps them at home under lock and key."

She shrugs. "I told you, I spent summers organizing his office for him. Lucky for me he's a creature of habit. Same spare key under the same garden gnome. Same closet combination. Same filing system from when I was thirteen. Some people never change."

I exhale shakily.

"Mary—Sam—what am I looking at here . . . what's in these?"

"A story."

I look up to find her watching me.

"A story? What kind of story?"

"A scary one," she says, dead serious as she drops her voice. "The kind with monsters under the bed. Like a nightmare you never wake from."

"Okay, tell me, then."

She shakes her head. "I can't. There isn't time. I have to leave here. Tonight. Now. I should've been gone already because once he realizes these are missing, he's going to come after me."

My fingers rise to my temples as I shake my head, unable to process everything she's saying and not saying. It's too much. It's not enough.

But, in the end, does that really matter?

I make a snap decision that it does not. My hands fall away, and I level my gaze on hers, willing her to feel my sincerity.

“Tell me what you need from me.”

“Read,” she says, putting a hand atop the bag with the books. “It’s all there. Every vile thing spelled out in his own handwriting. Then you’ll understand what I need to do, and, hopefully, you’ll know how to help me do it.”

I don’t bother asking her to clarify again. She’s not going to tell me any more than she already has.

I swallow. “All right. I’ll take these back to the hospital and—”

She grabs my shoulders, not roughly, but with urgency. Her eyes pin mine.

“No. He might see them, and he can’t know what I’ve done—not yet. You need to take these somewhere safe. Dr. Flores, swear you won’t tell him anything about this conversation.”

It comes out more as a plea than a demand.

“I—yes—sure—”

“Swear it.”

Her intensity steals my breath.

“I swear.”

She releases me slowly. Then lifts her duffel.

“I’m going to lay low for a while,” she tells me. “And I’ve ditched my phone, but I’ll reach out when I can.”

“Can’t you give me any more than that? I still don’t understand.”

“You will,” she says nodding toward the bag on the bench. “When you read.”

And then she turns and walks away, leaving me with a bag full of his handwriting and the sinking realization that I’ve just stepped into someone else’s war.

Chapter Forty

MARY

Last weekend

“I don’t think this is it,” she told me for the tenth time.

“Yes. Yes, it is!” I assured her. “Sam, I’ve spent days paddling this waterway.”

“Yeah, but not this far out. You told me yourself that you’ve never actually been through here before. So how do you know?”

I groaned in exasperation. “I just know, okay?”

She looked doubtfully at the fallen tree trunk blocking our way about a hundred feet ahead. Just one of a dozen we’d encountered since entering the stretch known as the Nightmare a few miles back. It was a solid eight miles of narrow, winding channels, flanked by huge mangrove roots resembling dark, withered hands with long, craggy fingers. Low-hanging branches and vines dripped from above, where the tree canopy grew so tight and thick that not much of the late-afternoon sunlight filtered through. On the one hand, it provided shade as well as protection from the rogue storm, but, on the other, little to no breeze circulated through here.

We’d been able to bushwhack our way through the earlier branches, vines, and trunks in our path, but this one was different. It was nearly two feet in diameter, and there was no way we were cutting that bad boy with the tiny saw we had with us. More than that, though, we didn’t have the time to spend—the tide would start to ebb shortly, and we still had another four miles to go. If we stayed too long, the tide would go out, and we’d be left stranded without enough water to paddle out on. I do mean *stranded*—there was zero cell phone reception out here, and we hadn’t seen another soul for miles.

She gestured toward the narrow channel, almost completely choked by branches and vines, many toppled into the waterway. “I just can’t believe people consider this to be a viable cut through. I mean, look at all this

overgrowth, all these fallen trees! Jeez, you'd think we were the first people to ever try to get through here!"

"I know, you're right. But you saw the map. The entrance was right where it was supposed to be, just past Marker 21. And it's not like people didn't warn us about how bad it could get in here. Besides, we're nearly halfway through at this point. A little late to turn back and go all the way around."

"Yeah, well, nobody bothered to mention just how creepy it'd be back here. I feel like I'm riding through one of those Tunnel of Horror rides at the amusement park. But instead of monsters and ghosts and murderous guys with chainsaws, this one's full of spiders and alligators and snakes."

She shuddered at her own description.

I exhaled a long column of air. "I agree. I'm thinking we don't make this part of our tour route unless it's absolutely necessary—like to get out of a storm or something."

"Well, yeah! I mean if you and I have trouble navigating it, how can we expect a bunch of tourists to do it?"

It was an excellent point.

Nine months in, and we were finally settling into our *new* new life. After finding a sweet little coral-colored cottage in Everglades City, we'd spent months becoming intimately acquainted with Everglades National Park, hiking, fishing, and paddling almost daily. Wild Gemini Tours was gaining traction little by little, starting off with half-day hikes, then expanding to overnights and multiday trips. The novelty of having the "Serendipity Twins" for guides seemed to be a particular draw. Now, in anticipation of adding paddling tours to the roster, we'd spent the last few months honing our canoeing and kayaking skills while exploring the ninety-nine-mile Everglades Wilderness Waterway, including this claustrophobic, dark, twisty little slice of hell.

"Okay, well, I guess the sooner we get through these last four miles, the sooner we're back out in open water. In a few hours, we'll be all comfy cozy on our sleeping pads, in our tent, nice and high above the gators on the chikee."

"Yes, that's the spirit!" I grinned. "Tell you what, I'll even heat up some of that leftover beef-stew-in-a-bag crap for you, okay?"

She offered a weak smile. "Deal."

“Okay . . . so I’m thinking we’re going to have to go over this thing,” I said, pointing in the direction of the trunk still looming ahead of us.

“Over? Over how? I don’t think we can get out and lift the canoe without sinking into the mud.”

“No, we’ll go over, onto the branch. I think there’s enough clearance for the canoe to float underneath. Then we can pull it forward and get back in on the other side. Make sense?”

“Uh . . .” She considered the suggestion and looked up, trying to glimpse the position of the sun through the tree canopy. “Yeah, I guess we don’t have much choice. We’re running out of time—and tide.”

“Should be easy peasy,” I assured her with a smile. “You know, you’ve really gotten so much more confident with the water stuff. I’m really proud of you, Sam.”

I don’t know what made me say it, but whatever it was, I’m glad I did because there was something so raw and real in her expression—like gratitude. Like no one had ever said those words to her before. They probably hadn’t. I offered her my most sincere smile even as my heart hurt for all the love my sister had missed out on.

“Um, yeah, thanks,” she said a little awkwardly, breaking the spell between us as she turned back around to face the obstacle we were approaching.

We scrambled atop the tree trunk, sort of draping ourselves over it, hanging down so we could prod the canoe out from under us. It cleared perfectly.

“Damn, we’re good!” Sam declared, grinning from next to me.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Yes, we are!”

I swung myself all the way over, landing back inside the boat, then braced myself on the tree I’d just scaled so she could follow me. Sam reached out with her right and grabbed a branch jutting off the trunk, stabilizing herself so she could swing her leg over and join me. Then she froze.

I saw it on her face before she said a word—a lightning-fast sequence of confusion, shock, pain, disbelief, and, finally, fear.

“What?” I asked, alarmed. “What is it?”

That’s when a movement along the trunk caught my eye. A snake, almost perfectly camouflaged against the bark, was slithering away from us. Quickly. Retreating. My gaze swung to Sam, who was staring at her wrist.

Part of me knew what she was seeing, but I allowed myself the luxury of a few more heartbeats of hope. When I couldn't put it off another moment, I looked, spotting the twin puncture wounds on the inside of her right arm, just above her wrist. There was no more hoping. There was no more denying. There was only the rapidly swelling flesh turning angrier by the second.

"Oh . . . oh my God . . ." I whispered, staring at it with wide eyes. "Oh, sweet Jesus, Sam . . . It-it bit you?"

She nodded, unable to speak.

I had to do something, and fast. "Okay, okay, okay," I chattered to myself.

Think, Mary, think!

I willed my mind back to our wilderness first-aid training at NAWA and what Ranger Rick had to say about snakebites. It was very rare that someone would die from one, right? And I shouldn't make a tourniquet or try to cut or suck out the venom.

"Right," I said to myself. Then put a hand on her left arm, still braced like she was about to hurdle right over the tree like a gymnast on a pommel horse. I took a deep breath, making a concerted effort to keep my voice calm and steady when I spoke again. "Listen to me, Sam. You're going to be fine. We just need to make our way out of here as quickly and carefully as possible, okay?"

She blinked at me—through me.

"Sam? *Sa-man-tha!*" I barked out harshly enough to get her focus back to me.

She nodded. "Yeah, okay." She looked down and to the side again at the wound, then back up to me. "It's just—it hurts, Mary. It really, really hurts. And I don't feel so good . . ."

She didn't look so good, either, but I wasn't about to tell her that.

"Well, yeah, duh! Getting bitten by a snake is painful," I teased, hoping to ease the panic showing through—just beneath the surface of her tough veneer. "Now, let's get you back into the canoe, then we can see about immobilizing the arm. Okay?"

She nodded without reply, allowing me to help guide her off the trunk. There was no way she could paddle. Not if we wanted to keep the poison from spreading faster. She had to lie down, which meant I had to do it alone. I didn't like how quiet she was, how dazed and pale she looked. Of

course she'd be shocked and in pain, but this felt like more than just a nervous reaction. Once she was positioned on the floor of the hull, legs bent over the yoke bar and head resting on a dry pack, I took over the seat at the bow, took a deep breath, and started the work of getting us out of this nightmare.

Chapter Forty-One

JENN

Sunday evening

I'm snapping the shit out of the pink band on my wrist as I walk down the path and under the arching portico of the posh but tasteful Coral Gables home. Once I ring the bell, I stand there shifting from foot to foot. Snapping and shifting, shifting and snapping, until he opens the door. David Kellogg is barefoot, in khaki cargo shorts and a T-shirt. It's jarring to see him looking so normal, like any suburban dad.

He appears to be as perplexed as I feel.

"Dr. Flores. What brings you here at?"—he glances down at his watch—"eight forty-five on a Sunday night?"

Shit, it's later than I thought. I've spent the last two hours hunched over in my rental car, reading Julian's case files by the dome light.

"I . . . uh . . . I'm sorry to show up like this, but I didn't know where else to go . . ."

His brows draw together. "What's wrong? What is it?"

"I need your help."

The four words come out in a whisper, but, somehow, they're some of the most impactful that I've ever spoken.

For a long, awkward beat, he scrutinizes me, like I might be some Trojan horse trying to slip past the gates of his kingdom.

"Right. Well, then I guess you'd better come in," he says, stepping aside so I can join him in the house.

Suddenly this feels like a bad idea. A very bad idea. Why hadn't I thought this through or run it past Gabe first? He'd have talked me out of this inadvisable notion of walking right up to the lion's den.

Instinctively, I take a half step backward.

"Maybe we could . . . I don't know, go to a diner or someplace?"

Someplace public.

When he quirks an eyebrow at the same time he quirks a corner of his mouth, I know he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"Cassandra?" he calls out, his eyes never leaving mine. When there isn't an immediate response, he tries again a little louder: "Cass? Would you please come here for a second, hon?"

Hon? He's got a *hon*?

A tall woman about my age steps into view in a silky red kimono and matching pajamas, her hair a cascade of tight, shining curls. The toddler behind her is unmistakably hers—the same graceful features, the same warm undertones in her skin—except for the hazel eyes she shares with the man standing in front of me. Gobsmacked, I stare from her, to Kellogg, to the woman, and back again. He puts a hand on her arm and gestures to me with the other.

"Dr. Jennifer Flores, this is my wife, Dr. Cassandra Middleton."

"Oh!" she exclaims, her face filling with a lovely, brilliant smile. "Dr. Flores, how wonderful to finally meet you!" She starts to reach out her hand but then retracts it quickly. "Sorry, sticky apple juice hands," she tells me with a sheepish nod toward the child now peering at me from behind her mother's long legs.

"Um . . . hi?" I murmur, too stunned to know what to make of this domestic scene.

Cassandra hoists the toddler up into her arms and starts speaking excitedly. "You don't know me, but we actually travel in some of the same circles. I'm a psychiatrist as well—general family practice."

It's too much to process at one time—him, her, the kid.

"I-I . . . uh . . . yes, I—" I pause, take a breath, and try again without the stammering. "Yes, Dr. Middleton, I've heard your name before . . ." Just not in conjunction with this asshat. "I didn't realize you . . . and Dr. Kellogg . . . that he's . . . that you're . . ." I blather until she jumps in to save me.

"Married? Oh, yes! A few years now. And this," she says, bouncing her child, "is Melody—Melly, we call her."

I give a tiny awkward wave to the little girl, who turns bashful suddenly, burying her face in the crook of her mother's neck.

"Melly, can you say hello to Dr. Flores?" David asks.

She peeks at me just long enough to return my greeting with one tiny hand before hiding her face again.

“I caught your presentation on trauma in preteens at the APA conference in Vegas last year—you were brilliant!” the woman gushes. “I told David you were the only person he should consider for this case.”

My eyes snap back to his face, but his expression is unreadable. “I’m sorry—I thought it was Julian Braithwaite who wanted me here for the consultation?”

“I was *just* trying to entice Dr. Flores to come inside,” David tells his wife, ignoring my statement.

“I . . . no, really . . . I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize how late it was. I can come back tomorrow. Or, better yet, meet you at the hospital. Please, forgive me for intruding . . .”

I’m ready to bolt, already in the process of pivoting when I feel a light touch on my elbow. I look back to find the woman’s bright, open expression. She’s one of those rare people whose inner beauty radiates outward, warming and illuminating the darkest corners of the people around her. How on earth did this guy land such a stunning woman?

“Oh, please don’t go, Jenn—may I call you Jenn? David’s famous spinach artichoke pizza is just going into the oven . . . I know it’s late, but between his schedule at the hospital and this little night owl of ours, we’re rarely sitting down to dinner before eight or nine. So please, come, come. He’ll make you a nice ‘adult beverage,’ and the two of you can sit out on the deck and talk while I get this little one into a bath.”

I shake my head quickly, holding up a palm in protest. “Oh, I . . . I couldn’t—”

“Nonsense!” David declares, clearly enjoying the cocktail of shock, confusion, and awkwardness that I’ve got going on at the moment. “Of course you can!”

“Daaaaaddy!” the child whines, holding out her chubby little arms toward her father.

He scoops her up effortlessly, plopping her atop his shoulders before turning around and walking back into the house.

“What’ll it be, Dr. Flores?” he calls back to me without turning. “Beer? Wine? Vodka?”

“Yes.”

I mutter the comment under my breath, but he doesn’t miss it, turning slightly to shoot me a grin past his toddler.

“Excellent suggestion.”

For once we agree.



We're out on the deck overlooking the canal, a couple of gin and tonics between us on the glass coffee table that separates our respective love seats. David sits back in his chair and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

"I had no idea," I begin. "That you were married. That you had a baby."

He chuckles. "You're surprised that anyone would want to settle down with me."

"Well, yeah, a little, I guess."

His frame relaxes back into his chair, and his gaze strays out to the water as he talks again.

"I'm not the same man I was ten years ago, but I couldn't expect you to know that . . . or to even believe that. Though that woman back there in the house, and our little girl, should be some compelling evidence in my favor."

"Okay, yeah, I can see that. But you're still kind of a . . ."

He glances at me, smirking. "What? A dick? A douche? An arrogant prick? Yeah, I know. But, for some reason, she loves me anyway. And it makes me want to try a little harder to not be those things." He pauses and sighs. "Look, I've made some pretty big mistakes in my lifetime—Cami Miller being at the top of that list. You being a close second. But apologies don't come easily for me, and they don't do much good anyway. I believe in making things right with actions instead of words. Making amends, if you will."

"Well, that's very 'twelve steps' of you," I comment wryly.

"Yes, it is, in fact," he replies, the smile gone now.

Then I see it.

"Oh! Oh my God . . . are you?"

"An alcoholic? Yes."

My eyes go right to the drink in front of him.

He notices and holds it up. "That's the beautiful thing about a G&T. Who's going to notice if you skip the G?"

Memories explode in my head, shattering into a hundred jagged-edged possibilities.

“That night?” The two words are as profound a question as I’ve ever asked.

There’s a slow nod from him. “I was good at hiding it. So highly functioning that no one knew except for me.”

I can scarcely believe what I’m hearing. The man I’ve known and hated for a decade is disappearing before my very eyes, and I have no words to describe just how unnerving I find this. Him being an alcoholic does not, under any circumstances, excuse what happened in the ER. But it goes a long way to explaining how it happened—and why. It allows me to see the gray nuances between the black and white I’ve always painted him to be. He’s hardly a good man. But maybe . . . just maybe . . . he isn’t the complete monster I thought he was.

“As for you,” he continues, oblivious to my inner monologue, “maybe my opinion has changed. A little. Maybe.”

“Okay . . . so then what’s with the Big Bad Wolf routine these last couple of days?” I ask, incredulous. “Why work so hard to convince me—and everyone else—that you’re still an ass?”

“Oh, make no mistake about it, I’m still an ass. I’m just an older, wiser ass. Which makes me a little more judicious about where and how I apply that particular trait.” He glances back out at the water, shimmering under the brilliant Miami moon. “Okay, enough of the confessions. You gonna tell me what this is all about? Are you having second thoughts about admitting Sam Kinski?”

“Um, no. And anyway . . . She’s gone.”

All traces of humor leave his face. “What do you mean, ‘She’s gone’? Did someone discharge her?”

“When she said she wanted some fresh air, her nurse, Shannon, wheeled her outside to sit in the gardens for a little while. She went in to get Sam a bottle of water and when she got back, the wheelchair was empty.”

“Jesus.” He scrubs a hand over his face, the motion raking through the stubble shadowing his jaw. Away from the hospital’s fluorescent glare, he looks steadier, more self-possessed—the years have only carved his features in deeper.

I exhale. “Then she texted me a few hours ago asking to meet at a local park.”

Hazel eyes steady on mine, he leans forward on both forearms. “You went?”

I nod. “I did.”

“Right. So what did she say to you?”

“She gave me some information.”

When I don’t immediately continue, he waves a hand at me. “Care to elaborate?”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the possibility that he won’t believe me. Or, worse, that he won’t care. Well, either way, it’s too late now; I have no choice but to trust my enemy. Not if I have any hope of taking down the man who was once my mentor. On the drive here, I debated whether to tell Kellogg about Sam being Mary. Or is it Mary being Sam? There’s no doubt in my mind who the woman on that park bench was, but I have no concrete proof, so I choose to bypass that part and skip right to the thing that she’s entrusted me with.

I say a silent prayer and start at the beginning.

“Julian knew Sam. He’s always known Sam. He knew she and Mary were twins. He treated them both—for more than a decade.”

David’s body has gone completely still. He doesn’t even blink for several long seconds. I’m about to ask him if he’s all right when he finally speaks.

“She told you this?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“And you believe her?”

“I do. But, more to the point, she gave me Julian’s journals. It’s all in there. One journal for each girl for each year from age five to eighteen.”

At this he sits up straight, brows arching high. “Wait, wait, wait—you have his *journals*? As in his patient case notes?”

“Yes. I’ve just skimmed some of the parts she highlighted for me. Once I realized what it was I was reading, I knew I was in over my head. That’s when I decided to come here. To you.”

He rubs the bridge of his nose. “Seriously? Okay, so, confidentiality violations aside—”

“What confidentiality violations?” I break in. “They came from Sam herself. And Mary’s dead. The only one who didn’t give permission is Julian, and when I tell you the rest of this, you’ll see why it doesn’t matter.”

“Wait, so there’s more? More than him seeing both girls and never disclosing that? How much worse could it possibly get?”

I lean over, reach into my purse, and pull out one of the red leather volumes, and then I hold it up for him to see. “You need to see this entry from Sam’s journal from the year she was fifteen.”

“My reading glasses are inside. We can either go in, or you can just read it to me.”

“Right, okay . . .” I hold the book close to the lantern on the table between us. There’s just enough light for me to see the pages. “Samantha continues to respond favorably to our sessions. Her attachment to me is growing stronger, which aligns with what I’ve observed in cases of patients deprived of stable affection during formative years. For her, the boundaries between professional guidance and emotional intimacy are blurred, as expected from someone who has never known genuine care. I find it fascinating how her psyche is shaped by the lack of nurturing in her time within the foster care system.

“It is evident that she views our relationship as a source of comfort and security, the closest thing she’s ever experienced to love. While conventional views might frown upon such dynamics, it’s hard to ignore the therapeutic benefits she derives from it. Rather than any harm, our interactions serve to fulfill an emotional void. It’s more of an experiment in understanding how fractured development seeks repair, isn’t it?”

When I look up, Kellogg is sitting up straight, gaping at me.

“Holy shit. Is he saying . . . ?”

“That he was having a sexual relationship with her? Yes.”

“Son of a bitch!” he mutters harshly, slapping the glass tabletop hard enough to make it wobble. “*Fifteen*? She was just fifteen!”

His outrage reassures me he had no idea about any of this, and it emboldens me to continue.

“Dr. Kellogg, there’s more . . .”

His head tilts to one side, jaw locked, hazel eyes blazing. “Tell me.”

I set the one journal aside and pull the second out of my bag. I open it to the page that was dogeared for me when I received it. Then I clear my throat, and I begin.

“The situation with Samantha has taken an unexpected turn. Her pregnancy was not part of the plan, but it presents new variables for study. She was understandably distressed when she found out, but I’ve taken steps to handle the matter discreetly. Arrangements have been made for the child to be sent to a facility in the Midwest, the Harper Home for Children. It’s a

place I trust, one where the child will be well cared for, out of sight and mind.

“I have no intention of telling Samantha where her child is. The knowledge of the baby’s whereabouts would only complicate things, especially given her emotional instability. She’s far too fragile to handle such responsibility. Instead, the child will serve a dual purpose—an incentive for her cooperation, as well as a reminder of the consequences if she steps out of line.

“Samantha needs to understand that her future depends on my decisions, just as her child’s does. This arrangement ensures control over the situation, allowing me to guide her more effectively. She has already begun to grasp the importance of our bond, but now she will know how much further that bond extends.”

With that, I close the book, set it down on the table, and look at the man sitting across from me. He’s red—completely crimson—and I can feel the waves of fury radiating off him. He takes several deep breaths through flaring nostrils, as if he can’t quite trust himself to speak yet. When he finally does, his voice is frighteningly low.

“Where are the rest of those?” he asks, nodding toward the book.

“In my trunk.”

“Right. You go grab them while I put on a pot of coffee. We’ve got a long night ahead of us.” I don’t know what it is that he sees in my expression—relief, maybe? But he pauses and exhales deeply, holding my gaze. “It’s okay, Jenn,” he says, using my name for the first time in recent memory. “You did the right thing coming here. You can trust me.”

God help me, I believe him.

Chapter Forty-Two

MARY

Last weekend

If we were moving slowly when there were two of us paddling, we were barely inching along when it was just me. The canoe was unwieldy with the new weight distribution, and it took everything I had to nose it along, floating in and around, under and over the clusters of vines and jagged-edged stumps that were starting to break the water's surface as the tide went out. At first my paddle would glance against the muddy bottom every few strokes, but it didn't take long until the bottom of the canoe itself dragged the creek bed. We would not be moving another foot—not in this boat.

Behind me, Sam was quiet. Too quiet. I'd tried to engage her at first but found I needed to keep my concentration fixed on the twisting path ahead of us. But now as I shifted around on my seat to face her, the exhausted, overheated blood in my veins turned frosty. Her eyes were closed, her face pale with a sheen of sweat. Her chest rose and fell in quick, minute movements, her breath a series of shallow, open-mouthed gasps.

Dear sweet Jesus.

"Sam? Sam, open your eyes," I instructed. "Sam!"

My loud insistence managed to penetrate the haze of her shock, and her lids fluttered open to reveal watery blue eyes.

"I don't . . . I don't feel so good," she murmured.

I examined her arm. The gauze that I had taken such care to wrap loosely around the wound was now stretched tight against the swelling. My concern doubled as I unraveled it to find her wrist nearly double the size it had been, the color an alarming shade of purple. I knew enough about snakebites to know that it shouldn't have progressed so far, so fast. They were dangerous, sure. But we should have had several hours before things were dire—more than enough time to wait out the tide and get to help.

Unless I'd misjudged the snake. Unless it was much more venomous than I initially thought.

I looked around, considering our surroundings. The exposed roots of the mangroves looked even creepier as the waning light lengthened their shadows and cast distorted reflections in the shallowing water. Without a single bit of solid, walkable shore, we were stuck exactly where we were. In the canoe. In the middle of the creek bed. Resting atop the mud. With more bugs descending than I could swat away.

Pawing through our gear, I pulled out the tent and draped it over the canoe, securing it as best I could with some rope and a few bungee cords. Once that was done, I propped it up with our paddles, wedging them between our bags so they stood upright, lifting the fabric just enough to give us a little clearance underneath. Sam was shaking now, so I gathered every bit of clothing we'd packed, laying it all atop her—a makeshift blanket covering her from toes to chin.

Then I managed to work my way around and behind Sam so that I could sit against the stern, settling her between my legs, her back to my chest, with her head resting on my shoulder. At least, like this, I could wet a bandana in a little of our fresh drinking water and dab it to her clammy skin.

"We just have to wait out the tide," I murmured above her. "In a few hours, it'll start to come back in, and we'll be able to paddle the rest of the way out of here. We'll be able to get you some help."

She gave the barest shake of her head.

"What?" I asked gently. "What are you shaking your head at? Getting out of here? Pfft. Please. We lasted ten weeks in the wilds of Oregon, in the winter, with a ragtag group of campers. In fact, you didn't just survive, you managed to get yourself laid!"

She didn't join in my chuckle.

"Something's not right," she murmured weakly. "This is happening too fast. I'm . . . I'm not going to make it, Mary. I can feel it."

My heart jolted in my chest. "What? Don't say that," I chided, trying to sound as if this were the silliest notion I'd ever heard in my life.

"I need to tell you some things . . ."

"Sam, please. You're being dramatic. You just—"

My sister twisted just enough so that she could look back up at me, and I saw she was right. We didn't have long. I felt her grab my arm with

her good hand.

“I need you to listen to me,” she rasped, weakening right before me. “I don’t have a lot of time, and this is important.”

My throat was starting to close up, threatening to choke off my air.

Stop it, Mary!

The three words rang as loudly as if I’d spoken them—which I hadn’t. In fact, I hadn’t even thought them. It was as if the command had come from someone who existed someplace beyond all this. Beyond me. Beyond death.

My racing pulse settled, and I took a deep, calming breath.

“Tell me,” I whispered.

And she did.

Until the sun sank completely into the ocean and the last embers of light were snuffed, leaving behind only a tendril of smoke against the darkness.

Chapter Forty-Three

JENN

Monday morning

The sun is just coming up when Kellogg and I pull into the driveway of Julian's bungalow in Coconut Grove. We've been up all night, excavating every horror we could from those hundreds of pages—coffee fueled, bleary eyed, vibrating with the kind of anger that keeps you awake long after your body gives up.

As it turns out, Dr. Cassandra Middleton, Kellogg's wife, is the behavioral-health compliance director for Jackson Health, with one foot in the state licensing board. She spent the night calling in favors across hospital social work, child-welfare liaisons, and ethics committees. By sunrise, she'd stitched together enough off-the-record confirmations to turn Julian's "research notes" into a prosecutable pattern.

Not everything clicked into place—but enough did.

Enough to know Julian Braithwaite had been playing God, and he'd gotten away with it for a very long time.

Despite the early hour, there's a light on in the kitchen. For a moment we sit there in the car, staring at it, the silence between us thick as the humid morning air.

Then he says quietly, "Ready?"

I nod.

"Yeah. Time to end this."

Moments later, we're standing on Julian's front porch.

"David," Julian says, surprised. His eyes move to me, and for a beat, delighted confusion overtakes everything else—the suspicion he should feel drowned out by the novelty of seeing two supposed adversaries standing side by side. Of course he notices the puzzle before the danger; Julian has always been far more fascinated by people as patterns than threats.

"And Jennifer. Together. Well, this is certainly a surprise."

“Julian,” David says. “We need to speak with you. It’s urgent.”

His arms lift in a theatrical gesture.

“Well, then—by all means, please, come in.”

We follow him into the kitchen. He lights a burner beneath a kettle, reaches for a cup.

“Tea?” he asks over his shoulder.

“No, thank you,” David answers for both of us.

“Well, I hope you don’t mind if I make one for myself. It is rather early,” he says pointedly. “So—what brings you here this morning?”

His back is to us as he fusses with the tea bag.

“I had a long conversation with Sam Kinski last night,” I say, watching his posture stiffen.

He doesn’t turn.

“So she turned up again? After escaping the hospital?”

“Escaping?” I echo. “Interesting choice of words. She was always free to leave anytime she liked. Or was she, Julian?”

He spins around, mug clutched tight in his hand.

“Meaning what, exactly, Jennifer?”

“Just that she revealed some very disturbing things about you.”

A beat. Then:

“I’m not sure what she could have possibly said. I don’t know the woman.”

“Don’t you, though?” David asks.

Julian lifts his brows, all polite disbelief.

“You know I don’t, David. I believed her to be Mary—just as you did. Before that, I’d only ever laid eyes on her once, at a Thanksgiving dinner at Terry and Doug’s home. Five years ago.”

“Tell me, Julian,” David says. “Have you looked through your patient journals lately?”

That gets him.

A flicker—calculation mixed with unease.

“The ones here at home? Not in a few days. Why do you ask?”

“Because if you checked your closet, you’d find a few missing. A few dozen of them, actually.”

“Really?” His attempted chuckle collapses halfway through. “And what makes you think that’s the case?”

“Because they’re sitting in an evidence locker down at the police precinct right now,” David says.

The air shifts. Julian’s hand tightens on the counter.

“You—you broke into my home . . . and stole my files?”

“Actually, Sam gave them to me,” I say.

His face reddens.

“And you took it upon yourself to read through my patients’ notes?”

“Yeah,” David says coolly. “All twenty-six volumes of them.”

“You had no right!” Julian snaps. “Those are confidential—clinical materials.”

“Please,” I say. “Spare us the righteous indignation. The evidence is all there, in your own handwriting. You split those girls up. You engineered every variable of their lives just to watch what would happen. You preyed on Doug and Terry, made them unwitting accomplices. And what about their biological parents? Did you victimize them too?”

He doesn’t even attempt to deny it.

He waves a hand.

“The mother was a teenager living on the streets. No family. No idea who the father was when she walked into the adoption agency I worked with and offered to sell them. *Sell* them. Her words. She saw her children as a commodity. When she died in childbirth, it was . . . ideal. Fortuitous.”

David’s voice sharpens. “And when Sam and Mary met? Fortuitous too?”

Julian exhales, almost fondly.

“I never expected them to find each other. Statistically impossible. But when the story broke—twins reunited, the world enthralled—I realized it could be . . . useful. A natural endpoint to the study.”

“Useful,” David repeats.

Julian nods eagerly.

“Exposure brings data. Patterns of attachment, shared memory formation—it was like watching my own experiment unfold in real time.”

Bile rises in my throat. I force it down. He clocks my disgust and smiles—thin, wistful, chilling.

“I did what had to be done. Everyone talks about nature versus nurture, but no one’s willing to face the cost. I don’t know what it is you think those journals prove. From where I’m standing, they’re nothing but notes for a longitudinal study.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” David says with a humorless huff. “And you should be aware how damning they are.”

Julian’s tone shifts—defensiveness morphing into pride.

The mask of benevolence hardens.

“Damning? You think this is about guilt? Identical twins, controlled environments—this is work that will be studied for generations.”

“In ethics courses, maybe,” I mutter.

His eyes flash.

“How dare you mock me. I *made* you, Jennifer. And look what you’ve become.”

The words land heavier than I expect.

But I refuse to give him an inch.

“We know you had a sexual relationship with Sam,” I say. “And before you call it consensual—she was fifteen. That’s rape.”

The kettle whistles. Julian turns it off, buying himself a moment. When he faces us again, he’s settled into an eerie calm.

“Is that what she told you?” He waves a hand. “Samantha was lost. Unstable. I gave her stability. I gave her . . . affection. In her troubled mind, it became something more.”

“She got pregnant, Julian,” David says.

He flinches, then shrugs.

“Unfortunate. She didn’t want to disclose the father,” he responds easily, the lie obviously practiced. “She certainly wasn’t equipped to be a mother. So I did what I had to—I ensured the child was adopted into a loving family.”

“You took that baby from her,” I say quietly.

“She wasn’t capable of raising it. I did what was necessary for her progress—and mine.”

“So a DNA test would prove the child’s not yours?” David asks.

“Of course.”

A beat.

“Though it was a sealed adoption—out of state. No trail.”

Kellogg leans in, that familiar sneer curving his mouth.

“You’d be surprised what I can get done,” he murmurs.

Julian blinks. Fear flickers, then vanishes behind bluster.

“You’re bluffing.”

David straightens with a shrug.

“You know what your problem is, Julian? Well—aside from the whole ‘evil genius’ thing . . .” He gestures broadly. “It’s your hubris. You always assumed the rest of us were too dim to uncover your little mind games. And while we may not have filled in every blank yet, we’ve got a lot more this morning than we did last night.”

He steps closer.

“And even as we speak, officials are combing through every page of every file of every patient you ever had. Internal investigators, ethics committees, the child-welfare division, licensing boards—hell, even adoption-placement partners. They’re all being notified. Every sealed record you manipulated? Every placement you influenced? It’s all being unraveled.”

His voice drops.

“I will find that little girl. And when I do, a DNA test and a calendar will be all we need to prove you raped a minor. A patient.”

Julian’s voice rises, cracking. “You think this ends me? You have no idea who you’re dealing with. My research will—”

“It’s over, Julian,” I cut in, low and sharp. “Forget about saving your career—you won’t have one by the time the sun sets. Not after today.”

That lands. A small, sharp fracture appears in his mask.

Kellogg steps in beside me, voice flat and professional in a way that makes it infinitely more threatening. “We notified the detectives this morning,” he says. “They’ve secured a warrant. Police are en route to execute it at this address.”

Julian goes very still.

Kellogg continues, “Every journal, every draft, every scrap of documentation you’ve ever taken home—they’ll seize all of it. You won’t get a chance to destroy anything. Not this time.”

A pulse kicks hard in Julian’s temple. The color drains from his face only to come flooding back in ugly patches.

“You don’t—” His voice cracks again. “You don’t understand what you’re interfering with.”

“I understand perfectly,” I say. “You’ve been hiding behind terminology and theory and your own ego for a long time. But the minute law enforcement has your notes in hand, the translation is going to be . . . illuminating.”

His hands clench at his sides, shaking.

“I made Samantha strong,” he hisses, tapping his own chest with a trembling finger. “I gave her affection. Purpose. I was the architect of Mary Langston’s fairy-tale life. I’ve accomplished more in twenty-five years than the two of you ever will—combined!”

He is shouting now, red faced, breath coming too fast, sweat gathering at his hairline. He looks seconds from unraveling completely.

I have no intention of being here when he does.

We turn to leave. Kellogg pauses, lifts a finger as if remembering something, and turns back.

“In case you missed it, Julian—you’re fired. Your privileges at Miami Killian have been revoked. And I’ve already called the medical licensing board. You’ll never practice again.”

I see it then—the moment it sinks in. Rage collapses into something smaller. Trembling. Fear.

The moment a man realizes the game is over, and he was the last one to know.

There’s no satisfaction in it. Only inevitability.

Back outside, a mockingbird chatters above us, and a lone cicada buzzes awake, its steady drone cutting through the heat.

“Should we wait for the police?” I ask as we walk back to the car.

“Probably.” He glances down at his watch. “Detective Rivera said he’d have someone here within the hour.”

“Yeah, and we might need to call in the fire department too. He’s just unhinged enough to try and burn the place down.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me one bit,” he says as we reach the car and climb into our respective seats.

We sit silently, staring through the windshield at the house, silent and calm despite the bomb that’s just been detonated inside.

I notice him giving me the side-eye.

“What?” I ask.

“Just wondering what you’re smiling at.”

My hand reaches to touch my lips.

“Huh. I didn’t realize I was.”

“Oh yeah. Big ol’ grin. Was that about him?”

I shake my head.

“No. It’s about you.”

“Me?”

I shrug.

“I think I might be starting to like you,” I say, holding up my thumb and forefinger a fraction apart. “Just a little.”

He smiles.

“Well, funny thing that—”

Before he can finish his thought, a sharp crack splits the morning.

A gunshot. Violent, unmistakable.

The mockingbird rockets skyward.

Kellogg jerks toward the house.

At the same second I go still, eyes closing.

I always tell my patients to honor their own feelings. You feel what you feel—regardless of what seems to be appropriate in the moment. In this moment I don’t feel shock or horror. I feel release . . . and relief.

Somewhere deep inside, in the quiet place I’ve kept barricaded for years, something loosens.

Julian Braithwaite can’t hurt me anymore. Maybe he never could. Not really.

This isn’t the first note of another nightmare.

It’s the last breath of the old one.

The world is still tilted, still finding its tempo.

But for the first time—I can feel it turning toward the sun.

Chapter Forty-Four

MARY

Last weekend

Julian Braithwaite had been the only person to ever show Sam any kindness, attention, affection. How could she have possibly known his motives were anything but pure? She had nothing to compare it to. And as she got older, she clung to the increasingly physical contact as the ultimate expression of his love for her. But he didn't love her. Even if he had, his actions still would have been statutory rape. She was fifteen; he was fifty.

In the beginning, the attention felt safe—a lifeline she thought she could trust. He told her she was special—a word that sounded like praise until she learned what it really meant. She'd thought it was love. But love wouldn't have made her afraid.

She told me she began to sense it—that tightness in his voice whenever she mentioned her future, the way he warned her that nothing could “jeopardize what they had.” When she missed a period, she didn't need to guess how he'd react. He had too much to lose. A pregnancy meant exposure—proof of what he'd done. So she hid it for as long as she could, terrified he'd force her into an abortion if he found out.

By the time he did, it was too late. The damage, as he called it, was done.

He arranged for her to deliver at a small rural clinic two counties away, a place where no one knew them and no questions would be asked. She said she held her daughter only once—just long enough to count her fingers, to memorize the weight of her in her arms—before the nurses took the baby to the nursery. Not long after, Sam began to hemorrhage. She woke hours later, weak and disoriented, to find her child gone. Julian told her the baby had been transferred for observation, that it was best she rest, that he'd handle everything.

He said if she trusted him—if she didn't make trouble—she'd see the baby again once they were both "well enough." She believed him. But when she was finally discharged, the nursery was empty, and no one seemed to know a thing. At first she'd thought he'd let her go—let them go—but once the baby was gone, she realized what her daughter represented: evidence, risk, weakness.

That was the breaking point. The moment she said she wanted to see her daughter, the kindness vanished. His expression went cool and deliberate, the way it always did whenever she reached for something he meant to hold over her. He accused her of betrayal, of sabotaging everything he'd worked for.

He'd taken the child somewhere far away, promising that, someday, when enough time had passed, he would allow her to see the girl. If she didn't make trouble or tell anyone about their "relationship." Sam's own daughter became a weapon he wielded to keep her in line. Because with the carrot came the stick. He assured her that if she ever breathed a word to another living soul, he would know. And he would make sure she never saw her child again. Because he was that kind of man, and he had that kind of power. The day on the river when she'd come at me in the raft had been her daughter's birthday.

"I wanted so much for her," she told me, now in a whisper that I could hardly hear over the incessant buzzing of the mosquitoes clustered around the mesh panels of our makeshift tent. "I wanted to have some stability so I could make a life for her. I wanted to give her that cabin in the woods by the water where she could grow up running and exploring and free. I wanted to be someone for her."

"You *are* someone," I said, brushing the hair back from the clammy skin of her forehead. "You've always been someone. You're her mother. And you're my sister."

With great effort, Sam twisted to face me. I could barely make out her features even though she was only inches from me.

"I need—" she huffed out, gathered her strength, and tried again. "I need you to find her. Find her and give her what I couldn't."

"Sam, please stop talking like that," I begged through the tears I couldn't hide anymore. "It's just an hour or so now before the tide—"

"You promise me!" she hissed, grabbing my hand with what little strength she had left.

I nodded. "Yes, yes. Okay. I promise."

Nodding, she collapsed against me again, reassured I would carry out the wish she wouldn't live long enough to see fulfilled.

I was there the moment my sister took her first breath.

And I was there the moment she took her last.

One I'll never remember, and the other I'll never forget.

Chapter Forty-Five

JENN

One week later

It's not until I'm almost directly across the street from the brownstone where my office is located that I spot her. She's partially obscured by the potted plants lining the front steps, and it takes a second for me to put all the pieces together. A few wisps of brown hair have escaped from under the hoodie she's wearing—totally out of place for a warm June morning. Oversize sunglasses obscure what I know to be cornflower blue eyes. There's only the faintest redness where there were abrasions not that long ago.

"Mary?" She scowls up at me, and I backpedal immediately. "Sorry, sorry—*Sam*. I'm just—I'm surprised to see you. Here. In New York. When did you—"

"Is it true?" she asks, springing to her feet so suddenly my neck snaps to follow her.

"Is what true?"

"Julian? Is he really dead?"

When she removes the sunglasses, I see the dark rings bruising the skin beneath her eyes. She looks like she hasn't slept in days.

"Come inside," I say, pulling the key from my bag and brushing past her to reach the door. "We can talk in my office."

She stays silent as she follows me, the only sounds the creaking of old wooden stairs and the muted murmurs behind the other doors we pass: the dentist, the insurance broker, the psychic. It isn't until we're safely inside the door with my name on it that I answer her question.

"Yes, Julian is dead," I tell her, dropping into my chair and gesturing to the one opposite me. She perches on the edge, leaning forward like the slightest shift might cost her the truth.

"Are you . . . are you sure?" she whispers.

"I am. Dr. Kellogg and I went to his house and confronted him about the journals. We hadn't even made it out of the driveway before he killed himself."

She collapses back into the chair, a heavy puff of air escaping her lungs. "Oh my God." She rubs the bridge of her nose, then her head jerks up again, eyes sharp with sudden urgency. "Did he tell you where she is? Where Sam's daughter is? Did you get that out of him before he did it?"

I shake my head, already holding up my palms so she won't panic.

"No. But he wasn't as brilliant as he thought he was. He left plenty of clues for anyone who was looking. And trust me when I tell you Dr. Kellogg and I were looking."

She swallows, absorbing that, and I have to give the man credit. He pulled every string he had, turned over every rock Julian thought he'd buried his secrets under.

"Did you ever hear Julian mention a place called Mayo, Florida?"

She frowns. "No. Never heard of it."

"Yeah, well . . . I think that was the idea. It's one of those blink-and-you'll-miss-it towns where he knew someone who ran a clinic."

"Oh my God. Is that the place? Is that where he sent her to have the baby?"

I nod somberly.

"It is. She was sedated, and by the time she woke up, the baby was gone."

When tears start to spill down her cheeks, I hold out a box of tissues. She plucks one and wipes her face as I continue. "Once we had that tiny thread, we pulled and pulled until it all unraveled."

"Please," she manages, her voice splintering at the edges, "tell me she was adopted by a good family. That she wasn't . . . hurt."

"She wasn't adopted, Mary."

The tears vanish. Not wiped away—dismissed. Mary bolts upright, shoulders squaring as though someone just slammed a visor down over her face.

"What? That's what he told Sam—"

"To throw her off the trail if she went searching," I explain carefully. "In reality, he placed her in a facility in Minnesota. Far enough away it'd be nearly impossible for Sam to find her."

As the emotion ebbs, what's left is the one truth that matters.

“You found her,” she murmurs, as if she only just now heard it.

“We found her.” I pause, then offer the thing she doesn’t even know she needs. “Her name . . . is Jocelyn.”

Something feral and heartbreaking rises out of her—a sob wrapped in a scream, edged with years of grief. She slips from the chair as if her bones dissolve, collapsing onto the floor in a shaking heap.

I’m with her in an instant, holding her, rubbing her back, murmuring in her ear that it’s going to be all right.

After a long stretch, when the shaking quiets, she pulls back slightly so she can meet my eyes.

“Dr. Flores . . . my parents . . .”

She leaves the question unfinished, too horrible to speak aloud.

“They had no idea you were a twin, Mary. They had no idea Sam existed. Julian spells it all out in his notes. He saw their grief for their own lost child as an opportunity to manipulate them—and to keep doing it. For years. Right up till the day he killed himself.”

Relief moves through her in a visible wave—shoulders loosening, breath shaking out of her as if her body can finally stand down.

I’m loath to take this long-awaited moment from her, but there are pressing matters to be dealt with.

“Mary . . . there’s more we need to talk about. Come sit down,” I say. I help her up to the seat she slid out of before returning to my own.

“What is it?”

I lean forward, forearms resting on thighs, hands clasped together.

“No one has connected Julian to you,” I begin slowly. “Not to you, or your sister, or to Jocelyn. Right now the only people who understand the full scope of what happened are you, me, and David Kellogg. He and I decided we would leave it up to you how you want to proceed from here.”

“What do you mean—proceed? He’s dead . . .”

“He is,” I agree. “But that doesn’t necessarily mean the story is. The question is how much do you want to reveal? Do you want to expose him for who he really was—tell the whole world what happened to you and to Sam?”

She stares down at a tissue balled in her fist.

“I don’t . . . I hadn’t really thought about that part. I mean, I was prepared to expose him when he was alive—to do whatever I had to do to

stop him and to make him tell me where Sam's daughter was. But now that he's gone . . . And now that she's safe, I'm not sure."

"Okay, well, I can tell you this much—if you do decide to come forward, the press will devour the story. It will define you. And it will define Jocelyn. And it's probably just a matter of time before someone starts sniffing around, digging deeper. Maybe putting two and two together and unearthing the story of Julian's experiment—and the fact that he fathered Jocelyn. Before you know it, you're a Lifetime movie of the week. I mean, I understand if you want to tell the world what really happened—and I'll be there to back you, but you'll need to prepare yourself for the inevitable cost of that decision."

She lifts her head now, eyes bloodshot and weary.

"I promised. I promised Sam I'd do whatever I had to do to find her daughter and give her a good life. Can you help me with that?"

Mary didn't entrust her secret to me just because she wanted to take down Julian. She knew she'd need help navigating all the red tape involved in reclaiming the child snatched from her sister's arms at birth. And since I'm the only one on the planet who knows that she is not Samantha Kinski, I've felt the pressure of having to work through this on my own. There are so many variables, so many unknowns. Not the least of which is the woman sitting across from me at this moment.

"I've actually given this a lot of thought," I confess, not mentioning the nights I've lain awake sorting through all the options in my mind.

This was the big reason she trusted me with her secret in the first place.

"I know deciding to take on your sister's identity had more to do with getting out from under your parents' influence, but it actually puts you in a better position where Jocelyn is concerned."

"But I can't just go take her, right? She probably has no idea she even has a mother out there somewhere. God only knows what they told her."

"Exactly. And the reality is that if you'd come forward as Mary—as the aunt—you'd have no automatic standing. You're just one relative—potentially among many. It's conceivable that if word somehow got out that she was Julian's daughter, someone from *his* family might come forward. Really, anyone even remotely connected to Julian or Sam could petition for custody."

She blanches.

“If you identify yourself as Mary,” I continue, “Jocelyn becomes a child with no living legal parents. CPS would open a full investigation. They might keep her in foster care while they sort everything out. You would have to fight to prove you’re the right person. And you could lose.”

She closes her eyes as if bracing against a blow.

I go on gently.

“But . . . continuing as Sam keeps the circle small. The system treats you as the surviving parent of record, and that gives you the strongest position while they verify things. It limits who has a say. It limits who’s notified. It limits who can intervene. It protects Jocelyn from becoming a public case and from being bounced between strangers. But, like telling the world about Julian, this decision also comes at a cost.”

She opens her eyes. There’s steel in them now.

“I’ll have to stay Sam the rest of my life.”

I nod. “Exactly. If you proceed like this—as Samantha Kinski, Jocelyn’s mother, you’ll be burying your own life. Your past. Your dreams. Everything you thought your future might be.”

She doesn’t look away.

“There’s a lot to consider,” I go on. “Things that aren’t on your mind at this moment but that will become important later. Someday you’re going to fall in love, Mary. Will you tell your partner the truth? How about Jocelyn—does she have a right to know? And then there are your parents . . . are you really okay with letting them grieve for you for the rest of their lives? *Especially* now that you know they were innocent in all this?” I pause for emphasis because she needs to hear this question and consider it. “Mary, you’re a very young woman. Are you really prepared to carry this alone? Forever?”

A long, aching silence.

Then she wipes her face with the heel of her hand.

“I can do it,” she says. “I made Sam a promise. She trusted me with her daughter. That’s all that matters. Jocelyn is all that matters.”

There’s no wobble. No hesitation. Just iron.

I exhale slowly, nodding. “Okay,” I say quietly. “Then we’ll do this your way.”

Chapter Forty-Six

MARY

Last weekend

Samantha Kay Kinski died sometime in the middle of the night, somewhere in the middle of the Everglades, leaving me truly alone for the first time in my life. She had *literally* been a part of me since before I was born—even if I was never aware of her existence.

It was only in her absence that I truly appreciated her presence.

I don't know how long I held her in my arms, crying. It was the kind of inconsolable anguish that comes when you finally understand that sometimes people you love leave and never come back. No matter how hard you wish, or beg, or pray. I held her like that, even as my teeth chattered and my muscles contracted, the chill of the damp night air settling into my bones. Even as my heart cracked open, spilling its contents into the brackish water under a moonless sky, in my own literal nightmare.

Eventually, the well of salty tears dried up, and the fog of my grief was pushed aside by the most primal instinct of all—the one that was threaded into the code of our very DNA: survival.

I had to live. For Sam.

I promised my sister that I would do for her what she had not been able to do herself. I would find her child, and I would give her the life and the love that Sam had never had. And I would see to it that the man who had done this to her paid for his sins.

With great care, I wrapped my sister's body in the tent material, tucking and securing it tightly so the bugs couldn't get to her still-warm flesh. Then I fumbled around until I found a flashlight, putting it in my mouth—cursing myself for not bringing the headlamp on this trip.

As the tide rose, so did the canoe, higher and higher until I was well above the mud, the carcasses of so many fallen, rotting trees swallowed up by the black water once more. The air grew thick, humming with unseen

life, the mangroves shifting and creaking as if the swamp itself were breathing.

Then the hull scraped against something—roots, maybe, or a half-buried trunk—and the canoe jolted sideways. I clutched at the gunwale, heart pounding, but the sluggish pull of the tide twisted us again. A splash, then another, and I heard the soft thuds of our gear sliding into the water. The tent poles, the food, the spare clothes—gone, swallowed whole by the dark. The swamp gave nothing back.

I steadied the canoe, wiped the sweat from my eyes, and kept paddling. I managed maybe another mile before meeting a wall of tangled debris that couldn't be rowed over, under, or around. I'd lost the energy required to saw through it hours ago. My only choice was to tether the boat to a thick branch, leaving my sister behind while I struggled to make my way out on foot.

It was agonizing and slow, branches clawing at me, stumps grabbing me, mud pulling me into its thick, clinging embrace. I lost a hiking boot and sock—not that I could feel my toes. More than once, I slipped, falling hard against the mangroves or a felled tree trunk. The bugs feasted on me every step of the way, clinging to me, buzzing around me, draining me alive. The Nightmare wanted to keep me, to claim me as it had my twin. And by the time I collapsed near dawn, I was almost ready to let it.

Almost.



I'm not sure how long I lay there like that on the tiny sliver of shore. The dramatic events that followed were reduced to a series of snippets strung together in my mind, like a movie trailer packed with the highlights of a film you have yet to see. The ranger, the swamp rescue team, the floating raft, the helicopter. Again and again my conscious mind skimmed the surface of reality and time, only to drag me down to its murky depths once more.

The first time I woke, I sat bolt upright, gasping for air, swatting at bugs that weren't there, my own scream still ringing in the tiny hospital room. I spotted Sam standing in the corner, watching me silently. I was just reaching for her, calling out to her, when two nurses came bursting into the

room. One tried to soothe me while the other injected something into my IV. Sam's name was on my lips as I floated away once more.

But then she was there with me in the cold, dark abyss, holding my hand as she pulled me toward the surface of consciousness until we were close enough for the light and the sound to permeate my stupor, if not bring me fully awake.

There was a familiar touch of my mother's hand on my face.

"But why does she need to be sedated?" she asked from somewhere far away.

"When she was awake earlier, she was quite delirious, and it was impossible for the medical team to interact with her and treat her. She'll be transported later today, and I've given orders for her to remain sedated at least until we've got her settled in at Miami Killian, where I can oversee her care."

The man's voice niggled away at me. I knew him but couldn't place him.

"Julian, I don't know what we would have done without you," my mother declared.

Julian. The third voice was Julian Braithwaite. Of course. "Uncle" Julian.

"Yes, we are," my father agreed. But as he continued, his tone turned hesitant. *"But . . . again, do you really think it's necessary to start the conservatorship process? I mean, as it is, she hasn't spoken to us in nearly two years. I don't see how keeping her locked up in the hospital against her will is going to make that situation any better . . ."*

"As I said before, Doug, Mary is going to need time and support as she deals with everything that's happened. And not just this horrible tragedy. I've read Samantha Kinski's file. She was a very troubled young woman, and you said it yourselves, everything changed when she came into your lives. Goodness only knows what kind of lies she's told Mary over the last five years. I wouldn't be surprised if she was the driving force behind your estrangement from your daughter. No, trust me on this. We cannot risk her taking off and disappearing once more. Mary needs us. She just doesn't know it."

"Oh, dear Jesus, I hate to do this to her," Mom cried.

"It will be fine, Terry, I promise. Just leave it with me, and I will take care of everything."

Powerless to move or speak, all I could do was listen until the darkness that tethered me between the two worlds pulled me back down.

The next time I broke the surface fully, I found myself in the posh VIP suite at Miami Killian, and Uncle Jules was right there at my side. There was no sign of my parents . . . or my sister.

He smiled sweetly, patted my arm, and promised to help me through this “difficult time.”

But I already knew who Julian Braithwaite was—*what* he was. And that was exactly what he was afraid of. So I smiled sweetly, pretending to adore him as I always had even as I started to formulate my plan. It was complex, and it wouldn’t be easy to pull off, but I had to try. I’d made a vow to my sister as she lay dying in my arms out there in the Everglades, and I couldn’t allow anything—or anyone—to jeopardize that.

These people were *not* going to let Mary go so easily.

So I had to stop being Mary.

Chapter Forty-Seven

JENN

One week later

Penn Station at rush hour feels like it's vibrating—announcements ricocheting off low ceilings, rolling suitcases clattering over tile, the smell of stale pretzels and diesel braided together. The air is warmer down here on the Amtrak concourse—heavy and metallic, like someone forgot to switch on the ventilation ten years ago. **TRACK 8** flashes on the board beside the words **LAKE SHORE LIMITED—CHICAGO**.

We join the crowd shuffling down the escalator, pressed shoulder to shoulder until we spill onto the platform. It's even stuffier here—thick, warm air clinging to the concrete as the engines idle, humming with that restless, itching-to-depart energy long-distance trains always have.

Sam—Mary—keeps her hood up, chin tucked. Her backpack looks too small for a person about to become someone else.

"You'll text when you get to Chicago?" I ask, tugging the hem of the outerwear straight, like some fussy parent.

She nods. "Yeah. And when I get on the next train. The . . . uh . . ."

"Empire Builder," I remind her gently. "To the St. Paul station."

"Right." She tries for a smile, but it's thin.

The PA system crackles to life overhead:

"Now boarding the Lake Shore Limited, service to Chicago. Track eight. All passengers, please prepare to step aboard."

People start moving.

We step with them.

She stops a few feet from the open train door and turns to me, eyes steady in a way that feels older than twenty-three.

"Jenn . . . I can't thank you enough for what you've done for me. You're making all of this possible."

“Well, we’re not completely out of the woods yet. You’ve got a lot of heavy lifting to do. Do you have the lawyer’s number? She’s expecting your call.”

She nods. “I’ll pick up a spy phone when I get there.”

“A . . . spy phone?” I echo, confused.

A smile fills her face—it’s wistful, and sad, and amused all at once. And it’s the first completely raw, unfiltered emotion she’s shown me to date.

“It was a joke . . . between me and my sister. Me and Sam.”

This makes me smile in response.

“You’re going to be okay. Just . . . please consider reaching out to your parents. Not today or tomorrow, necessarily. But maybe once things are settled for you and Jocelyn.”

She looks away for just a moment.

“I just don’t know how that would work, how we go back. There’s so much water under that bridge.”

I shrug.

“Yeah, well, you’ve handled Class IV rapids before, haven’t you? It might get dicey, but you’ll navigate it. And you know I’m always here to throw you a line if you need one.”

She launches herself toward me without warning, catching me up in a hug that nearly takes me down.

“Oof!”

I reach around, clutching her to me, pressing my face into her hair. It smells like apples and flowers. If I close my eyes, I can pretend, for just a moment . . .

She pushes me away as quickly as she enveloped me, holding tight to my forearms as she studies my face carefully. She knows what I was thinking. She can sense it with the creepy “twin sense” we’ve got going on between us.

“What you told me about Jess. About letting go.”

My breath stills.

She doesn’t hesitate.

“Jenn, you didn’t,” she says, uttering my name for the first time. “You didn’t let go. But you should have.”

Her words are unnerving.

“Wh-what? I-I don’t understand . . .” I stammer.

“Look, I know I’ve only known you for a few weeks, but I can see it. I saw it the first time we met. What you’ve been hauling around with you all this time isn’t Jess’s life. It’s her death. And what came after.”

I’m so stunned by the words that I can’t formulate a response. Not that she’s waiting for one.

“If you let go of that, it doesn’t mean you let go of her,” she tells me softly. “She already lives in your heart. She always has.”

She hesitates then, just long enough that I feel another thought gathering behind her eyes.

“And you get to live a life she didn’t,” she adds. “A whole one. With . . . whatever comes. Whoever comes.”

Her gaze flicks—barely—to my left hand.

“You don’t have to shut the door on the parts you two used to dream about. Jess wouldn’t want that for you.”

How she can see so deeply at twenty-three is beyond me—except it isn’t.

Losing a twin. Living under another name. Preparing to raise a child who isn’t hers.

Mary Langston has lived more life in the past few years than most people do in decades.

Of course she understands things people her age normally don’t.

The words land inside me like a pebble dropped down a deep well—soft, small, but echoing long after they fall.

I open my mouth—though I’m not sure what I mean to say—but the conductor gestures her forward.

I see it then, so clearly.

Mary Langston steps off the platform and onto the train. But when she turns around to face me from inside the Lake Shore Limited, it’s Samantha Kinski who lifts a small, uncertain hand.

“Wish me luck!”

The doors slide shut with a hiss.

For a few suspended seconds, we just look at each other through the glass—her on a train bound for Chicago and then Minnesota and a life she’ll have to build from scratch; me rooted to the platform, unable to accompany her to this first stop of that future.

But I’ll be there for her when she needs me.

The long-distance engine shudders, the cars lurch, and the Lake Shore Limited carries her away down the darkened tunnel.

Leaving me alone with the gift she doesn't know she handed me.

Or maybe she does.

Epilogue

JENN

One year later

Gabe is holding my hand tightly as we approach the wrought iron gates. Identical twin cherubs rest on either side of the entrance, as if standing guard over the souls within. I rather like that idea, I decide, as our rental car crawls along, passing row after row of headstones, periodically punctuated by a mausoleum.

I spot the mimosa tree right away.

“There,” I tell him, stretching my arm to point. “Over there on the right. Across from the spigot.”

He nods, gliding to a stop at the curb, and then turns to me. “You okay?”

“I think so.”

“Because you don’t have to do this. We can try again later. Or tomorrow. Or another time.”

I smile at him and then lean across the console to give him a kiss. When we separate, he presses a warm palm against my cheek.

“What was that for?” he asks.

“For always making sure I have a safety net. You make me want to be brave.”

“No wanting about it,” he murmurs. “You are brave, Jenn. Always have been.”

I chuckle, starting to unbuckle my seat belt. “Oh, I don’t know about that. It’s only taken me twentysomething years to get here. And I’m not even out of the car yet. This might still go south.”

“Say the word, and we’re gone.”

My answer is to open the door and step out, shutting it firmly behind me. I wait while he exits his side, comes around, and offers his hand once more.

I take it.

We walk down the carpet of thick Bermuda grass, past the resting places of strangers. They are, in some odd way, neighbors of my grandparents, whose plot sits almost at the end of the row under the mimosa tree. This is the first time I've visited them in this place. The headstone is a smooth granite adorned with a carving of hands clasped in prayer against a cross. The epitaph reads simply, **FOREVER IN OUR HEARTS**. Below it are first Lito's name, birth, and death dates, followed by Lita's. At the bottom the same information has been carved out for their daughter. My mother.

Gabe steps back reverently, just far enough to give me my space, just close enough to let me know he's there. I stand there for several long seconds as tears begin to slip down my cheeks. I use a hand to wipe them, then kiss the still-damp fingertips before pressing them to the cold face of the stone. Only then do I sidestep to the smaller memorial, the one with the carved angel. I drop onto my haunches in front of it, reaching out to run a finger along the grooves of her name, Jessica Maria Flores. Below her dates is the inscription I know by heart, though I've never laid eyes on it before this moment:

AND I WILL SLEEP IN PEACE UNTIL YOU COME TO ME.

When I look back over my shoulder at Gabe, he hands me the small spade we brought with us. I use it to dig a small hole right at the base of my sister's headstone. Then, reaching up under my sleeve, I hook a finger over the pink elastic band on my wrist to slip it off. Once I've tucked it into the hole, I use my hands to push the bit of displaced soil back over it, patting the ground until it's smooth. Standing again, I dust off my hands and rest them loosely across the soft swell of my midsection—one settling there, almost without my permission. A small, unconscious gesture of protection. Of promise.

It remains there as I smile down at my sister's grave, saying a silent prayer that it's not her final resting place. That, someday, I will come to her, and we will be together again in death, as we were meant to be in life.

"I love you, Jess," I whisper.

And then I just let go.

Epilogue

MARY

Two years later

The crunch of gravel makes me start.

It's early. Earlier than anyone ever drives down this road. I don't get many planned visitors, and the big **PRIVATE PROPERTY** sign up at the main road is usually enough to keep everyone else from straying down here.

Maybe that's why the sound unsettles me. Or maybe it's because some part of me has always known that eventually the past grows legs. And there isn't a sign in the world that's big enough to deter it from paying you an unexpected visit.

No.

Not possible.

But then they step out, and the breath leaves me like someone just punched a hole in my rib cage.

I'm out the door and standing on the front porch before they've even closed theirs.

My parents.

For a moment, all I can do is stare. The last time I saw them, I was still raw from the hospital, from the lies, from Sam's final hours.

I blink now—slow, disbelieving. Two years shouldn't change people this much. I wonder if they're thinking the same thing about me.

They look weathered, worn down in ways that grief makes permanent. Terry's short, swept-back hair—once meticulously maintained—now carries silver that shines plainly in the morning light. Doug's brown-silver temples have surrendered almost entirely, his face etched with the kind of lines carved by sleepless nights and too many unanswered prayers.

And yet . . . beneath all that erosion is something steadier. A resolve that wasn't there before. They seem—strange as it is to think it—stronger.

Different.

Better.

“Hello, Sam,” my father says carefully, like he’s approaching a skittish animal.

My mother joins him, mirroring his hesitant smile.

I swallow hard. “Um . . . Doug. Terry.” A nod. “Wh-what brings you here?”

I don’t bother asking how they found me. Money can buy a lot of clarity. And it’s not like I buried my trail deep. Maybe, on some subconscious level, I didn’t want to.

Just in case.

Just in case of this.

“May we come in?” my mother asks. “Please?”

May they? I glance nervously at the door behind me.

“Umm . . . How about we sit out here? It’s such a nice day, and the morning sun on the lake is beautiful.”

They turn in unison to look in that direction.

“Oh my,” she breathes. “You’re right. That’s stunning.”

They follow me to the far end of the porch, where I gesture for them to take the two rockers while I settle onto the swing bench that’s mounted into the ceiling. It creaks under my weight—a familiar sound, almost comforting.

I should offer them coffee. Or water. Something. But I just fold my hands and wait because, whatever this is, however it ends, I’m done worrying about this—about them.

“What are you doing here?” I ask—not rudely, but directly. It’s the only way I know anymore.

They glance at each other. My father starts.

“Um, right, well . . . We’re aware of the work you’ve been doing out here . . .”

“The foundation,” she clarifies. “The . . . the Mary Langston Foundation.”

Because of what I did—and the way I did it—my parents believe Sam to be alive and well and living off their daughter’s trust fund. And while pretending that Sam was the one who had survived was necessary for me to do what had to be done, the idea that they thought of her as some gold digger bothered me. A lot.

Naming the foundation after Mary Langston was a way to rehabilitate Sam's reputation, showing the world that she was using the money for good—and giving Mary the credit. Of course, it felt ridiculous to name it after myself, but then, I wasn't Mary anymore. And I never will be again. I expected to hear from them at some point, and I hoped they'd be happy about it. What I never expected was for them to show up here in person, out of the blue.

Suddenly it occurred to me that they might be here because they were put off by it. That maybe they thought it was ghoulish . . .

Damn. What would Sam do? How would she react to this?

"I'm not changing the name," I tell them with my sister's trademark defiant edge. "My attorney tells me I'm perfectly within my rights to call it that."

"What? Oh, no! No, no, no," my father jumps in, waving his raised palms as if he surrendering to the SWAT team. "No, Sam, you misunderstand. We—we're so . . ." He seems to struggle for the word.

"Moved," she supplies, choked up. "That you would use that money to honor Mary in this way . . ." The tears move from her voice to her eyes, damp trails running down her cheeks even as she tries to wipe at them with the back of her hand, impatiently. "We want to help."

"You do?" I'm so surprised that I blurt the question before I can filter it, but I adjust my tone a second later. "You do. I'm not sure that's a good idea . . ."

"Please hear us out," Dad says. He glances at her again, then back at me, sighing. "My God, but we owe you an apology."

"You do?"

Damn! I did it again. This time I don't bother converting the question to a statement. He does it for me.

"We do. For so many things. More things than we can name."

"But for starters," she says, "for the way we treated you when Mary brought you home to us. You're Mary's sister. That *does* make you family. But we were so . . . threatened . . . I guess you could say?"

"And afraid," he adds. "That she'd, I don't know, love you more? That you might somehow take her away from us." Now he looks down at his hands in his lap. "In the end we were the ones who drove her away. We realize now that it didn't have to be like that. That it *doesn't* have to be like that anymore."

I study them.

I'm so used to reading danger in every kindness that sincerity feels foreign—like a language I once knew but forgot how to speak.

“What do you know about my life now?” I ask.

“Uh, not much,” he admits. “You came onto our radar when you launched the foundation—and started awarding grants.”

It's been a long haul, but we've just released the first round of funds to help young adults transition from foster and institutional care to independence.

“Right. Well, the foundation—that's my work now. It's what I do. Mary and I talked about it . . . before,” I tell them quietly, using my bare foot to push off on the porch floor so that I'm rocking gently.

It's easier to be Sam when the work is good. When the world sees her as someone generous, principled, whole. Easier than being Mary, who never had the chance to be anything at all.

“Well, we think it's brilliant,” my mother says. “We only wish we'd thought of it. And the fact that this was how you chose to use the money—it just spoke volumes about you. About your character, Sam. We're so ashamed of our part in all this. And we want to ask you . . .” She starts, stops, and closes her eyes briefly. When she opens them again, I find more resolve there. “We want to be a part of it—if you'll allow it.”

Dad throws up his palms again in a preemptive gesture this time. “We understand if you don't want that. And we'll stay away if that's what you prefer. But if you'd consider allowing us to help you, we'd be so honored.”

“What exactly did you have in mind?” I ask a little suspiciously.

“Whatever you're comfortable with,” he clarifies. “We know that the money you have is an excellent start, but we could set you up to expand the reach and longevity of the program.”

“Either as silent ‘angel donors,’” she adds, “or as active participants. You could use our infrastructure and resources—if you wanted.”

My foot flexes down again, this time to stop the back-and-forth motion of my swing. I can't believe what I'm hearing. Surely there must be a catch.

“And then what? You decide who gets what? I get squeezed out, and it's just another vanity project for Langston Pharma?”

Their alarm is immediate.

“No, Sam, no, that's not it at all!” she says. “No, this would be your program. You'd make the decisions. About all of it. Where the funding goes

and how much. Future projects, all of it. We'd put it all in writing, and your attorneys could look it over. If you'd allow us, we'd even salary you—but that's your call." She looks at my father, who nods, then back to me, her eyes locking on mine as fiercely as I've ever seen. "Sam, this isn't just about Mary—missing Mary, wanting to honor her memory. This is about you. We have so much to make up for. We've wasted so much time with you that we can't ever get back. But we want to try, now, to be the family we should have been all along . . ."

Doug nods, voice rough. "Your sister used to say I never knew when to quit trying," he says with a shaky smile. "Maybe she was right. I just keep thinking about what I used to tell her—what my dad told me. It's never too late to be a family."

I study them.

"You . . . want to be my parents?" I ask.

Not because I want the answer.

Because the irony could crush me.

Mom shakes her head. "No. We're not naive. We don't want to define it. Not yet. We just want to . . . try. To know you."

"This needed to be said in person," Dad adds. "So you could see we mean it."

"No strings," she promises. "Your decisions. Your call."

The tears pool behind my lashes.

They believe their daughter is dead.

They believe I am Sam.

They gain nothing by offering to help me.

And still—they do.

A strange mix of relief and panic hits me. Because this—support, love, belonging—these things are dangerous when you're living a lie. And I've built my whole life these past two years around avoiding the kind of intimacy that might crack me open.

"I have an idea," I whisper. "There's a three-hundred-acre property in North Carolina. I want a wildlife preserve—outdoor education, leadership programs, animal therapy. Free for foster youth, young adults, social workers. I want to call it Mary's Place."

They both break at once—crying softly in matching rockers.

My mother reaches out and takes my hand. For one suspended second, something shifts. Something intuitive and terrifying. Her brows knit, tilting

her head.

She feels it.

Her lips part, as if she's going to say something, but then the door creaks open, and the words fall into the space between us, taken up by the morning breeze and forgotten.

Jocelyn steps outside in her Hello Kitty pajamas, hair tousled, fists rubbing the sleep from her big blue eyes. She looks confused as her gaze travels between me and the two strangers in the rockers—our rockers: hers and mine. Without a word she makes a beeline for the swing, climbing up next to me. I lift my arm so she can snuggle in against my side.

Doug and Terry Langston have gone perfectly still, breath held, eyes wide.

I know what they see. I know *who* they see.

Heart-shaped face, bent left ear, long hair the color of spun gold. At nine years old, Jocelyn is the spitting image of her mother at that age. Or, at least, how I imagine her mother looked at that age, taking into consideration the fact that she looks exactly the way *I* did at that age. She's staring at them as intently as they're staring at her.

"Jocelyn, this is Mr. and Mrs. Langston. They're . . . they're your Auntie Mary's parents."

The little girl twists around to look at me, like I might be pulling her leg. "Auntie Mary has *parents*?"

I nod, smiling.

"We talk about Mary a lot," I explain to them.

"You wanna see the pictures?" Jocelyn asks. "We have pictures of my mama and my Auntie Mary!"

My parents are as transfixed by her as I am.

"Um, yes," my mother manages to choke out. "Yes, I-I'd love that."

When the child tumbles off the swing and runs inside, their eyes fall on me, full of the questions they're afraid to ask.

"She's mine," I explain, the lie falling easily after all this time. "I was—well, let's just say the circumstances of her birth weren't ideal. And she was taken from me. For a long time, I didn't know where she was . . ."

Mom looks aghast. "Samantha! Why on earth didn't you ever tell us? We could have helped you!"

Of course they would have, but Sam had no way of knowing that. What she *did* know was that the man who'd made her life a living hell was

a longtime friend of our family. A man my parents had me call “uncle.”

Why would she think for a second that they would take her word over his? It’s why she kept the truth from me until the very last minutes of her life. No one had ever fought for Sam Kinski before. It never even occurred to her that someone would then. And she couldn’t risk it.

“It’s a long, complicated story,” I tell them. “Maybe someday . . . but not now. Not with her right here.”

As if on cue, the door slaps open again, and my girl comes tumbling out, hair streaming behind her, arms full of the photo albums. I had them printed up to share with her, like so many children’s picture books. Their pages chronicle the brief life I shared with Sam, just a few drops in what could have been—what *should* have been—an ocean of memories. Jocelyn marches up to my father and hands him the stack, which he takes. I’m amazed when she proceeds to crawl right up into my mother’s lap, holding out her arms for Dad to pass one of the albums back to her.

“This is my favorite,” she tells them, small hands flipping pages, small pink-nailed fingers pointing to images of us in the woods, on the river, in a tent.

They are simply mesmerized by her, as am I every day.

In two years, this little girl has taught me so much about the bond that exists between a mother and daughter, whether by blood, or by choice, or by fate. Because it doesn’t matter that I didn’t birth her myself. She’s the only person who knows me completely, even without knowing the truth. She’s the one place I don’t have to be Sam or Mary or anything but hers.

She trusts me with her whole small world.

And all I can think is: *Please let me be allowed to keep it.*

Now, as Doug and Terry Langston stare, spellbound, at the little girl that Sam and I share from beyond the bounds of this earth, I recognize that the rage I once held for them faded long ago—softened and reshaped by my newfound understanding of parenthood and the depthless well of love that comes with it. Julian stole that instinct, twisted it, and turned us all against one another.

But he’s gone now.

And still . . . we carry on.

Yet some nights, when the house goes quiet and Jocelyn’s breathing settles into that deep, even rhythm I adore, the questions slip in.

What happens if this facade ever cracks?

If she grows up needing answers I can't give?

If someone looks too closely?

If I ever let myself fall in love and have to build a future on the fault line of a lie?

Terry looks up at me again, something dawning behind her eyes—a tiny recognition, or maybe just intuition. A seed planted.

A truth waiting to bloom.

She smiles—tentative, bewildered.

I smile back—hopeful, terrified.

Because somehow I know this:

I can keep the secret forever.

I can be Sam for the rest of my life.

I can shoulder it, bury it, breathe around it.

But I also know the weight of it will always keep me at arm's length from every person I might ever love—except the two girls who made me who I am now: the one I lost and the one I'm raising.

And somewhere, in the quiet place where guilt and grace coexist, I already know how this story ends.

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About the Author



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Lauren E. Rico is an award-winning author and nationally recognized classical music broadcaster. Known for her twisty, emotional fiction, she has published more than a dozen novels, delighting readers with stories that explore the intersections of family, identity, and suspense.

For over three decades, Lauren's voice has been a familiar presence on the airwaves, whether on SiriusXM's Symphony Hall channel, radio stations in New York City and beyond, or in-flight entertainment aboard several international airlines. A lifelong musician and former French horn student, she brings the same passion and storytelling energy to her broadcasts as she does to her novels.

When she's not writing or broadcasting, Lauren can be found puttering around with her husband, Tom, and their rescue pup, Sandy—plotting her next story along the way.
