

DO YOU
FOLLOW?

J.C. BIDONDE

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GREENLEAF
BOOK GROUP PRESS

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Published by Greenleaf Book Group Press
Austin, Texas
www.gbgroup.com

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Design and composition by Greenleaf Book Group
Cover design by Greenleaf Book Group
Cover Image: ©iStockphoto/Savushkin, ©iStockphoto/The7Dew

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.

Print ISBN: 978-1-62634-902-5

eBook ISBN: 978-1-62634-903-2

Part of the Tree Neutral® program, which offsets the number of trees consumed in the production and printing of this book by taking proactive steps, such as planting trees in direct proportion to the number of trees used: www.treeneutral.com



Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

To the mad ones, may you never stop burning

1

ALEXA

September 17, 2021

NYC

The police station is just as I've always imagined—or rather, the same as I've seen in countless episodes of *Law & Order*. There is a large open area at the center, housing several clunky desks adorned with actual landline phones and computers. Veering off from the large room, like gates at an airport terminal, are an excessive number of rooms hidden by white aluminum blinds. Sounds are equally excessive—phones ringing, voices shouting, doors opening and closing. And the walls are pale green, of all colors.

I've always liked true crime television, but my experience today may change that. I understand they need to corral the alleged criminals, but what about those of us who are innocent? Shouldn't we get a fabric chair or something? Instead, I've been sitting in this cold, dingy interrogation room for hours. The office with the ratty blinds is starting to seem downright appealing. Hindsight and all that, I suppose.

One thing, though: This room doesn't have a two-way mirror—the kind that the lead detective always stands hidden behind, with a look of equal parts frustration and determination as he studies the tight-lipped criminal.

It's probably for the best that there is no mirror. I'm afraid of who I'd see in one.

I pass the time by fumbling with the now-empty Dixie cup, water being the only creature comfort they've given me since my arrival. Despite the mirror's absence, I know they're watching me—the cops are always watching these rooms. I don't know how I'm supposed to act. I'm not telling them that I had nothing to do with what happened, because that's not true. But I didn't kill him.

She did.

The only way to get out of this is by proving my innocence. But I have no idea how I'm going to do that without *her*. Beth, my twin sister. We've always been close, closer than most twins even. Every time I've needed her, she shows up. But something tells me that this time, it's different.

The doors in this place are heavy, so I hear the detective coming before I see him. He's alone this time, and I'm glad it's him and not the one with the mustache. The ones with thick mustaches always have something to prove, it seems. The soft lines around his brown eyes make him appear kinder—and I need kinder right now.

"Need a refill?" he asks.

I look down at the empty Dixie cup—I knew they were watching. As I tell him no, I scan the room for the hidden cameras. Nothing that I can detect.

"Okay then. Officer Morton will be back in a little while, but I figured we could keep talking. Are you ready?" he asks with what might be compassion, might be boredom.

“Sure,” I reply.

“Ms. Martin, can you tell me what happened when you entered your apartment earlier this evening?” he starts, and I realize it was neither compassion nor boredom—it’s the same tone you hear when speaking to a customer service representative who cannot communicate with you outside of their script.

“As I told you, I saw my boyfriend, Curt, lying in a pool of blood.” I jump ahead, already off-script. “But I wasn’t the one who killed him.”

The memory of it makes me tremble and sends an actual shiver right up my spine. Curt, with his legs and arms splayed in different directions, his chest full of bullet holes. He didn’t look human, probably because he wasn’t anymore. His mouth was agape and his eyes wide open—he looked like a prop from a costume store. Not my boyfriend, not anymore. I look down and notice my hands are bright pink from being wrung together.

“Then who did?” he counters, startling me. He’s managed to improvise—skipping the part where he forces me to tell him what happened again. How refreshing.

“Beth,” I say for what feels like the fifteenth time. On *Law & Order*, once the suspect’s alibi checks out, they let them go. But then I remember this one episode where the cops wanted it to be the guy on camera so badly that, even though he’d ratted the real killer out, the detectives just started the line of questioning all over again.

“Okay, Ms. Martin, let’s start from the beginning again,” he says, and that’s when I realize they want it to be me, not Beth.

But why? I wonder as a thick fog blankets my brain, silencing the officer’s words. Instead, I play back these last few months with Beth. She never liked Curt, but no matter how dark our sisterhood was, I never thought she’d do this.

Where did you go, Beth? You have to come back. I try to connect to her, but that feeling of connection is gone.

Like a cord cut, just a limp rope in my hand.

2

ALEXA

Three Months Earlier

Living at home means eating dinner at the ungodly hour of five o'clock. As Dad and I sit in awkward silence, I steal glances at his plate. He hasn't touched my latest Instagram recipe.

"Is it chicken?" he asks.

"Cauliflower, Dad," I manage with restraint. "I told you—it's a way to make veggies taste better so you can cut out fatty foods. Like chicken wings and fries."

Without looking up, he stabs one of the cauliflower florets with his fork and tosses the vegetable in his mouth. I can tell he's confused. The flavor from the Frank's RedHot sauce does say buffalo wings, but the texture is unmistakably vegetable. He chews the floret a lot longer than he would spend gnawing on a chicken wing.

"So?" I inquire hopefully.

"It tastes like cauliflower with hot sauce," he states.

"Yeah, I guess there's a little aftertaste," I say, steadying myself for the now-familiar monologue. After Mom passed away a few

years ago, we survived on six-dollar drive-thru meals. Around my sophomore year of high school, I couldn't take it anymore and started cooking. I began with easy things like microwave veggies and boxed rice, and as I experimented, I got better. But he still prefers the artery-cloggers from the chain restaurants. We've compromised on breakfast and dinner—now eating those meals at home—but I can't control lunch.

“Well, if you're going to put the same hot sauce on vegetables, why not just have wings and eat the carrots and celery they give you? Chicken's good for you,” he says, and, honestly, he has a point there. I'm preparing to go through the health benefits of cauliflower once more when my cell phone rings from the kitchen counter.

A 212 area code. Dr. Greer? No, I have his number saved. Maybe someone else from the Weinstein Center.

“Hello?” I say, picking up. I steal a glance at Dad. He's moved on to the kale salad, lifting a couple of small leafy pieces as if he's searching for something more appetizing beneath. I think I may have gone too far with tonight's dinner.

“Hey, Alexa!” an overly cheerful voice greets me. “It's Christine from FLLW.”

“Oh! Yes, hi, Christine. How are you?” My voice has gone up three octaves to match hers, and Dad has taken the distraction as an opportunity to completely give up on dinner. He's set his fork down and is now watching with eager fatherly eyes.

“Good, good. Listen, everyone here just loved you. We'd love to have you join the team as a marketing assistant.”

“Oh, my goodness. Wow. Thank you!”

I interviewed almost two weeks ago at FLLW, pronounced “follow.” Since their main office is in Manhattan, it took me almost six months to convince Dad to let me interview. Dad wouldn't even

let me go away to college; instead, I received my associate's in communication from Middlesex Community. That's the thing that surprises me the most about Christine's news; they don't care that I'm missing a bachelor's.

"The only catch is we needed someone, like, yesterday. So would you be able to start on the fifteenth?" she asks.

"Next week?" I say, walking to the kitchen as I do the math in my head.

"Yes. Can you do it?"

"Yeah, I think that would be fine. I mean, it's not that far, even if I don't have a place by then."

"Oh, totally! Plus, you know New York—when you find a place, you take it that minute," she says. Except I don't know New York. Not like that. I visit Dr. Greer every week, but Dad takes me, and the longest we stay is for a slice of pizza before heading back to Connecticut.

"That sounds about right," I say, keeping my voice neutral and upbeat. But already I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. *Excitement*, I tell myself. *Not fear*.

"I'll go ahead and email you all the details and salary information, okay, girl?" she says.

"Sounds great!" I chirp, although honestly, it's my first job; the fact I'll be paid anything is exciting enough. "I'm excited to be a part of the team." It's said with what I think may be too much enthusiasm, especially given Christine's cool and confident New Yorker demeanor. But I can't help it—I can't remember the last time I felt *happy* like this.

"Awesome. KK, talk soon!" she says.

"Okay, thank you! Bye," I say, although I'm fairly certain she's already hung up.

As I hit the end button, I turn around and am surprised to see that Dad has followed me into the kitchen. He's the loving-and-supportive-but-still-not-sure-how-to-handle-daughters kind of dad. Since Mom passed, he's slipped into a familiar shell.

"Did you get it?" he asks with cautious enthusiasm.

"Yeah," I say, the full reality of the call washing over me. "I got it!"

He reaches out to hug me. His hugs are still frequent, but there's an air of hesitation now, a trepidation not unlike how he approached the buffalo cauliflower. I'm his daughter, but he still misses Mom. And Beth. I'm the only one of us still here, and I'm not sure I'm his first choice. I think I used to be, but so much has changed.

"When do you start?" he asks when he pulls away.

"That's the thing," I begin as we return to the dining room. "They want me to start Monday."

"This Monday?"

"Yep."

"Oh, wow, that's quick. How do they expect you to have a place in the city by then?" he says, running his hands through his espresso-colored hair, the way he does when he's uncomfortable. I've seen it a lot. Finally, he sets them on either side of his plate, where almost every piece of the cauliflower remains.

"I'm not sure, but I think I should head in tomorrow and start looking."

He gives me a long stare. "Oh, Lex, I don't know. Are you sure you're ready?"

"We've talked about this. I've been doing so well with Dr. Greer. Plus, I'll be able to see him more frequently if I live in the city," I argue. This point was always my ace.

"I know," he says, then pauses. He looks at his plate, then back

at me, and I can see the white flag rising. “I just worry about you, Lex—and I still worry about Beth.”

And there it is, he’s said it. The name that kicks us both out of the present moment. It registers in the faraway look in his eyes. I’m never sure where he goes, but I imagine it’s to a time when Beth and I were little, or maybe to Mom. But for me, I go to the same place every time: the night it all changed, the night that Dad had finally had enough and sent Beth away. Dr. Greer wants to explore my reluctance to move on, but I don’t want to leave it behind. In an odd way, it’s comforting knowing there are some things that will never change.

I haven’t told him that. I don’t think I will.

My dad’s fumbling with his beer bottle now, swirling it as if it’s a fine wine, occasionally lifting it to peer through the small hole. There’s nothing in there except beer, which can be very interesting, but I can see he’s just trying to avoid an argument. I begged him not to kick her out. I pleaded for him to let her stay. I tried every combination of words under the sun in my attempts to make him understand, but he just stared at me as if I were speaking Mandarin. It was maddening. Until, finally, I gave up. When he says he worries about her, I don’t think it’s like a normal parent would. He doesn’t worry for her safety. That’s something I had to accept a while ago too.

Still, when I play by his rules and avoid Beth, he gives me more freedom. So, in some twisted way, he’s won. I think about her every day, but we no longer speak.

I’ve spent most of my days missing her, but this time, I’m relieved that she isn’t here. I know how she’d react to this new development in my life. She’d squish my excitement like a roach under a heavy work boot, barely noticing the destruction in her wake.

3

BETH

I've never understood why mental facilities always look like something right out of the pages of *Elle Décor* magazine. Every time I enter this lobby, with its obnoxious palm-frond wallpaper, oversized leather sofas, golden wall sconces, and perfectly herringboned tiled floors, I'm immediately nauseous. This is a goddamn looney bin—most of the patients don't even know their own name, let alone care about the aesthetics of their surroundings. Plus, isn't it a little counterproductive to give such a beautiful building to people with such little hope? Or perhaps the hope is only for their families, desperate to have in their view something that deflects the terror and hopelessness that they feel.

Today the reception desk is manned by the blonde receptionist with the offensive fingernails. They're filed to such a sharp point that I don't know how she wipes. She's usually looking down, texting under the desk, but today, in a shocking twist, she's on the landline. I think she's actually working.

Dr. Greer's office is down this long maze of a hallway. Unlike

the lobby, the hallways are all decorated in the same style, with big black-and-white tiles that alternate like that of a chessboard. It's very distracting, as are the black-and-white photos lining the walls. I can't help but wonder if they ran short on budget after the lobby or if they hired the same interior designer as Kris Jenner. Either way, if I were crazy, these hallways would make it worse.

As I pass the rooms, I can't help but think of Alexa. I've never understood why she comes here willingly (I don't have a choice in the matter). Since the incident, Lex still seems pretty convinced there's something wrong with her. Something to fix. I've tried to explain that there's absolutely nothing wrong, but she's always been the naïve one, open to what everyone suggests is the reality rather than relying on her own mental processes.

The black-and-white photos are just repeating depictions of elephants, giraffes, lions, and zebras, the silver grassy backdrop behind them seeming to glow under the African sun. I make a silent vow to never look at them—between the tiles, the photos, and the zebras, I'm going to lose it myself. Maybe that's why they chose the décor, to ensure repeat customers. The revelation makes me laugh.

I make a turn, but as I reach the end of this second hallway, I realize I must have taken a wrong turn. To my right is a pair of double doors leading to a large room, and to my left, the bathrooms. I haven't been down this hallway before.

I enter the large room. Twenty round wooden tables, each surrounded by eight matching black chairs, sit empty. There are apples, bananas, a coffee machine, and a basket of KIND bars. I smile as I grab an apple. They really had to go with the KIND brand granola bars—RX bars wouldn't be appropriate. Clif would be simply wrong.

I head back to the checkered halls to continue looking for Alexa, but I'm stopped when a white blur slams into me from one side.

"Fuck! Sorry, didn't see you there," says a raspy male voice. When my brain catches up, I recognize that the speaker is a tall blond man with an apron hugging his athletic physique. He's setting down his metal tray of assorted baked goods, and as he does, three croissants fall to the floor. I only get a good look at his face when he brings the fallen pastries to his mouth and blows whatever invisible germs may have gotten on them during their affair with the floor.

I'm not a huge germaphobe—in fact, Howie Mandel annoys me. Not because he's a germaphobe but because he was so ahead of his time. Who knew he was right all these years? A true social-distancing pioneer. That's what bugs me.

I notice that Apron Guy is staring at me, almost as if he knows what I'm thinking. Fuck.

"No worries," I reply, turning on my heel and trying to hide my disgust at his adoption of the five-second rule.

"Hey!" he calls after me.

I turn back, a massive bite from my apple pushed to the left side of my mouth.

"How are you doing?" he says, an odd expression in his green eyes.

"Pretty good, thanks." I can't help but feel bad for this weirdo. They clearly let the patients work in the kitchen here, like those weeks in elementary school where they forced students to prep and serve tray lunches. I always hated that one week a year when it was my turn to don the hairnet and serve my peers. We all had to do it, but it always sucked when it was your turn. It was almost as bad as when it was the kid who always used his sleeve to wipe his perpetually running nose.

“Good!” he says, still staring at me.

“Okay, cool.” I hoist up the apple in a gesture meant to signify both “thank you” and “we’re done here.” He seems to understand, so I turn and head for the double doors.

“See you later!” he shouts, then thankfully leaves me alone when someone calls out for him to drop the tray and help chop onions for lunch.

As I wander down four or five more hallways, my frustration grows. The hunt for Dr. Greer’s office makes me miss the old days, when I’d wander the halls of our elementary school to find Alexa. Until fourth grade, the school never had any issue with us being in the same class. But I’d seen them separate the Johnson twins in first grade, so I suppose, on some level, I knew it was coming. When we got the notice that she was in Mr. Gleeson’s class, we were all shocked to see I’d been assigned to Mrs. Hobbs. I developed a little ploy early in the year. I’d sneak out under the pretext of a bathroom break and go peek into Alexa’s classroom.

It’s not that I couldn’t handle being separated, but Alexa is unknowing, gullible, and at times downright weak. When I heard a rumor that she was being picked on, I had to make sure she was okay—just like any good sister. The first time she saw me spying on her through the slim rectangular window, her face was priceless. She was so excited she stood up at her desk and waved at me, narrowly missing the consternation of her teacher, who was distracted with scrawling numbers on the chalkboard.

I’m at the end of another goddamn hallway when I spot another restroom, a welcome opportunity for a break. To my delight, the restroom is the color of a California poppy, and the four stall doors are each adorned with gold handles and a round circle lock. I can tell someone is in the far one from the sound of the flush.

I don't have to use the restroom, so I stand at the sink, waving my hands in front of the faucet sensor. It spits water intermittently as I wash the apple juice from my hands. I stare at my thick dark brown hair in the mirror. I've always loved it. While we were different in so many ways, Alexa and I both liked to keep our hair long, wearing it down and letting it fall like a security blanket around our faces.

The stall door opens, and I hear feet approaching the sink.

"Ms. Miller?"

It's Patricia, Dr. Greer's nurse practitioner.

"Oh. Hi, Patricia," I reply with little enthusiasm.

"You're late," she states flatly as she motions for the touchless faucet to begin.

"When duty calls."

She forces a smile, and I stifle my desire to say something snarky. As she waves her hands, now under the paper towel dispenser, I take a final look in the mirror and steel myself to follow her to my session.

I follow her mousy ash-brown bob through the maze of black-and-white halls until we finally reach his door. Patty opens the door for me, and I step through, only catching her gaze for long enough to see the tiny crooked scar above her left eyebrow, marring her otherwise perfectly smooth forehead. I never noticed it before. I suppose I never really looked at her much, but today I see it and it bothers me. I hate scars—they always serve as this dark reminder that you can't go back in time, that some things are forever and you can't change them.

"Ah, Ms. Miller, good to see you," Dr. Greer greets me.

"Hi, sorry. Train traffic," I reply.

"Well, it's your time, as you know."

Dad, or Dad's insurance, pays Dr. Greer. So even when I'm absent or late—and I'm absent a lot these days—he's always compensated. Dr. Greer has explained this to me several times throughout the years of therapy.

I settle into one of the office's two large tobacco-colored leather chairs. He rarely stands to greet me anymore. We're like an old married couple, a little too comfortable—or maybe it's complacent. Either way, Dr. Greer knows us, our story, and our family. We've seen him for most of our lives. On most days, I'm quiet.

"How have you been?" he begins.

"Fine." The words leave my mouth too quickly. From Dr. Greer's expression, I can tell he knows I'm lying. I have to give the man credit—he knows when there's more to my story. And today, there is. I feel like talking.

"I think I'm pretending to be okay. But I don't really feel okay," I tell him.

His face barely moves at this admission. He's unfazed.

"There have been so many changes," I continue.

"For you?" he asks.

"Yes. And for my sister," I say.

"Have you spoken to her recently?"

"No."

He looks at me as if searching for the truth somewhere below the surface of my skin. He seems to be placated.

"How do you feel about that?" he asks.

"I miss her."

"She likely misses you as well."

"I doubt it." I think back to the emails of hers I've read. Figuring out her password was easy. At the treatment center Dad sentenced me to a year ago, we were allowed only an hour a day

to use the internet, but I was able to crack it on the first day—BIEBERWIFE. Twins can't keep secrets from each other, but she also hasn't changed it since we were little. Her obsession with Justin Bieber transitioned a little too easily through each stage of adolescence. I never really got the appeal of him, but he has had a few bangers that I can't deny.

"As we've worked on, you are two separate beings. Yes, you're twins, but it would be impossible to really know what she's thinking and feeling," he reminds me. "Then, or now, if she was able to be in the room with us for this session."

But I know she doesn't miss me. She's elated to be on her own, with a new job, in a new city. When I finally left the facility a few months ago, I was released to a transitional home for women where I had more internet time to keep close tabs on her inbox. I knew she'd move on, likely start her adult life, but seeing the job offer was excruciating. I immediately asked for a transfer from the glorified halfway house up north to one in White Plains, but somehow, just last week, they agreed to release me instead.

"Can you tell me more about why you feel like you're pretending to be okay?" he asks.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know. I just feel . . ." I trail off, searching for the word.

"Disconnected."

"Yeah, I guess."

"From her?"

"From everything."

He nods, but I see a frustration wash over him. Generalities are not what therapists want to hear. They want the nitty-gritty details

of our brains' inner workings. So our little dialogue has taken a sharp right turn toward unproductive. To my surprise, I'm disappointed too. I don't dislike Dr. Greer. And, on occasion, I do open up. I thought today would be one of those days. He did too. But now here we are, at a standstill.

"Want to tell me about how you think all of your time here has gone?" he asks. "How you feel about our work together?"

I shake my head, and he turns toward the TV hanging in the corner. It's the only other thing we can do to finish the session with a semblance of productivity. I have never felt particularly warm toward Dr. Greer. He's never done anything outwardly awful or wrong, but I just don't want him in my business. Our business. After this many years, what else does he possibly have to wonder about me?

"Brené Brown it is," he chirps as he goes to play yet another clip from the shame expert.

"I don't feel ashamed."

He quickly shuts down my attempt to avoid Brené. "We all have shame. You know this."

"If I watch this, will you discharge me?"

"You know your discharge is today. This is simply to wrap up inpatient treatment and to get a sense of where you are at as we start you on intensive outpatient work."

"Well, can we skip the video?" I try with a cheeky smile I rarely give.

"Humor me, will you?"

I take a deep breath and settle into the chair. Its worn-in softness welcomes me but hardly hugs me.

4

ALEXA

The East Coast is known for its traditions, architecture, and stereotypically aggressive inhabitants, but I've always loved the thick foliage. Trees line the highways like the crowds at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, there to see Snoopy and friends coming down Madison Avenue.

I know how to drive, but Dad always insists. He's not a bad driver in Connecticut, but I worry once we reach the city, as the madness of cabs and pedestrians makes him nervous—even when we don't have stacks of boxes piled to the ceiling. Today our forest-green Jeep Grand Cherokee could be its own self-contained episode of *Hoarders*, despite the fact that movers handled most of the larger items. The additional blind spots would make maneuvering hard for a seasoned cabby, let alone my suburban-dwelling father.

As we round the last bend, the trees start to recede, and Dad's silence turns into chatter.

“Yeah, I don't know how people drive in this city.”

“They don’t,” I say with a smile. “Well, the smart ones don’t. That’s why you have the almighty metro card.” Instinctively, I reach for my wallet to check if I still have mine.

“Ah yes, the subway.” He sighs. “You feel comfortable using that to get around?”

“Yes, Dad. They have these crazy things called apps”—I wave my phone in his peripheral vision—“and some genius invented one that not only routes you to your final destination but also lets you select your preferred mode of transportation. Even these outdated things are a legitimate option,” I say, propping my feet on the dash and wiggling my toes.

“Okay, okay, I get it. You’re all grown up,” he says with a laugh. “Just know that if you need anything, I’m only an hour away—or five, with traffic.”

“I know, Dad. And I have Dr. Greer close by if there’s any emergency,” I assure him. In fact, we were supposed to see him earlier today, stopping on our way to the apartment to do a quick talk about the transition, but Dad must have canceled the appointment, because he didn’t say anything about it this morning as we were packing up the last odds and ends. I must have dozed off somewhere between White Plains and the city, because once I came to, we had long passed Dr. Greer’s office and were nearing my block. Of course I wasn’t going to say anything. One less thing to deal with today, which suits me just fine.

The trees have given way to the concrete jungle, but I can still see the Hudson River snaking along the West Side Highway—the last reminder of the serene hometown I’ve left behind. We finally turn away from it and onto Twenty-Third Street, at which point I glue my forehead to the window and watch the people and buildings. I’m always surprised by the amount of color. Neon signs,

red-toned brick, iron fire escapes, and millions of different skin tones. The city looks like one of those blurred images a photographer captures, just streaks of colors in a completely still image. Life moving too quickly to capture. That's New York City.

We turn down Seventh Avenue, and I watch as tiny cobblestone side streets wander off the busy avenue. I've always loved the West Village. The few times Dad has let me come in to see Dr. Greer on my own, I've wandered downtown, blaming my late return on the omnipresent NYC traffic. Each downtown street seems to unfold in a new direction, making it impossible not to get lost, and I love it. Filled with people and noise at all hours, the New York streets provide me with the one thing a small town cannot: privacy. New York City is the one place I know where no one is really watching.

After a few turns and near misses with pedestrians, we arrive at Bedford Street, the site of the small walk-up apartment I found two days prior on StreetEasy. The virus has left nothing but a dark memory for most, but for me, it means a more affordable apartment in the West Village. Selfish, maybe, but it's the truth.

We find parking on an even narrower street that flanks the back of the building, a miraculous accomplishment even post-pandemic. I open the rear side door of the Jeep, and two pillows slump out. I pick them up, noticing the stains of the city street smeared across the clean white cases, then tuck them under my arm as Dad rounds the rear with one of the larger boxes.

"This way!" I nod, and he follows.

After fumbling with the keys that the agent messengered over the day before, we go through two sets of glass doors and then stop in the marble entry. This has to be the original flooring—once opulent, it now bears almost as many cracks as the pavement outside. The stairs in the building are old as well. As we head

up to the third floor, I make a mental note on the second-floor landing not to wear heels or carry too many groceries home—the steps are surprisingly steep.

We find my door, the first to the left of the staircase. It was once a bright blue, but the years of wear have dulled it to a murky blue green. Two other doors of the same hue line the hall. Shifting my pillows, I manage to open the door to a welcoming beam of sunlight across the hardwood floors.

“Gosh, Lex. It’s pretty small,” Dad says from behind his bulky box. He’s still trying to catch his breath.

We walk down the narrow hallway. The “walk-in” closet is to the right. Just past it, on the left, is the entrance to the “kitchen,” although it has been designated as such in the loosest sense. Anywhere other than New York, a kitchen means a refrigerator, freezer, microwave, oven, stove, sink, and garbage disposal. Here, I have a refrigerator and a sink, sans garbage disposal, and a tiny oven with two electric burners as my stove. All of the other staple kitchen items seem to have been overlooked by whoever converted this old building.

Another interesting addition is the door just beyond the sink, which is one uneven step up. Through this secret passage is the bathroom, which contains the smallest tub I’ve ever seen, as if a normal tub just had a baby and that baby tub was taken and placed here in my new apartment, the cramped space forever stunting its growth.

The living room, which is also small, houses the furniture that came with the apartment. The walls somehow hug both sides of the sofa loosely enough that I think I’ll be able to fit the floor lamp I brought from home. I have windows but not a lot of natural light. The espresso-colored wood coffee table sits too largely in the

middle of the space and screams outdated. Thankfully, a TV is mounted on the wall, so there's enough space to pass to the small pocket door leading to the bedroom. There is only enough capacity for a double bed, tall slim dresser, and small night table for a lamp. The presence of one decent-sized window keeps the room cozy, not claustrophobic.

"You know New York—you lived here once," I remind him.

"Yeah, but that was the seventies. I'm fairly certain they spliced up my tiny apartment into eight new shoeboxes for you kids," he jokes. "Oh, and then multiplied the rent by eight."

"Times ten actually. But I'll take two hundred and forty-six square feet. It's my little safe haven in this mass of people."

After putting down his box, he stands with hands on his hips. "I suppose you're right. Moving to the city is a rite of passage."

"One I wasn't sure I was ever going to have."

I regret the words as soon as they leave my mouth. He gives me the look, but this time no words of caution come with it. Instead, he begins to drag the large box to the corner of the room, which doesn't take long, as it is about four steps for him to cross the room. I almost think I've dodged the consequences when he speaks.

"Have you heard from Beth lately?" he asks, his back still turned to me as he carefully aligns the box with the edges of the walls, so that it fits as snugly into the corner as possible.

"No," I assure him. It's the same answer I've given him for fourteen months now.

Finally satisfied with the arrangement of the box, he turns around and faces me. His eyes tell me he's still concerned, so I flash my most easygoing smile.

"Well, let's get the rest of them," he says, signaling that the Beth discussion is over, at least for now.

We retrace our steps over and over, moving my little life packed in boxes. When the last of my things are safely inside my apartment, Dad organizes them into stacks in the corner, saying he wants to free up as much space as possible for me to unpack later. He dusts off his hands, as if to signal a day's work coming to an end.

"Do you want to grab a bite before I have to head back?" he asks.

"Sure!"

"Slice?" he suggests, although he knows the answer.

"Salad?"

"Come on, Lex. I think it's actually against the law to leave Manhattan without a proper slice."

I can argue with Dad on almost anything, but he has a point on this one.

We arrive at Joe's after two short blocks. Since it's three o'clock in the afternoon on a Thursday, there's only one person in front of us. Joe's is famous in the city. Celebrities frequent the place, fully willing to stand with the rest of us in a line that normally wraps around the corner onto Sixth Avenue.

Inside, a young couple laughs beneath the rows of famous-people photos while playfully arguing over how best to eat their pieces of pizza. I watch as the woman dramatically flips her brown ponytail to the side and tilts her head, lowering the pointed end of her folded pepperoni slice into her mouth.

Her boyfriend watches with admiration and a wide smile before taking a bite of his unfolded cheese one. "See, if you leave it flat, there's more opportunity for bites. Don't you want the slice to last as long as possible?" I hear him argue.

"No!" she exclaims, then takes another massive bite.

Usually, I never order anything besides cheese. But when the

round-faced Italian man at the counter asks what kind, I tell him, “Pepperoni.” I want to be on the other end of that argument and the boyfriend’s loving eyes. I’ve wondered for a while now what it would be like to be loved by a man. The truth is, I’ve never been the object of anyone’s desire. I’ve blamed it on being from a small town, on being too nerdy, but it’s most likely my family’s drama that has kept the male sex at bay. But now, in this big city, no one knows me. And no one knows Beth.