

An Excerpt from

Judge's
Girls

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harris



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PROLOGUE

MAYA

*Saturday morning, March 14th
6 days since Daddy died*

Pastor Davies strode toward the solid oak lectern, a thick, maroon-colored Bible in hand. Sunshine streaming through the stained glass cast red and green lights against his weathered face. “Let the church say amen.”

“Amen,” the congregation responded.

I couldn’t. My throat felt like grains of sand in an hourglass. A hundred pairs of eyes were aimed at me, watching my every move even though they couldn’t see me through the black lace veil covering my face. I stroked a coin, Daddy’s lucky penny, between my forefinger and thumb. The cool from the copper soothed me.

“Oh, Lawd.” Aunt Lisa waved a black lace handkerchief in the air, her arms jiggling with the motion. “Not my baby, sweet Jesus. Not. My. Baby!” Aunt Lisa jumped from the seat and walk-hopped to the front of the church. She threw herself on the black and silver casket, moaning and groaning and body shaking.

That's right, Aunt Lisa. Give them a show. Move the attention away from me.

"Take me instead, Lord!" Aunt Lisa patted her chest and looked toward Black Jesus in the mural above the baptism pool.

My daddy's other sister, Aunt Eloisa, wailed from the pew. She didn't dare run up like Aunt Lisa. Aunt Eloisa had bad knees, bad ankles, bad joints—bad everything if you let her tell it.

Daddy would hate this. He hated spectacles and pomp and circumstance.

If he were here, he'd tell Aunt Lisa to sit down and tell Pastor Davies to get on with it.

But if he were here, he'd be alive. And I wouldn't be at his funeral.

Exhausted from crying myself to sleep. Exhausted from heaving the two crackers I'd just managed to swallow before my stomach churned. Exhausted from taking care of my stepsister.

Exhausted from making sure my stepmother hadn't burned the house down.

Pastor Davies looked over his shoulder and nodded to the minister seated to the right of the pulpit. I couldn't remember his name, but he'd always been nice the few times I'd attended service. He sighed and hefted his portly physique up. The chair squeaked and shifted, as the red velvet cushion on top of the chair rose like dough.

"All right, Sister Lisa." The minister's soothing and patient voice could barely be heard over the wails. "Go on back to the pew, now. Sit down with your family."

Aunt Clara Bell, my great-aunt who'd raised Daddy and his sisters after my grandmother died, waved Aunt Lisa back. "Come sit down, so we can pay our respects to Joe. It's a funeral, not *The Price Is Right*."

Aunt Lisa wailed louder. Minister Simpson, who'd been

seated toward the left side of the pulpit, gently grabbed her elbow and guided her away from the casket. She slumped from his grip like a toddler in the throes of a tantrum. Her black, mad-hatter hat fell to the ground, as she flopped onto the floor and howled.

“Hush now,” the minister’s voice grew agitated. “Judge Joe’s in a better place.”

In a better place. What better place could there be than here with me? The tsunami was building, churning my insides, flooding my lungs. I couldn’t breathe. I was angry—so damn angry and hurt. I couldn’t move past the vow he’d made twenty-two years ago.

He should be here. He promised.

The penny heated between my fingers, but I couldn’t stop rubbing it. I couldn’t stop the memories from bowling me over.

“Swear it, Daddy. Swear on your lucky penny that you’ll never leave me.”

Daddy, so big and so strong, was like the oak tree in our backyard that I’d loved to climb—solid and steadfast. But the day Mama died he’d fallen, and he’d crumbled. And at five years old I didn’t know what was scarier—Mama’s lifeless body or Daddy’s lifeless eyes.

I don’t know if it was my small fists banging on his legs, or the tears that soaked his pants, but he suddenly dropped to his knees. His brown eyes glistened with a wetness that left me cold even though the sun warmed my skin. He looked at me, and he *saw* me. He choked on a breath as if he were coming back to life.

He took the penny from my fingers and vowed, “*I promise, Maya. I’m here to stay.*”

I believed him. But I’m not five years old anymore. Twenty-seven years old, mad at the world, mad at God. Mad at Daddy for saddling me with his second wife, Jeanie, who couldn’t

bear to see his casket. So instead of sitting in the pew with his family, she'd run out of the sanctuary and locked herself in the bathroom. After everything Daddy endured for that woman: my family giving him crap for marrying a white woman fifteen years his junior, his so-called friends freezing him out because they didn't think it was *right*. And how had she repaid him? With cowardice.

Sniffles cut through my fog of anger. *Ryder*. My shadow. The only good thing Jeanie had done with her life had been birthing a beautiful and brilliant daughter.

The squeeze from Ryder's hand gave me a sliver of comfort. Though, from the red that inflamed her baby blues, and from the puffy bags under her eyes, she needed comforting, too. I tilted my head on her shoulder and pulled her into a side hug. "We'll be okay," I managed to whisper.

Her arm squeezed my waist. "Promise?" Her voice shaky and desperate, much like my own when I'd asked Daddy the same request. I wanted to give her the world, but I couldn't utter the lie.

But I did stop rubbing the penny. It wasn't lucky after all.

CHAPTER 1

MAYA

ALL BLACK EVERYTHING

Monday morning, March 23rd
15 days since Daddy died

Damn.

I pushed the heavy glass door, lunch bag and empty mug in hand, ready to start back after a brief hiatus from Dickerson, Hill, and Sanders Law Firm.

I wasn't cursing about my return to work, or the fact that I felt just as lost as I had two weeks ago when Daddy died. No, I cursed because I wasn't ready for well-wishes.

Or fake wishes.

Marc Sanders, one of the owners and a partner, would be authentic. David Nero, a fellow staff attorney and my nemesis, would give me fake sympathy. But I was an adult and a Donaldson. We didn't run away from difficulty, we conquered it. So, I marched into the breakroom, my pink, four-point-seven-two-inch Louboutins clicking against the tile announcing my arrival. Marc stopped mid-conversation with David, giving him the universal "hold up" finger. David pressed his lips together, likely very annoyed at my noisy entrance that took time away from his precious mentor.

My pace brisk, I strode over and opened the door to the fridge and then placed my lunch inside. “Gentlemen.” I nodded and moved a few steps over to the coffee machine.

“Heeyyy, Maya.” Marc’s firm grip grasped my shoulder as I waited for the coffee to drip. “How’re you holding up?”

I fixed my lips into a not-too-happy yet not-too-sad smile and then turned around. “I’m okay.”

“Your father will be missed.” His brown eyes drooped a bit at the corners. “Did I ever tell you he helped me get my first client?”

I shook my head, though he’d told me a few times already. It made people happy to share memories of Daddy.

I let Marc ramble on while I tried to anchor myself to his words, attempting to hold back the tidal wave of grief that threatened to consume and carry me away.

Breathe. Focus. Smile. Nod.

“Here I was, thinking I’m a hotshot with my brand-spanking-new law degree, and just like that”—Marc snapped his fingers—“I thought I could take over this small town. I strutted around, giving out my cards, wearing a full suit and sporting a heavy Jersey accent. No one, I mean, NO ONE”—he waved a hand—“would touch me with a ten-foot pole. Then I get *really* desperate and start hanging out at the courthouse. Judge Joe takes me to the side, tells me that instead of walking around like my shit don’t stink, I needed to look people in the eye when I talked to them. After that, well . . .” He waved his hand again. “Proof’s in the pudding. Judge Joe . . .” Marc sighed. “He was a hell of a guy.”

Everyone loved Dad. The brilliant attorney turned judge had a heart of gold. Instead of sending screw-up kids to jail, he’d allowed the offenders to invest in the community. Although he’d had a soft spot and granted second chances, Daddy wasn’t a pushover. The repeat offenders found that out with the loud clack of his gavel and a prison sentence.

Marc stuffed his hands into his pockets and bobbed his head. He did this every time he was winding up or ramping down a closing argument or a conversation.

Say something before it gets sad and awkward.

The last of my coffee dripped into my favorite mug that stated: I LIKE MY COFFEE BLACK, LIKE MY SOUL. I grabbed my cup and then leaned against the counter. "I'm truly grateful for the meal vouchers. I hadn't had a chance to mail out thank-you cards, and I—"

"Of course, you haven't."

"But I—"

Marc waved away my fake protest. "I'm sure you have a million and one things to do. When my mother, God rest her soul, passed on, I barely had time to come up for air. I know you have a lot of people cooking for you right now. When things settle, and you need a break, use the vouchers."

David cleared his throat as if I needed a reminder of his slimy presence. He stood right beside Marc, nodding at everything Marc had said to me about Daddy.

David, an all-star pro at the art of bullshitting, attended every networking event. If the owners went golfing, he'd worm his way into an invite. And it worked for him. He got awarded the big cases that would earn big dollars, and the ones that were so slam dunk you'd have to be fresh out of law school to lose.

"If you're too busy for work, I'm happy to chip in. I've made great strides with Mrs. Stevenson, and I'm happy to take it to trial while you . . . grieve." David's tone left a Sweet'N Low aftertaste in my mouth.

Hell no, you cannot steal my case.

"Thank you for the offer, David, but that won't be necessary." I puppeteered a smile.

Another partner, Roland Hill, strode into the kitchen. My

pulse raced at NASCAR speeds. I cleared my throat and returned my attention to David.

“Are you sure, Maya?” David’s unibrow lifted in solidarity.

“Very. I’ve been looking at your notes, tightening up a few things. I’ll take the interviews from here. Thanks for the research, but Mrs. Stevenson seemed excited to have me back onboard.”

Marc nodded. “Tell me about it. She kept asking for you and wanted your address to send flowers and food. You’ve got the magic touch with her, for sure.”

“Thanks, Marc.”

The case had initially been assigned to David. Six months ago, the widow had been a wreck when she first came to the firm and could barely get out a word without breaking down.

Back then, David stomped out of the meeting room into the cafeteria where many of us had been eating lunch. “I can’t understand a damn thing she’s saying, other than ‘Dan’s dead.’ Anyway, I’ve got the Billings case that’s going to trial next week. Can someone else take her?”

Katy, our paralegal, smiled and said, “Maya, your case just wrapped up today, didn’t it?”

I already had three or four more cases than all other junior attorneys, but since I was put on the spot by Thing 1 and Katy, Thing 2, I said yes. Besides, I hated it when clients were dismissed because they were emotional.

After our consultation, I’d discovered that her case had the potential to bring in major money, seeing as her husband was killed in a tractor trailer accident.

I worked with Mrs. Stevenson and nursed her back to emotional health. After a few meetings she laughed and smiled again.

All that to say, hell, fuck no, David wouldn’t be taking over my case. Not to mention, a successful win for this case would damn near solidify my spot as a partner.

I mustered up another smile. *Mouth open, check. Teeth on display. Double check.* “Thank you again for your research. You really shine in that area.”

David narrowed his eyes, knowing I’d relegated him to a research assistant, not a trial attorney.

“Glad to see you both working together.” Marc patted David’s back. “And Maya, it’s good to have you back. The team meetings have been boring without your spirited debates.”

I gave him a smile, a real one this time, and saluted him with my coffee. “I’m a Donaldson. We always have something colorful to add.”

After I stepped into my office, I did my usual routine: boot laptop, sip coffee, and kick off shoes. I put my cell on silent and pushed it to the edge of my desk.

Now what?

My take-on-the-world attitude disappeared.

I plopped my mug on the desk and pushed my feet against the floor, swiveling my chair around. Every time it stopped moving, I pushed myself off, again and again, twirling around like I had all the time in the world.

A sliver of silver caught my attention. I didn’t need to look at the picture in the frame, my mind’s eye clearly recalled the image: me and Daddy at my law school graduation.

Me with a big smile, all teeth and a little gum and my eyes so squinty they looked closed. Daddy’s long arms wrapped around my shoulders while he kissed my cheek. His attention was focused on me. I don’t think he was aware of the camera.

Daddy had been wistful that day with broad smiles and bear hugs.

“I’m so proud of you, Baby Girl. Your mama would’ve been proud of you, too, graduating at the top of your class.” Dad stepped back, pride etched on his chestnut-brown face. “Mark my words, you’re going to change the world.”

On our way home from the ceremony, I’d asked Daddy to

stop by Mama's grave. On special milestones, Daddy and I left her flowers. I always thanked her for giving me life. But, when Jeanie's mouth began to tremble and her face turned tomato red, he brushed me off.

"It's been a long day, Baby Girl. Let's go later. Just the two of us."

We never went to share my news. *We never will.* A mass of pain sat over my left eye where it made camp over the past two weeks. Anytime I thought of Daddy it thumped like a bass drum. Thoughts of Daddy were convoluted: grief, then anger, chased by guilt. "Not here." I pressed my fingers against my eyelids. "Not now."

Both my parents were gone. Mama had been reduced to mental snapshots of braiding my hair, bedtime stories and singing in the choir. Memories of Mama were fond but fading.

Memories of Daddy were torture.

Nausea slammed into my stomach, threatening to propel two ounces of coffee and two tons of agony. My mind whirred, never focusing on one thing but skipping like a scratched record.

His easy smile falling off when he realized he'd burned our toast.

Daddy casting a fishing rod in the lake while he stumbled through the birds-and-the-bees talk, attempting to keep it scientific until he got frustrated and said, "*Boys only want one thing.*"

I hooked the creepy crawler and slid it down the hook. I smiled a little. I didn't shriek or cry like I did last time. Daddy said I needed to be tough because the world was hard. "What's the thing boys want, Daddy?"

"To feel you up and let you down."

I shook my head. "Can you really say all boys, because you said to never generalize a group—"

"Yes. All of them." He nodded once and told me to be quiet and bait my line.

"Bored already?"

I dropped my feet to the ground to stop the spinning and focused on the familiar voice.

I swallowed and licked my lips. "Mr. Hill."

"Miss Donaldson." His brown, almond-shaped eyes roved over me, sending electric zings down my body.

Mr. Tall, Dark and Handsome, as one of the paralegals called him, shot me a killer smile, biting down on one corner of his lips. He was usually clean-shaven but in the past few months he'd grown a beard. I wasn't a fan of beards, but the look worked for him. His impressive gray suit covered even more impressive muscles. His shoulders were so broad I wondered if he lifted boulders instead of hundred-pound weights.

I squirmed in my seat, and his eyes ignited. He knew damn well what he was doing.

Refraining from rolling my eyes, I crossed my arms and cleared my throat.

"Can I help you, Mr. Hill?" *And knock on the damn door next time.*

He was a partner at the firm and technically my boss, but I didn't report to him. Regardless, he knew I preferred he knock before entering.

"No, I don't need anything. I'm checking in on you. It's your first day back, you have some major cases underway, and I figured—"

"You figured I couldn't handle it, Mr. Hill."

"Maya." His tone compassionate yet reproving. He knew I knew better.

I dropped my head and averted my gaze.

"You can talk to me, you know."

"I know." I swallowed, my throat drier than sandpaper.

“B-but if I do . . .” I swallowed again, but this time I looked up, taking in a deep breath—an attempt to remove the quiver from my voice. “I need to work,” I whispered. “I need to be around people.” I sniffed before the tears crawled up my throat.

He nodded. “I figured the first day back would be rough for you. And I know how you love caramel macchiatos.” He brought around the hand he’d been keeping behind his back and revealed a cup from the only Starbucks that was clear across town.

I leaned forward, hand outstretched. “Skim milk?”

“And no whip. I’m not some amateur.” He gave me the hot beverage.

I took a deep breath and accepted the offering. “Thank you, Roland.”

“You’re always welcome, Maya.” His eyes lit and dancing with a secret he was dying to tell.

I grabbed a file from the corner of my desk. “I really am ready to work now.” I smiled. “Thanks.”

He nodded, shooting me another hot look. Just before he turned to leave, he paused at the door. “I’ll be seeing you, Maya.”

“Yes.” I gave him a wobbly smile. “I suspect you will.”

His mouth quirked at the corners. He turned and left my office.

I sipped the hot beverage. My spirits had lifted, but I still couldn’t focus.

Thrumming my fingers, my eyes drifted back to the very thing I tried to avoid, my phone.

“Don’t do it,” I chided myself.

But I needed to hear Daddy’s voice. The last voicemail he left before he died.

“Screw it.” Leaning over, I grabbed my phone and punched in the code for voicemail.

“Hey, Baby Girl. I know you’re working late. I saw the oil light blinking so I’m going to pick up your car and swing it by Tony’s shop.” A deep sigh rattled my receiver. “Okay, that’s not the real reason I called you. I’ve been thinking about our talk on the lake. I was wrong for what I said. I think you’ll make a great partner. I was just mad because I always thought you’d want to start a firm with your old man. But Marc’s a good guy—not as good as me—but he knows what he’s doing. So, go for partner. Just know that you’ll have to work twice as hard to get it. Keep a cool head at all times and don’t let ’em see you sweat. Okay, we’ll talk more this Sunday. Bye, Baby Girl. Oh, wait, one more thing. Do me a favor and swing by Aunt Clara Bell’s before you come over on Sunday. She’s making banana pudding.” He lowered his voice. “Don’t want Jeanie to get all worked up about it.”

I put my phone down and squeezed my eyes shut. I could recite the message by now, but the jab of pain never lessened. After hearing Daddy’s voice, pure joy filled my center. Warm and soothing, like hot tea and honey.

Just as quickly as joy arrived, pain took over, hitting me like a one-two punch. I didn’t want to get up. I wanted to sit there and bleed. Maybe catch my breath after the gut punch.

But Daddy wouldn’t want that.

Tears rushed to the surface. I squeezed my eyelids tight, my breath coming out in pants. My eyes flew open and it felt as if a wet, hazy filter blurred my vision. With the side of my fingers, I dashed tears away and reinforced the dam that threatened to break free and flood me.

“I won’t let you down, Daddy. I’ll make partner.”

*Monday evening, March 23rd
15 days*

The day had passed, and the sun had begun its descent. I pushed away from my desk, massaging my eyes. Thankfully, I

was nearly caught up on Mrs. Stevenson's case. Although David had done an excellent job the few weeks I was away, his notes hadn't been easy to decipher.

The man wanted me to come to him and ask a bunch of questions. And with his office located squarely between two partners at the firm, they would witness my multiple walks of shame had I not been determined to figure out things on my own. If I called him, he would've put me on speaker and if I emailed, he would've copied our bosses in his reply. I knew this because he'd done it before—make me look inept while he got all the glory.

I didn't let it slide. I took my complaints to Roland, the youngest and most approachable partner, not to mention David's boss. Roland thanked me and told me he'd resolve it. I don't know what Roland said to David, but ever since, David was more careful in how he spoke to me in front of the partners.

Still, I'd been burned. And now I'd take my evenings to catch up rather than ask that snake for help. Besides, I had no plans and work kept depression at bay.

After packing up my briefcase, I set off for home. Tonight, I'd catch up on my other two cases while binge-watching bad reality TV. Most people would assume that I only watched *Law & Order* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, but after hours of scouring legalese, my mind needed a break. *Big Brother* had been my latest guilty pleasure and I'd mastered the art of listening while working.

After my short trip home to my apartment, I showered and ordered Chinese food.

"Cookies. I need cookies." Decision made, I pulled ingredients from my pantry: flour, old-fashioned oats, brown sugar, and raisins.

The doorbell rang. I glanced at my watch. "That was quick." I'd just ordered the food fifteen minutes ago. The bell rang

again. "Coming, coming." I grabbed my wallet, rushed to the entrance and yanked open the door.

Instead of my usual pimply-faced, teenage guy, Roland leaned against the doorframe. The three-piece suit he'd worn earlier had been replaced by a denim shirt. A liberal number of buttons were undone to reveal his hard chest.

"Rola—" Before I could finish his name, he rushed me, cupped my jaw, pressed me into the wall, and kissed me senseless. The door slammed behind us. He lifted me in the air, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, kissing him with equal intensity. Somehow, he walked us to the couch. I pushed myself up and arched my back while he stared down at me as if I were a dream. His dream.

My breath stalled in my lungs. I was equally pleased and dismayed. I needed to focus on making partner, not being his dream girl.

This thing, this attraction we had for each other, wasn't a relationship. It was a long-standing booty call. Yes, a little over a year ago we mutually decided to make our booty calls exclusive with occasional trips out of town. But one of us would stop it when the time was right. Most likely, me.

I cleared my throat, my chest now heaving under his intense gaze. "What are you doing here?"

"I needed to see you."

"But it's Monday."

He shrugged. "I needed to see you. I think our seeing each other only on Tuesdays and Saturdays is a stupid rule, anyway." He lowered himself beside me, reached for the remote and muted the television. "How're you holding up?" His thumb grazed my lips. I shivered from his warm touch.

"Some days are better than others." I pushed him off and scooted away. "The caramel macchiato helped."

He hooked his leg around mine and pulled me closer to face

him, all the while giving me the infamous Roland Hill look. The one he used to cross-examine witnesses, eyes narrowed, lips pinched, and head tilted. The subtle, yet stern look that forced a person to confess all. I was usually immune, but today it worked on me.

“Okay, I’m a hot mess. Jeanie, my daddy’s wife, is stumbling around like a zombie. And something is off with Ryder. She’s hiding something from me. Whenever I call, she’s in a rush to get off the phone.”

Roland massaged my shoulders. “People deal with grief differently. Maybe you remind her of your father?”

I shook my head and leaned against his chest. “No, I don’t think that’s it. The girl has been my shadow since she was three years old and they moved in with us. We usually talk every day. No.” I shook my head again. “Something’s up. But I’ll see them for the reading of the will on Thursday.”

Maybe I shouldn’t wait until then, I thought. I could pop by unannounced. Like lover boy here. We had rules of engagement, and for the most part, we stuck to them. Rule number one, never go to his house. It was a rule I created because his neighbor is the father of the biggest gossip in our office: Katy, our paralegal. She didn’t live with her parents but was at her parents’ house often enough to know Roland’s comings and goings. Not to mention she had the hots for him. One word whispered about our affair could mean the end of my chances to make partner.

Although fraternizing was technically allowed, it was generally frowned upon. Not to mention generally women tend to not come out on top when affairs are discovered.

Roland would get a slap on the wrist and a high five when no one was looking.

I would either be frozen out by my coworkers or blocked from any real promotions or exciting cases until I got the hint

and resigned. The very same situation happened to a friend of mine from law school. I'd be damned if my career got iced because I couldn't control my hormones.

Roland rubbed my arms. "Why is it so cold in here?"

"No idea." No matter how many times I set my thermometer to seventy-five degrees, lately it seemed like it reset to fifty degrees.

"I'll check your thermostat." He stood and went to the wall that led to the kitchen.

"You know . . . my daddy used to say if you don't pay the bills, don't mess with the temperature."

"Mhmmm." Roland tapped on the gauge. "You need to call the management company. It says it's on seventy-five, but it feels like it's below freezing. You want me to call them?"

"Umm . . . no thanks." I snorted and shook my head.

Instead of coming back to the sofa, Roland scanned the ingredients on the island in my kitchen.

He picked up the bag of raisins. "Are you making me oatmeal-and-raisin cookies?"

"I'm baking, yes."

"For me?"

"For . . . for people." I licked my lips.

"You know oatmeal and raisins are my favorite."

"Really?" I shrugged. "Didn't know. Happy coincidence."

He chuckled, leaning against the counter. "You hate raisins."

I did, but how did he know? "Says who?"

"You pick the damn things out of the cookies, Princess."

"Ryder likes oatmeal-and-raisin cookies, too."

"Uh-huh," he said as he sat at the round breakfast table in my kitchen. Manilla folders, legal pads, and my iPad were scattered across the tabletop.

"Bringing work home?" He flipped through cases and I let him. Sometimes when one of us needed help with strategy, we

bounced ideas off each other. He was brilliant, and though I didn't like asking for help, I did my best for my clients.

I shrugged. "Not exactly. I fell behind on some of our pro bonos."

"Sanjeeta Bahati?"

"She was passed over for a promotion. Boss straight up told her he didn't like her kind . . . Muslims. And he's been reprimanded in the past for saying some racist-ass comments."

"Any witnesses willing to go on record?" Roland asked, flipping through papers.

"I've got one brave soul."

"Still, it's going to be tough."

Roland knew the deal. It would seem like it would be a slam dunk, but companies, big and small, tended to put their heads in the sand. They only paid attention if they got bad press or found themselves in the middle of a social media war.

"It's a good thing she documented her clients' and peers' feedback," he added. "Otherwise it would be harder to prove."

"I've got a few more aces up my sleeve. He's an asshole: cheats on his wife, hits his kids. I'm going to see if we can add that to the discovery to question his character. And I'm going to slide his wife my business card and resources for a shelter while I'm at it."

"You always find a way, Warrior Princess."

"I can't change hearts, but I can make 'em pay." I rubbed my fingers together. The world was full of selfish, opportunistic assholes. Once, I had a guy who'd paid an old friend a shitload of money to seduce his soon-to-be ex-wife so he could get out of paying alimony. I knew people who orchestrated car accidents to get money from insurance companies. And sometimes people were just plain dumb. Someone had even called me to ask if they could sue a frozen food giant because they got a bad case of gas.

So, when a good person—a person who actually needs help—gets screwed, I'm all up in that ass. I especially take joy in going after insurance companies.

My phone vibrated on the table. I recognized the number from the gate and buzzed the visitor in. Which reminded me that I hadn't buzzed Roland in.

"Who's that?"

"Chinese food. And how did you get past the gate without me buzzing you in? As a matter of fact, you rarely call me from the gate when you're here." The luxury apartment complex had decent security. We usually had a guard on duty and, if not, a gate system. Daddy had made sure of it before I moved out of the house after I returned home from law school.

"I know your security guy, Stan the man."

"Stan the man?"

"Yep, his name is Stan and I call him 'the man.' Ever since then, he just buzzes me in. Tonight, I followed behind another vehicle."

"Jesus."

"So Chinese food, huh? I could eat."

"I only ordered enough for myself." It was a lie. I always ordered enough for two meals, but he needed to learn that popping by was not okay. Giving him food would be like giving tuna to a stray cat.

"Fine." He gave me a slow smile while reaching for his phone. "I'll just order something from Lenny's diner. They deliver, and hey, I'm sure Sheila, your aunt's friend, won't notice my name and the fact that the order's being delivered to your apartment." He typed a few numbers, but before he could press the button to call, I grabbed his cell.

"Fine. I can spare you some food. But next time, call me first." I tossed the phone back to him.

“Deal, Princess.” He gathered me close in his lap. “But after we eat, I want my dessert.”

Thursday evening, March 26th
18 days

Dell McManus—or, as I called him, Father Time—was stooped over his desk. His liver-spotted fingers gripped a quill—kidding—a pen as he quickly scratched something on unlined paper.

The quirky old man was my father’s mentor, and I’d known him all my life. He was intelligent, kind, and it was hard to see him without my father by his side, slapping his shoulder and laughing at something he’d said.

Daddy’s gone. He’s really gone. From a damn heart attack. The man loved his cigars and brandy and sure, he went to town on my Aunt Clara Bell’s infamous soul food Sundays, but otherwise, he was fit.

A few months ago, while he was alive, you couldn’t pay me to admit that the man drove the ladies around town crazy. With his salt-and-pepper goatee and good looks, he could’ve been a ladies’ man. Hell, I’d much prefer he had been than settle for Jeanie’s woe-is-me-ass.

Dell put his pen down then stood. He walked from behind his desk and gave me a bear hug. “Hey, Tootsie Pop,” Dell greeted me with the nickname he’d given me as a child. He said I was all hard on the outside, but on the inside, sweet as candy.

“Are you ready for this?” He guided me to the couch, pushed against the wall, and settled beside me.

“Heck, no.” I shook my head.

“Me, either. When I drafted your father’s will nearly a decade ago, I thought my younger partner would execute it. Not me.” He took a deep breath. “But a deal’s a deal. And I’m

going to follow his words to the T." He flicked my nose. "You want a Jolly Rancher?" He pointed to his candy jar on the corner of his desk.

"No. I'd much prefer a scotch."

"And you shall have it." He got up, went to a cabinet behind his desk, and poured me a hefty portion.

"How's your heart? You've been taking your pills?"

He tapped his chest. "The old ticker's doing fine."

"Have you been keeping up with your appointments?" I took a sip. The alcohol stung my tongue.

"Mhmm."

"Really? Because I spoke to Tina on my way in and she said you missed your last two. Don't make me come to your appointments." I could hear the nag in my voice, but I couldn't help myself. I had a gooey spot for Dell. Not to mention Daddy's sudden heart attack shook me.

"Dell," Tina, his paralegal's disembodied voice boomed over the intercom. "Mrs. Donaldson just arrived."

"Send her to my office, please." His voice went tight.

"Is it going to be that bad?" I took another sip, fortifying myself for the will and for Jeanie's river of tears.

"Sharing someone's last wishes is never easy." He poured himself a drink and then settled into his black leather chair behind his desk.

"If you don't mind, I'll take a glass, too," a soft voice said behind me. I knew who the voice belonged to without turning around. The woman who'd taken my mother's place in my father's heart.

She was like hand-spun glass and antique teacups. You breathe too hard, and she'd fall apart. Daddy ate it up. He loved being someone's savior.

If the woman sneezed too hard, Dad scooped her in his arms and became a human handkerchief.

I remembered the day she moved in, plastic bags and suitcases. Strolling around the house, she made plans for “sprucing up” the decorations my mother, Renee, had done.

Getting rid of the picture of me, Mama, and Daddy, in the living room hit me like a shot to the heart.

Hell, she’d tried to move the urn from the front room, but I had a hissy fit. Daddy just sat there, a besotted look on his face, and let her get away with everything.

He never asked how I felt about Jeanie. How it felt to be ignored when she was around. How he’d abandoned the memory of my mother.

I had no love for Jeanie, and I knew she didn’t love me either. She’d never tried.

But I couldn’t help but feel something for the woman in front of me. She was delicate, yes, but she wasn’t her typical glossed-up self.

A run in her stockings, flat shoes. No makeup and her usual golden-brown mane pulled into a messy bun.

There was no denying there had been stars in her eyes whenever Daddy was around, but I always wondered which aspect she loved most in Joseph Lee Donaldson: the man or the provider?

Something pricked my conscience. I clenched my hands before I could reach out and . . . I don’t know what.

“Maya.” Jeanie clutched a small purse and sat beside me. After she settled in her seat, she reached for the scotch Dell offered and slugged it down in one gulp.

“S-smooth,” she hissed and pressed the back of her hand against her lips. With her other hand she gave him back the empty glass. “Another, please.”

“I . . .” Dell looked at me, a helpless expression on his face.

I shrugged. Jeanie was an adult. She could make her own decisions.

While Dell poured her another round, a distinctly smaller portion, I asked, "What's with all the pomp and circumstance? We could've done this at the house. Or you could've just sent it over to us for review."

"With Ryder at the house, I thought it would be better to read it in the office." He looked down at a blue folder and took a deep breath. "Let's get started."

I gave him a nod. Jeanie gave him the same confirmation.

"I, Joseph Lee Donaldson, residing at Eighty-seven Meadow Ridge Lane, Hope Springs, Georgia, declare this to be my Will and I revoke any and all wills and codicils I previously made."

Dell bounced along with legal jargon. Daddy gave Ryder his car. Left all of us money, giving me the lion's share. Some old watch that he loved but never wore. Nothing too crazy until . . .

"I give my residence, subject to any mortgages or encumbrances thereon, and all policies and proceeds of insurance covering such property to my daughter, Maya." Dell glanced away from the will and zeroed in on me. "I will also allow my wife, Jeanie, to live in the house as long as she sees fit."

As long as she sees fit.

"What. In. The. Hell?" He wants her to live in the house. My house. Forever? Oh, hell no, Dell."

"Now, young lady, I need you to calm down."

Jeanie trembled beside me, melting like wet tissue.

Oh hell. Here comes the crying jag.

"Joseph!" she wailed. She covered her mouth, bending over until her knuckles touched her lap.

"You're telling *me* to calm down?" I pointed to my chest and jerked my head to Jeanie.

"Yes. Can't you see she's upset?"

Like I give a damn. I stretched my hand out. "Can I see the will?"

Dell nodded and handed me the documents.

“I mean . . . I’m fine with Jeanie staying until Ryder graduates, of course. Are you sure this is what Daddy meant?”

“Yes.” Dell tapped his desk. “I’ve read everything of importance.”

My hands shook around the thick stack of papers. How could he? He knew Jeanie and I didn’t get along.

What was he thinking?

That he would live forever. I knew Dad. The heart attack had been sudden. He thought I would’ve moved on, barefoot and married before he died.

Now he’ll never meet his grandchildren. If I have them.

I pressed my hands against my temples. Mama and Daddy built the house for *our* family—not for Wilting-Flower Barbie.

I shook my head. “This is not acceptable.”

“Fine,” Jeanie whispered beside me. Her brown eyes stark against her pale skin, she dabbed her face with a crisp handkerchief with my father’s initials. “I’ll just pack my things and leave. I have enough in my savings to get something appropriate for me and Ryder.”

Ryder.

Her name was like a bucket of freezing water doused on my head. “No, it’s . . . we’ll figure something out.”

I wouldn’t kick Ryder out, but once she graduated, Jeanie had to get the hell out. With my father gone, she had no business staying in my mother’s house.

She turned to face Dell. “I’m happy to forfeit my right to stay there after Ryder graduates from high school. She plans on going to Emory anyway, so just as soon as she’s gone . . .” Her voice went hoarse and shaky. “Then I’ll be gone. Maybe I’ll move to Atlanta with her.”

Dell shook his head. “Don’t make a decision right now. Why don’t both of you sleep on this?”

Jeanie nodded like one of those Atlanta Falcon bobbleheads in Daddy's office. "I'm tired." She grabbed her forehead, her eyes squeezed shut. She whispered, "Is there anything else to discuss?"

"No." Dell shook his head, his jowls flapping with the motion.

"Very well." She nodded and left the office without a goodbye.

I sat rooted in my chair. Dell jerked his head toward the door. "Close it, will you?"

I leaned over and tipped it shut.

"Maya, I know you and Jeanie have your differences." He paused, stroking his chin like I'd see him do in court. "But this is what your father wanted."

"Why?" I whispered. "It doesn't make sense."

"For what it's worth, Tootsie Pop, I did try to talk him out of this. But he insisted that *if* anything should happen, he wanted to make sure all his girls had a home."

"Dad left her a nest egg and she's only fifty years old. She can go back to work and find her own place. Hell, Ryder will be off to college soon."

"Do you even want to live back home?"

"Like you said, and as Daddy stipulated, it's *my home*. A house my mom and daddy built together, intent on growing a family. Then . . ." I sighed. "It's the only thing . . . the one thing I have from both of them. And I don't understand why Daddy would put in that clause. He just didn't get it." I threw my hands in the air.

The same ole shit but I can't argue with him because he's dead.

Dell leaned back, resting his hands on his stomach. "Tell me why you two never got on."

I shrugged and leaned back into the chair. "We're just oil and water."

“Do you think you would’ve felt that way about anyone your father remarried?”

“No. I’m not that self-absorbed. I just never liked Jeanie.”

And apparently, it’d been since the day I met her. Even as a little girl I saw the hero worship in Jeanie’s eyes. She wanted him, even then. And when Mama died, she slid right in, like it was her due. I couldn’t tell Dell about my instincts. We lawyers focused on facts and logic.

“I just don’t . . . I don’t know if she ever *saw* Daddy, if you know what I mean. Just the power he had and what he provided.”

“Well, that’s not fair. Your father was shrewd. There are things you couldn’t see as a child. Things your father shielded you from. But when your mother died, he grieved. *Deeply*, Tootsie Pop. And Jeanie was there.”

“To take away his pain,” I said with air quotes. “What in the hell did they have in common? There’s a fifteen-year age gap.” Anyone with a brain could tell that Jeanie had a classic case of daddy issues. Not to mention, an old black dude and a young white woman did not go over well in Hope Springs, Georgia. I kept my thoughts to myself. Dell was one of those guys who pretended like he didn’t see color, but hell, he didn’t have to acknowledge color. He was an old rich white man. I loved him, but those were facts.

“Joe wouldn’t want you to contest the will.”

“I won’t.”

“You won’t?”

“No. You heard Jeanie. She’s going to leave after Ryder graduates. I think that’s fair.”

“But—”

“I didn’t force her, okay? You’re a witness. She said she would leave.”

“After your less-than-happy reaction.”

“Look, stop acting like she’s a victim. I didn’t force her. She

volunteered. And she hasn't been the best stepmother in the world. She hates the fact that I am closer than she is with her daughter, and that I was the apple of my father's eye."

"So, she's jealous?" he asked, curiosity in his voice. He seemed to be thinking about it.

I didn't have to think about it because her feelings were on the surface. The evidence lived in her actions and comments. Her passive-aggressive remarks about the way that I wore my hair. She called it *those braids*. She nearly had a heart attack when Ryder tried to copy me.

And when Daddy and I debated the outcomes of hotly covered cases in the media, she would get this sour look on her face and walk away. She was another person who didn't believe that people were racist. It was as if she didn't notice the blatant stares she received when she and Dad went out on dates or the nasty whispers from her little church friends or the parents at Ryder's school.

"Well," Dell sighed. "Let's just hope she doesn't change her mind."

I stood, leaned over, and gave him a kiss while *Hamilton's* "Ten Duel Commandments" played in my head. "Then she'll have a battle on her hands. And I never lose."

CHAPTER 2

RYDER

NEW NORMAL

Monday morning, March 30th
22 days

I snuck into Mom and Dad’s room and did the same routine I’d been doing for three weeks: collecting cups, dirty plates, used Kleenex, and whatever bottle Mom had downed from the night before.

I didn’t need to check if she was breathing—her snores sounded like we were going through a wind tunnel. Still, I crept over to the bed and watched her chest rise and fall. With her hair spread over the pillow, she looked like a Disney Princess. But Disney princesses didn’t go on drunken tirades, cry uncontrollably, or say nasty things to their daughters.

She doesn’t mean it. She can’t help it.

I left bottled water and two aspirins on her nightstand. Every morning she woke up with a huge migraine and a dry throat.

But I wouldn’t be here to make sure she took her water and pills. Today was my first day back to school since he died.

I wanted to stay at home, but Maya wouldn’t let me. “You know education was important to Daddy.”

The thought of going back to school made my stomach teeter-totter with Mrs. Robertson's lasagna. My being at home was the only reason why Mom stumbled out of bed.

I couldn't tell Maya. It'd be another reason she and Mom would never get along. Besides, Mom's drinking wasn't permanent.

By the time I made it to Whitfield Academy, Mom was still heavy on my mind. But she'd have to suck it up and move on, just like me. Just like Maya. Just like everyone who loved Dad.

I shuffled down the hallway to homeroom. Funny, nothing had changed. The black and white checkered floors were still spotless. Mr. Blue, the custodian with hair that looked like clouds, waved as he buffed the already gleaming red lockers.

Banners decorated the halls. Pictures of famous alumni hung at the end of the hallway. Not Beyoncé famous. Famous in Hope Springs meant you owned a restaurant or served on the board of something.

Scents of florals and citrus filled the hallways—a combination of cleaning products and fresheners.

Everything was the same and as it should be.

I was not.

Dad was a good man, a wise man. A man who taught me the meaning of love—unconditional love. I thought about that a lot. He was the only father I had ever known. My biological father, Ricky, had been in and out of my life. I loved him but not the way I loved Dad.

Dad read me bedtime stories (and did all the different voices; Mom's voices all sounded the same) and tucked me in at night. If I had a nightmare, he'd be the first one in my room, ready to battle every monster hiding in my closet or under my bed. He was always there for me, his presence larger than life. And he gave me a sister—the best big sister in the world. She always let me into her room when I was little. She never got mad when I followed her around the house.

I rounded the corner and paused before I entered homeroom. I could hear voices through the door. The other students weren't unusually loud; Mrs. Donovan would not tolerate it, but their voices pounded on my ears like the thud of dirt on a coffin.

I pushed open the door. The chatter stalled, replaced by whispers and open-wide stares. Usually, I would've marched straight to my desk, put my headphones in, and listened to one of my podcasts.

But my feet were stuck in cement.

My attention swung to my desk. Notes and cards had been neatly stacked with a yellow ribbon tied around the pile.

My mouth popped open, and I couldn't breathe. I probably looked like one of those dead fish Dad and Maya brought home every Sunday from the lake.

"Ms. Bennett," my homeroom teacher said in a soft voice. Somehow, she stood next to me. A few seconds ago, I could've sworn she sat at her desk.

"Are you okay?" She placed a hand on my back.

The words wouldn't come to me. My head saved me with a nod.

"Judge Joe was a good man. You have my condolences." She rubbed my back.

My head did the nod thing again. My legs unlocked, and I walked to my desk.

My classmates stared. My cheeks blazed.

"Sorry for your loss," Josh Green whispered behind me, his breath hot on my neck.

I turned and smiled, then put on my headphones. I didn't want to hear it.

I didn't need this attention. I was never popular. And I never wanted to be. I didn't get teenagers, to be honest. What did we have to be upset about? Most of us, especially at my

school, had a two-parent household, food in our bellies, and a more-than-adequate roof over our heads. We didn't have bills. We were just expected to go to school, learn, and be respectful. Big friggin' deal.

After homeroom period ended, the day sped by with sad looks from teachers and whispers from students. It was exhausting, pretending to be okay. By the time AP English, the last class for the day, rolled around, I was ready to go home.

I settled in the seat and removed my headphones. A few other students were settled at their desks. The bell had another few minutes until it rang, but like always, I arrived early to class.

Mrs. Frierson whisked from behind her desk and stood in front of mine. "I am so very sorry for your loss." She had the most beautiful green eyes, speckled with brown. They seemed to see straight through the soul. "Grieving is never easy. Here." She gave me a small book.

"The Sun and Her Flowers," I read the title out loud.

Mrs. Frierson nodded; her springy red curls bounced. "Something to read during this difficult time. Let me know what you think." She leaned down to give me a hug and floated back to her desk like a fairy caught at dusk.

"You're that poetry girl, right?" Dani Jones, the most popular guy at school, asked me. He settled in the desk beside me. Weird—it wasn't his assigned spot.

I smiled and tucked my hair behind my ear. He didn't say sorry or ask how Dad had died. He identified me with something I did.

I liked that he didn't ask intrusive questions, but I didn't like Dani. I didn't like that he introduced himself to other people as Dani with an "I." Who does that? And besides that, what was wrong with good ole-fashioned Danny—two N's and a Y?

Beyond his name, Dani was a ne'er-do-well, as Dad would

say. Last year, he asked if he could cheat off my notes. I promptly told him no. He was in advanced classes, which meant he was smart enough to do his own work.

But the worst offense was that he was a liar. He filled up pretty girls' heads with pretty lies and broke their pretty hearts.

No, I did not like Dani-with-an-I, but I liked that he didn't ask about Dad.

"So." He lifted an eyebrow. "You like poems?"

"Yes." I licked my lips. "I like poetry." *Brilliant, Ryder.*

"Cool. Maybe one day you can write something about me."

So long, Dani.

"Maybe." I gave him a tight smile (I was good at them) and turned to face the front. I didn't want to miss today's lecture about Greek mythology. After an hour of dissecting "The Iliad" the bell rang to end class.

I jumped from my seat, ran to the bike rack, and peddled home from school. I should've taken my sweet time. Maybe biked around town, grabbed some froyo, or stayed at Maya's place.

Instead, I went home straight away. The blue and gray drapes that hung on the center window in our sitting room had been drawn.

Actually, all the windows in our home had been covered by blinds and curtains.

I walked to the kitchen at the back of the house.

"Oh, no."

Black construction paper covered the window, up to right around the height of my mother. It was like a DIY-Pinterest project gone wrong. The small table near the window had bits of dried glue stuck to the surface.

The long table in the center of the room was stacked with paper. Scraps of black construction paper littered the floor. I

bent over, scooped them up, and dumped them into the bin.
Why didn't she just use the friggin' shade?

Irritation floated around my head like a pesky fly. I wouldn't let it land. *There is no place for anger.* I closed my eyes and took a deep, fortifying breath, remembering my instructions from the daily meditation I listened to. I opened my eyes again, taking in the piles of massacred paper.

Mom had Dad install custom solar shades. I stomped to the cupboard to find the remote to control the shades.

"Where is it?" I searched the cupboards and the bowl where Dad put our miscellaneous remotes, loose screws, and knick-knacks. No dice. The keys weren't there, either.

Mom's not home!

An army of dancing leprechauns did a Riverdance on my chest. I rushed to the door that led to the garage.

No car. Just a workbench and old paint cans.

Mom shouldn't be driving.

God, Mom.

I couldn't protect Mom if she wouldn't protect herself. I grabbed my cell and scrolled to my favorites. *Maya*. My thumb shook over the button. I should call her. She would fix it.

But Maya plus Mom equals World War III and I'd be a casualty.

Plus, drinking and driving was a pet peeve of hers—mine, too. A drunk driver had killed Maya's friend from law school. Maya would kick Mom to the curb, and then who would protect her?

"I can fix this." I grabbed the step stool. Mom was five foot nine, and I was a few inches shorter. I peeled the paper off the windows, some of which had been glued. Mom abhorred filth. She liked a neat house. She hated crumbs and stains and dirt, and if cleaning were an Olympic sport, she'd be a ten-time

gold medalist and her event would be vacuuming. The sound of the motor soothed her. As a matter of fact, anytime she had to make a big decision or if she was upset, she vacuumed. I'd lost count of how many times I saw perfect lines in the carpet that looked like mowed grass.

So even though Mom had made a mess, I took care to clean the windows the way she would like it, even if she wouldn't notice it now.

One day she'd be back to normal, fussing at me for leaving a glass on the table without a coaster.

I scrubbed the gunk off the window, squeegeed the panes, and then wiped the windows down with a terry cloth. My biceps felt like cooked noodles as I scraped the squeegee from side to side, the squawks and squeaks telling me I'd applied too much pressure.

Pressure. I knew that feeling.

Pressure to keep Mom's breakdown a secret.

Pressure to stay sane while my insides were ripped to shreds.

Pressure to keep up my grades. To make sure Maya and Dad were proud of me.

Even if he wasn't here, I still wanted to make him proud.

"Bunny ear laces, kisses on scraped knees. Words of wisdom near water and fire. Homegrown lessons learned, hard-lived wisdom earned. Father of mine, who isn't mine of blood. But of heart. Father of mine, who is not mine. Be mine. Of heart and mind and soul."

After Maya had left the Father's Day dinner—I think I was nine—I found him alone in his office. Mom made cranberry apple-stuffed pork loin. I remembered because I was so nervous, I wanted to upchuck and every time I swallowed down bile, it tasted of cranberry apple.

"What is it, Little One?" He waved to the seat in front of his desk. I shook my head and remained standing, just in case he

thought the poem was amateurish. I could just walk away, maybe cry by the lake or something. He liked my poetry. Maya loved it.

Anyway, I took a deep breath and recited the poem.

He'd given me the best smile. He smiled often, but it was the big one with crinkly eyes, the one dimple on his left cheek and a full set of white teeth. But there was something else there, too. His eyes were misty. Not full-on tears because he didn't really cry, but I could tell he felt something.

He walked from around the desk and gave me a hug.

"You are mine, Little One. From the day you were born. You grabbed my finger and made the sweetest sound. And I swore I heard you say Daddy. Blood is blood. We can't control who we're related to. But I chose you, and you chose me."

The soft growls from the engine of Mom's Range Rover cut the memory short.

I had to figure out a way to pull Mom out of the dark, though I didn't know how. She deserved time to grieve. Time to process her feelings. Time to understand what life after Dad meant. It had only been a few weeks, and honestly, I was still sorting myself out, too.

The garage door screeched. Dad used to spray it down with WD-40 every month, and it was time for another spray. I would carry on the tradition now.

A minute later, Mom walked in. "Hey, Chickadee."

I stopped cleaning, taking her in. She wore an oversized brown sweater, skinny jeans, and ballet slippers. She usually wore pumps, pencil skirts, and pearls, because, according to her, classy women wore pearls. Today she wore her hair curly. She usually straightened her hair—she didn't like curls. I loved her curls. It was the one thing I wish I'd inherited from Mom.

I sniffed the air. She didn't smell or look drunk, but she didn't look her best, either.

She dumped her keys on the counter, right by the key hook.

“Why’d you take the paper down?” She moved closer to me, closer to the window, and looked out.

“Why’d you put the paper on the window?” I resumed my side-to-side wipes. “With glue of all things.”

“It’s bright.” She waved at the glass. “Too many windows.”

“Well, then, next time you can pull the shade down.”

“I couldn’t find the . . .” She snapped her fingers. “Don’t tell me . . . Ha! The ree-mote.” She put an emphasis on the E and T.

I held my breath until my chest burned. She was definitely drunk.

I could tell because she took some *My Fair Lady*-type finishing school class when I was little and ever since she’d restrained her twang tighter than a dog on a steel leash.

But when she drank, the twang broke loose and anything with a-e-i-o-u became ayyy-eeey-iiiahhh-owww-yaawl.

“Can’t find anything. Nothing’s been right since . . .” She sighed.

“Then you should’ve kept the shades up, Mom.” My voice went soft as did my irritation.

“Maya probably stole it.”

“Stole what, Mom?”

“The ree-mote. She’s a sneak, you know.” She crossed her arms and rubbed them. “God, it’s freezing in here.”

I took another deep breath. Without Dad to act as a mediator, Maya and Mom were circling each other like the gangs from *West Side Story*.

“No, she didn’t. Maya isn’t like that.”

“She is. She hates us, you know. She’s going to take the house and kick us out.”

“No, she isn’t.”

“Well, not you. But she’s gonna have me livin’ on the streets as soon as you leave. This is my house, too, you know.”

If she says "you know" one more time . . .

Mom had told me about the reading of the will. Maya had agreed to let us stay until I graduated or left the house for good.

"Do you really want to stay in the same house as Maya? What happens when she gets married and raises a family?"

Mom laughed as she stared out the window. "Maya isn't getting married. She's going to be an old miserable hag."

"Mom!" I threw the squeegee in the bucket. Soap suds splashed on the floor. "Stop talking about her like that."

"She changes men more than she changes her clothes."

"Not true. She just hasn't found the right guy yet." And she hadn't. Maya needed an alpha guy. Someone to challenge her, someone who was her intellectual equal, yet a little bit of a bad boy. She hated goody two-shoes and thought good guys were boring. That's one thing we differed on. I loved good guys. Good guys didn't abandon or hurt you. "Maya just hasn't—"

"Maya this, Maya that. Maya, Maya, Maya," Mom said in a high-pitched voice.

"Whatever, Mom." I rolled my eyes. "You're drunk, and I'm not going to argue with you."

"I'm not—" she yelled and then grimaced. She lowered her voice. "I'm not drunk, young lady. I just have a headache." She massaged her temples. "I'm going to bed."

"Fine. Whatever." I dumped the water down the sink, opened the back door, and ran.

I could see Mom staring through the window, waving at me to come back. I turned away, grabbed my bike and helmet and hopped on my bike. I pedaled fast down the road, as if the Grim Reaper tailed me.

My lungs burned. My calves stretched like a rubber band. Still, I pedaled faster, determined to beat my best time. Determined to outrun Mama's grief and callousness.

After arriving at Maya's apartment, I slowed and crept up to the security box and dialed the code to get in. A long beep and then the guardrail lifted.

Stan gave me a chin nod. I waved and rode off, going toward the back of the complex until I spotted Maya's cherry red Lexus Coupe.

I leaned my bike against the brick wall near her door and then knocked. "Maya. Open up. It's me, Ryder." A minute passed by. There was some sort of noise coming from the other side of the door, but I couldn't make it out. It was probably one of those reality shows. She loved *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, though if anyone else found out, she'd deny it. "Probably can't hear me over the TV."

I patted my back pocket for my phone. Nothing but my keyring. "Crap." I smacked my forehead. I ran out so fast I'd forgot my cell. "Maya, I'm coming in." The keys jingled while I sorted through the ring. I opened the door and—

"Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God. Don't . . ." Gasp. "Stoooooop."

All I could see was a firm muscular butt and my sister's legs wrapped around someone's waist.

"My eyes!" I yelled and slapped my hands over my face.

"What the—" a low male voice shouted.

"Ryder? What are you doing here?"

I spun away from the naked couple with my hands still covering my face. Zips and clinks and something else I couldn't make out was being dragged against the carpet. "Umm. I'll just come back later, and umm . . . next time I'll call."

"No, no," Maya said, out of breath. More clinking. "You can turn around now. We're dressed."

I turned.

"And uncover your eyes."

"You sure?"

“Girl, yes.”

I took a deep breath. I shouldn't have. The smell of latex and sweat weighed down the room like a summer heat wave.

I opened my eyes. Maya had two wineglasses in one hand and a bottle of red wine in the other. I walked through the living room and took a seat at the kitchen table. Maya hurried past me and washed out the glasses.

“Roland, huh?” I reached for the orange in the fruit bowl.

Roland was kinda her boss at the law firm. I knew they dated. I'd met him a dozen or so times, but Maya made it seem like it wasn't serious. She hadn't mentioned him for the past few months. “Glad he's still around.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” I heard a deep voice say from behind me. He ruffled my hair.

“Please tell me you washed your hands.” I shuddered and ducked my head.

He chuckled. “You're a germaphobe. Just like your sister.”

I ducked my head again, secretly pleased at any comparison to Maya. Even in a gross situation. “Sorry I crashed the party. It's Monday, and I figured that you'd be free.” Maya and Roland's secret love affair had a strict schedule. Only twice a week. Tuesday and Friday with every other weekend if they decided to go out of town.

“Roland decided to surprise me . . . again.” Maya shot a heated stare at him. Not the hot kind, the scary kind. “Besides, we're done.”

“Are you sure? Because you told him not to stop, but then he stopped. I mean, it wasn't his fault because I kinda barged in and ruined things. So, I can just leave, or maybe I can wait outside until you're done . . . then you won't have to st-st-stoooooop.”

“Jesus Christ. I can't believe she just said that.” Roland leaned forward and laughed into his hands.

“That’s Ryder for ya.” Maya shook her head. She put both hands on her hips. “Roland, you can leave now. Ryder and I need to catch up.”

She turned around and pretended to wash already clean dishes.

“Okay, Princess. I know when I’m not wanted.” Roland wrapped his arms around Maya’s waist and whispered something in her ear. He kissed her neck and she squirmed, but it didn’t seem like she wanted to get away from him.

“Later, Maya.” He walked over to me, then leaned down and kissed my temple. It was kinda sweet and reminded me of Dad.

“Roland. What kind of car do you drive?”

“An Audi.”

“Color, make?”

“Silver, A4. What? You planning to jack me?”

“No. Just . . . if I see your car, I won’t barge in next time.”

“There won’t be a next time,” Maya cut in. “He’s sticking to the schedule. This is the third time in two weeks.”

“Sure, I will. See you tomorrow, Princess.”

“Wait up.” She pulled a Tupperware bowl from the fridge “Here.”

“Chili?”

Maya nodded, looking away as if embarrassed by something.

“You are so in love with me.” He kissed her forehead.

Maya snorted and pulled away. “I don’t want you to starve.”

Roland shut the door, mumbling something under his breath that made him laugh again. I liked that he laughed. Maya needed someone funny in her life, especially now that Dad was gone.

Maya stopped pretending to wash clean dishes. “Are your eyes still bleeding?”

"I'm fine." I waved her off. "Now that the shock's rolled off, I can see the humor. At least he has a nice butt."

"And what do you know about a nice ass?"

"I'm seventeen." I shrugged. "I've seen male butts before."

Okay, I hadn't seen a naked male butt before, but as far as I could tell, it seemed like a nice one to see for my first time.

"Sure, you have." Maya gave me a knowing look and rolled her eyes. She crossed the kitchen and sat in front of me. "Haven't seen you in a while."

I spoke to her once or twice after the funeral, but for the past few weeks, I'd been busy with Mom.

"Sorry." I shrugged. "I figured you needed some time to catch up with work."

"Yeah. I went back last week. I'm fine. How's school?"

"School is school. I've been busy with stuff." My voice trembled. Maya's eyes sharpened, and she went stiff in the shoulders.

"Bullshit. What's going on?"

I couldn't get anything past her, so I opted for the truth. "It's just hard. I'm trying to get the hang of my new normal. You know, life without Dad. It's so weird . . . kids at school are staring at me and saying nice stuff . . ." I shrugged. "I don't like it."

"Has anyone said something mean to you?"

I shook my head. "No. Even Dani-with-an-I said something nice to me."

"That dumb fuck who tried to feel you up?"

"He didn't feel me up. He just wanted to cheat off my paper."

"Like I said . . . the dumb fuck. Anyway, ignore him."

"I will."

"And how's your mother?"

"She's just . . . sad, you know?"

Maya shook her head. “I know. But is she still taking care of you? She can’t be falling apart.”

“No, nothing like that. She doesn’t need to cook because we have so many leftovers. And now I’ll be busy with school stuff, so I don’t really need anything.” The lie fell from my lips to the pit of my stomach. I needed Mom. I needed someone. Maya was dad’s biological daughter. I was just . . . the stepdaughter. Dad never treated me different but sometimes I felt my pain should matter less. “How do you feel?”

“I won’t sugarcoat things. Losing a parent is . . .” Maya shuddered. “It’s heartbreaking and sad, and it sucks. Now that Mom and Dad are gone, I feel like an orphan. Which is crazy, because I’m an adult, right? I should be satisfied that I had Daddy as long as I did.”

“Doesn’t matter if you’re a kid or not. It still sucks.”

Maya tapped the table and nodded. “Yeah, well, Jeanie and I may have our differences, but we are both here for you. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. I know it.”

“Good.” She stood. “Enough of the sad shit. I’ve got a few cases to work on tonight, but we can order takeout and watch TV. Or you can do some writing. I have one of your notebooks in my bedroom.”

Usually, I didn’t mind Maya working while I watched TV or journaled, but what was the use? The words weren’t flowing.

“No.” I shook my head. “I already ate. I should get going.”

“It’s getting dark out. Did you bike or drive? Why am I even asking? You never drive.”

I hated driving. Dad had been taking me out to practice every Sunday. Mom was too nervous to teach me, and Maya had no patience.

“Yeah, I’ll go ahead and get going—”

“No. I’m taking you home. You know these country bumpkins can’t drive to save their asses around here.”

“But—”

“No buts, Ryder. I’m taking you home.” She grabbed her keys from a bowl near the door. “Bring your bike in and come get it later. Let’s go.” She waved at me.

I took a deep breath and sent a quick prayer—*please let Mom be passed out and please, God, don’t let Maya come in.*

CHAPTER 3

JEANIE

RAINY DAYS AND MONDAYS

Monday evening, March 30th
22 days

Sandalwood and tobacco. I rolled over from my side of the bed, grabbed Joseph's pillow and sniffed, inhaling so hard my lungs burned. My nose already knew what my heart refused to acknowledge—my Joseph was fading away.

Joseph died on laundry day. And silly, eager me, I'd already washed his pajamas and undershirts and dropped his slacks and dress shirts off at the cleaners.

Now the only thing I had was this overstuffed king pillow to keep me company, along with his favorite drink. The expensive Cognac had helped me through the first week. It burned at first, but the fire blazing down my throat dried my tears.

They didn't sell Joseph's favorite drink at any of the liquor marts in town. He'd had it delivered every few months, along with specially made cigars. It was the last gift I gave him for Christmas. He lit up when I gave him a simple card and email that detailed his membership. I lit up right along with him.

I liked pleasing him because he'd done so much for me.

Every Christmas and Father's Day and birthday I went a little overboard.

Now I couldn't help wondering if I had a hand in his death. I hated those damn cigars, but I got them for him. The pillow grew damp under my cheeks. My body shook as emotions rolled over me like that boulder from the Indiana Jones movies.

I moved over to the edge of the bed, my hand swinging in the dark until it hit something solid. Something better than medicine.

Larissa, the clerk at the store, said the premixed stuff tasted good. And besides that, I didn't have to go into the kitchen and mix it up.

The alarm buzzed beside my bed. 8:00. "Huh . . . a.m. or p.m.?" The damn thing was smashed in. The screen cracked in a tiny million pieces.

I need to pee.

I skedaddled to the bathroom, pairs of jeans and shoes cluttered the way to the toilet. I fumbled around for the light switch and flicked it up.

After I did my business, I washed my hands and dared a quick look at the mirror, freezing at my reflection. "Oh . . . oh my." Mascara lined the trail of tears down my cheek. My eyes were brown and red. Mostly red. A pinkish crust that looked like a wart sat at the corner of my lips. I wet a cloth and scrubbed my face.

Old makeup gone, I splashed water on my face and smoothed the cool water over my neck. A loose curl dangled between my eyes. I twirled the tangled strand, chancing another look in the mirror. A wide-tooth comb sat on the corner of the vanity. I grabbed it and went to work on my hair, yanking it through until the tangles became waves.

My shoulders relaxed at my new and improved reflection.