

# Chapter 1

At 3 a.m., I finally slid out of our bed.

The moon was bright enough to light up the room. I stood in the living room for a minute. Something was wrong. I could feel it. The light of the moon had nothing to do with my lying awake for hours. I wandered into my husband's office as if that piece of paper had been calling to me the entire night. My hands shook as I picked it up.

"Nooo..." I whispered as I held the flowery paper in my hand. It was a woman's handwriting. Instantly, my eyes began to well up. I read her name and phone number over and over again, then closed my eyes.

My heart started beating faster and faster, my breathing became erratic. I felt my chest tighten. I refused to have another panic attack. I fought it off. I have been through his chicanery too many times.

Imagining my husband wrapped up in yet another woman's arms was not where I'd saw myself at forty-nine.

My lower lip quivered as I set the paper down. When I reached for a handful of tissues, I knocked over the photo of us taken during our 25<sup>th</sup> year together. The heavy ornate silver frame was a gift from Lynnae. She had it engraved, *Dan and Julie Holliday: When forever means forever after.*

I held the frame in my hand for a moment before setting it down. I knew it would have broken Lynnae's heart if I told her. She had been only eighteen when she came into our lives. Ten years later and she's like a daughter to both of us. There was no way I could let her know about my suspicions. When I stepped back, I banged into the gun cabinet. The stainless-steel barrel on my Smith & Wesson handgun shone in the light.

Shaking to the core, I stumbled out of Dan's office and went out the front door. I sat down onto the frozen Welcome Home doormat, my legs on the even colder bluestone patio. I took a deep, shuddering breath, filled my lungs with the cold night air and gasped. Above my shivering body, stars shone as bright as the moon.

I groaned audibly as I looked up at them. *How dare they?* In the distance, a lone coyote yelped.

Another icy shudder racked my body.

The man I built my life with. “Oh, God,” I whispered. “Why? I don’t deserve this.”

Memories flashed before me. Kayaking, hiking, Dan sitting in the canoe waiting for a fish to jump, me reading. Us cooking together every night. Dan holding my hand on movie night. So many memories. All good, until...

“Why?” I cried out into the night.

Realizing my legs were so cold they were numb, I had to crawl back into the house. As I was struggling to pull myself up, I caught sight of my reflection in the entryway mirror – shock. My face was pale, practically blue, and my hair was stuck to my robe. *What am I turning into?* I moaned, “Who is this?”

Tears trailed down my cheeks and I couldn’t stomach looking at myself any longer. I stepped away from my reflection, went into the guest bedroom and took off my frozen robe. Another mirror stood before me, four times the size of the previous. I dropped the robe and my panties on the floor and snatched two blankets from the closet. For a moment, I held the blankets in my arms. Since the day we met, Dan had always told me I personify sexy.

I took one more glance at myself, shook my head and blew out a breath. I was a good-looking woman. A willing lover. Two nights ago, I was on top of Dan, and I thought my head was going to explode from the orgasms. “What is *wrong* with him?”

My eyes began to well up again. I wrapped the blankets around myself, curled up in a corner of the window seat and stared out at the river, trying to gather my thoughts. I rested my forehead against the icy windowpane. Outside, the water was glowing from the moon’s reflection, but I could not stop seeing her name in my mind. *I cannot go through that again.* My suspicions were tearing me apart. I refused to give him the opportunity to call me crazy.

I had to find a way to be strong. Strong enough to what... leave him?

An hour later, my body finally stopped shaking, but my head refused to stop. I thought he was done. How *could* he keep putting me through this?

My God, why? I blew out a long breath as every painful detail came swimming to the surface. In 1977, we had been dating a year when I saw a woman on the back of his motorcycle. Dan swore to me that he was only giving her a ride home. With words and kisses, he *promised*. I believed him, and I thought I would never have to go through that again.

In spite of suspecting him of cheating a few *more* times, in 1989 I finally said yes and married Dan. And for a while we were both happy. But in 1997, I suspected he was having an affair with a woman he had done work for. When I confronted him, he said I was being paranoid. That's when I had my first panic attack. My panic attacks were uncontrollable, devastating, and strong enough to make me pass out. Back then, he was convincing, and I had no proof. But honestly, how many times could I play the fool?

For thirty years, I have racked my mind and heart to know if my suspicions were true or not. I hugged my legs to my chest. Buried my face to my knees. I was sitting in the comfort of our home – the home I designed, yet it felt like I was sitting in the electric chair waiting for him to flip on the current.

In the end, I knew there would be no peace for me. I had no good answer as to why I stayed with a man I suspected had no self-control. Over the years, my separation anxiety would not allow me to walk away. As many times as I tried to be strong and independent, I'd failed. I couldn't even go to my niece's wedding by myself. I spent the entire weekend vomiting. While my family enjoyed the Florida sun, I stayed in a bathroom.

Seeing yet another name on his desk, I no longer cared if I vomited every day for the rest of my life. I was done with sitting still, worrying about every damn woman who had round heels, who winked at him or gave him her phone number. My heart hurt just thinking about it.

Truth was I was scared to death.

I had no idea how I was supposed to live without him. Dan was my first and only love. He told everyone... I was his best friend.

I made myself get up, went back into his office, turned on the reading lamp and read the note one more time. I made a mental note: *investigate the matter before I say a word to him*. I needed *proof*.

## Chapter 2

At 5 a.m., after mulling the situation over for two hours, I wanted to wake Dan up. Shake the life out of him. Scream at him. But I didn't. Because I never let that woman out from inside me. I hated confrontation. Besides, even I knew Dan wanted me to find that note.

I tiptoed back to our bedroom and managed to snap up my clothes without waking Dan. Thankfully, our dog Lady slept on my side of the room. I was able to get in and out without disturbing them. I took a quick shower in the guest bathroom and got dressed. "Great. Brown hair, brown eyes, shirt, pants and boots." My wardrobe matched my crappy mood.

Next to the coffee pot, I left a note saying I had forgotten about an early pick-up. I went to the bakery, because I had nowhere else to go. Other than Dan, my bakery was my life. It was also where my best friend, Lynnae, worked.

I drove in a daze. When I reached the bakery, I parked my car, opened the front door and turned off the alarm. "Alarm..." I looked up at the camera. I should install a security system at the house. The clock caught my eye and I remembered a friend of mine telling me about a hidden camera in the clock at the local card shop. "Huh."

With no actual early pick-ups, I knew Lynnae would be wondering why I was there before her, but I didn't care. My heart calmed down as I stepped into the kitchen. I loved my bakery. I especially loved the three women I worked with. I stood there taking in every detail: the mixers, ovens, the cooling racks. The big spice cabinet. My cookbooks: *Once Upon a Tart*, *The Sweet Spot*, and the must have book in every bakery, *The Professional Pastry Chef* by Bo Friberg.

I blew a breath into my cold hands. I looked at the worktable in the center of the room. The one Dan custom-built for me. The bakery was a lifelong dream of mine. When I finally got it up and running; Dan made

sure I had every piece of equipment necessary; he even bought me a cinnamon-bun scented candle as a joke. “A little motivation to get ya started,” he said.

Just as I was ready to flip the table over, I heard the bell on the front door, and I knew Lynnae had arrived. When she found me in the office a few moments later, she was holding two take-out cups.

“Morning, Julie,” she said as she handed me a cup of coffee. Black.

“Morning,” I replied, yawning.

“I turned the ovens on,” Lynnae said as she picked up the clipboard containing the day’s orders. When she stopped in the doorway, she added, “You look like crap.”

“I’m fine,” I replied.

“Yeah, well, I’m gonna get started,” she said, a little unsure, as she left the office.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” I replied, but still sat there, lifeless, when I should have been working.

Maybe it was from the lack of sleep from the night before or perhaps it was the multiple flashbacks. *Affairs?* The word still made me sick. Suspected or real? I didn’t know. What I did know was no woman should have to suspect her husband of having an affair numerous times in her life. Could I have been wrong about the ones before we were married? Certainly not about all of them. Ten years ago, was the last time I suspected Dan.

“I’m exhausted,” I said under my breath.

“Hey, if you’re not doing anything important in there, can you frost the cupcakes?” I heard Lynnae say, after about an hour had gone by.

“I’ll be right out,” I hollered back.

Twenty minutes later, I was standing next to Lynnae at the worktable. I was still thinking about that damn flowery note and not the cupcakes in front of me and hadn’t realized I had managed to get icing all over my apron.

“Hey, meticulous, you’re making some mess over there,” Lynnae said as she put a tray of crumb cake in the oven.

Once again, I yawned.

“Julie...?” Lynnae tapped her hand on mine. “Hey, are you all right?”

“Of course,” I replied. Realizing she knew something was wrong, I frosted the last cupcake, and carried the tray out to the front room. My heart hurt. I wished I were more like Lynnae. She would have confronted Dan within seconds of finding a note from another woman. No, she would have run, the very first time. Hell, any other woman would be bawling her eyes out. Pride is an awful thing to possess. Actually, I was embarrassed. I especially didn’t want the rest of my staff, Brooke and Stephanie, to know my personal business. They were too young and innocent.

Somehow, I managed to place the cupcakes in the display case without dropping any of them on the floor. Even though I was exhausted, I took care of a few customers, wiped down the tables, and filled the display case with Lynnae’s fresh baked goods. Anything to keep myself busy and away from Lynnae’s line of fire.

Several times, I caught her peeking through the glass in the kitchen door. It would not be long before she asked me what was going on. As much as I wanted to tell her my suspicions, I couldn’t. Not that day, anyway. All I wanted to do was go to bed, yet I could not make myself leave. If only Lynnae were older. I wish she didn’t love Dan like a father. I needed her. I needed my friend.

Even more than a shoulder to cry on, at that moment, all I needed was sleep.

Finally, when several customers commented on how tired I looked, I decided I had better leave soon. Every time I heard the bell on the front door ring, I looked at the clock. Twenty-two minutes, Brooke and Stephanie would arrive, then I would go home.

I lined everything up in all the display cases, filled the napkin holders, and heard the bell on the door. That time, the bell gave me some relief.

“Good morning, Julie.”

“Good morning, Brooke. Good morning, Stephanie,” I said as they passed through the front room on their way to the kitchen.

I waited a few minutes, went back to the kitchen and said, “Hey, I’m gonna go home and take a nap. My head is killing me.”

“You better.” Lynnae gave me that look. The one she gives me when she knows something is up but isn’t quite sure what to say.

“I’ll call you later,” I said.

She waved her hand at me. “Don’t worry. I got this. Hey, don’t be bullheaded, take something for that headache.”

As I left the kitchen, I heard Lynnae ask Stephanie to open the door between the kitchen and the front room.

By the time I got into my car, I was numb. Somehow, I managed to put the car in drive.

When I made it home, I was glad Dan was gone for the day, and he had taken Lady to work with him. I was too tired to take her out for a run. “Sleep,” I said. “Julie, just go to bed.”

I figured I had a few hours to take a short nap and wake up in plenty of time to prepare dinner. *After all, I am nothing if not a good wife, no matter what my husband does.*

For a moment, I stood in the doorway, staring at our bed – it was the one bedroom set we both fell in love with. Our entire home was filled with oak furniture, and in every room, a Hayden Lambson print, or two. When the bedroom set arrived, so did a few surprises. A chaise lounge and a lingerie chest. “Spin it around,” Dan had said. “It has a full-length mirror on the backside.”

My eyes moved to the chaise and then to the print above it. Two bucks and a doe standing in a meadow. The caption read: *Over My Dead Body.*

On my nightstand sat my favorite photo of Dan. I picked it up and tossed it across the room. Bang! It landed somewhere in our closet. I had to be stronger. I could not make the same mistake. Normally, I would have confronted Dan about my suspicions. Not this time. I was done playing his game. I was not going to confront him. Not about to give him the opportunity to lie and deny everything and tell me I was crazy. I had to think about myself. My future. As much as I loved Dan, I had to find a way to let go of him.

“Damn you!” I hollered. “You were the only man I ever wanted.” He was the handsome bad boy. The kind of man my mother warned me about, the kind of man who would break my heart. The type that never stayed long. “Why didn’t I listen...?” I asked, as if my mother, or God Himself, could tell me the answer. “Huh!” It was my mother who also told me not to date too many guys. She said, “Those girls get a bad reputation.”

Ring! Ring! I jumped at the sound. “Good heavens!” I shouted before answering. “Hello.”

“Mrs. Holliday, this is Jane Bushnell. I’m a reporter from the *Herald*. We’re doing a story about your husband and...”

I sat on the edge of the bed and cracked my neck, first to the right and then to the left. The damn article was Lynnae’s idea. Of course, I agreed to it. She had said, “Dan always does the right thing. He deserves to be recognized.”

My eyes caught sight of the back of the oak picture frame, it was lying on the closet floor.

“The newspaper article? I’m sorry, now is not a good time,” I told her.

“The story is set to run in Sunday’s paper. This will only take a minute or two of your time. I just need a quote or two.”

I held the phone to my leg. “You have got to be kidding me,” I said under my breath before returning the phone to my ear.

“Your husband made a generous donation to the town. Because of him, Main Street now has flowering trees. His success is inspiring. I understand you were there from the beginning...”

*From the beginning? Dan was twenty-three, tall and thin when we met. His hair was longer than my own. Back then, Dan had not one penny in the bank.* I covered my mouth with my hand, hoping she didn’t hear me yawn.

“And now, without any college, he’s a self-made millionaire,” she continued. “With a lot of iron.”

A self-made *millionaire*? I had to answer that.

“I don’t know that I would go as far to say he’s a millionaire. And by iron, you mean equipment? Yes, he does have the tools necessary to work and yes Dan and I have been together long enough to start both of our businesses.”

I looked at the picture hanging above our bed. That one was Dan’s favorite. A buck and a doe lying together. I read the caption, *Secret Place*. Then snapped my neck again, to relieve the mounting tension.

“Thank you, Mrs. Holliday, you’ve been very helpful. The article will appear in the Sunday edition of the paper.”

“I’m glad I could help. We look forward to reading the article.”



I went out to the kitchen, made myself a piece of cinnamon toast and a cup of tea. I drank the tea, took two bites of the toast and went back to our bedroom. A half-hour later, I heard Dan calling for Lady to come inside. Of all days for him to come home early.

When he came into the bedroom, I pretended to be asleep. I heard him exhale. For an hour or so more, I could hear Dan roaming from one room to the next. At quarter to three, I heard the phone ring. "Hello." Dan picked up on the first ring. He must have been in the kitchen because I could hear every word he was saying.

"I'm whispering because Julie's asleep. No, she's out cold. Snoring like a baby. Nah, she got up early. No, she didn't see her flowers, she's sleeping. I'll give 'em to her later. I want her to sleep. I'm making Bolognese sauce for tonight, want some? You sure? I wanna start early tomorrow. Yeah, yeah, just get here by eight."

Dan is one of those rare men who picks up after himself, loves to cook, and even shares his Häagen-Dazs. When the Bolognese sauce was near ready, I knew he would drop the pasta into the boiling water, set the table, cut the French bread and pour two glasses of his signature homemade iced tea.

With dinner on the table, he came back to the bedroom and softly called my name. I tried not to move. My insides were trembling.

"Julie," he said again. Then came over and gently touched my shoulder. He called out my name several times, sounding like he was having a moment of panic. When he leaned in closer to me and heard me "snoring," he closed the door and I finally fell asleep.

## Chapter 3

I slept for twelve hours straight.

When I woke up, I saw where Dan had slept between the sheets and where he had pulled the bedspread over me. I kicked the bedspread to the bottom of the bed. Grabbed the photo from the closet and set it back on my nightstand. Thankfully, the glass hadn't broken.

Out in the kitchen, Dan was waiting for me with a breakfast of eggs and shitake mushrooms on the table.

"I heard you flush, so I poured the coffee," he said as he handed me a cup.

During breakfast, he asked me several times if I was okay. I nodded my head yes, staring at the flowers. "The sunflowers are beautiful."

He was brushing his fingers across the top of my hand. "Are we hiking this morning?"

I glanced over at the clock. We still had plenty of time to get our morning hike in before either of us had to be at work. I inhaled, exhaled, and answered him, "Yes, of course." Then I took my last bite and cleared the table. I was standing at the sink, rinsing the last plate when Dan approached me from behind. When he kissed the back of my neck, I flinched.

"You okay?" he asked me. "What's going on?"

"I'm fine. I'm almost done." When the lump in my throat formed, I took a deep breath and told myself to breathe.

I hiked about ten feet behind Dan, following him through the woods, over the railroad tracks, down the hill, over streambeds. I never once raised my eyes to look at him. My hands were freezing. Of course, I'd snapped up the wrong gloves.

The wind must have been blowing from the east, because I could smell Dan's shave cream – I inhaled the scent and my heart nearly exploded.

Usually, Lady runs up ahead of us. That morning, my beautiful chocolate Labrador retriever walked between Dan and me. Several times, she sat and waited for me to catch up. Each time, I would motion to her to get going. I tried to focus on the sound of happy birds coming from the trees, but the wind was picking up, starting to howl. All I wanted to do was go home and take a hot shower.

Suddenly, Dan stopped in his tracks, and he gestured to me to be silent with a movement of his finger to his lips. I stood still, wondering what he was looking at. When he motioned for me to come closer, up ahead, in the open field, I saw two small deer nibbling on a berry bush.

Dan reached for my hand, our eyes met and held. His deep blue eyes intense. He whispered against my temple, "I love you," then shot me a questioning look, but all I could do was nod. I caught my breath and mouthed, "Olive juice." In that instant, that second, something passed between us.

"They're last year's fawns. I don't see their mother, do you?" he asked and then pulled me in closer to where he was standing. "Be very quiet, she's not far away," he whispered, and then moved me so I was standing in front of him. "Uh-oh, look to your right. She's coming out from the cedar trees. Don't move."

We watched as she gathered her two youngsters, and waited for them to move to the lower field before continuing our trek. "Are you cold?" Dan asked.

"Freezing," was the only word I could muster.

He took his vest off and put it on me. "I figured you were cold. Put your hands in your pockets."

My heart was bleeding. Dan could be so gentle and tender at times that he took my breath away.

Immediately upon our return, we both headed for the bathroom. Dan grabbed our towels and hung them over the shower before turning both showerheads on. I did not want to be near him. I tried to think of a reason not to enter the same space, but Dan opened the shower door for me and I stepped inside. I had to turn away from him. I couldn't resist him, or his heart piercing smile. As the warm water poured down my face, so did my tears.

We both finished at the same time. I watched as Dan dried himself off. Usually, I cannot keep my eyes off him. Naked, he went by me. Same as every other morning, Dan pinched my butt. He went into the closet; half work clothes, half camo. He owns one suit, which hangs in the downstairs cedar closet. I could see him getting dressed and he could see me, rubbing lotion on my body.

“I’ll see you tonight.” He kissed me. “Mmmm, you smell good,” he said as he winked my way. He stopped in the doorway. “How much do I love you?” he asked with a seductive smile on his face, then he stretched out his arms as my breath left my lungs in small bursts.

I could not go to work. I just couldn’t. At six-thirty-nine, I called Lynnae at the bakery and told her that I would not be coming in. If she needed me, she could call my cell phone.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong?” Lynnae said.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.” Lynnae said with an iciness in her tone. “Call me later so I know what’s going on.”

As soon as I hung up, I got in my car, turned on the radio, and drove. I didn’t care where I went. It was at least two hours before I stopped for gas, then I parked the car in front of The Metro Café, a small café at the end of a plaza. To the right was an ice cream shop, Fudgy’s, and next to that, a dance studio. Thankfully, there were only a few cars in the parking lot. I could only hope they were all dancing.

I didn’t go in. I just sat there, letting the car idle. Making rash decisions would only make things worse. I hit the dashboard with my fists and grunted. Ran my hands through my hair as if I were pulling it out. I needed to be alone. Yet I was feeling terrified because I knew I could not do it on my own. I needed another cup of coffee. Strong. As I reached for the key to turn it to the off position, “Jesus Take the Wheel” began to play on the radio. I sang every word, crying. When the song ended, I wiped my eyes, shook my head and smiled. *I love you, Lord.*

In the café, I took a seat in the back, away from everyone, and ordered a cup of black coffee. I moved the red-checkered curtain, looked out the window and watched as the wind blew a woman’s tan and brown scarf across the parking lot.

After my second cup of coffee, I decided I could not take it anymore. Between the lump in my throat and my pounding headache, it was time to leave.

I paid for my coffee, went out to my car and wondered what my life without Dan would be. *How can this be? Why does it feel like I am in mourning, when he is still alive?* I cried, knowing that I would have to give up my business. I was so mad. Damn it, I was happy.

I rested my head on the steering wheel, feeling like Forrest Gump. Dan's love for me was not as deep as my love for him. At least that's how it felt. Where would I find the strength to tell him that I could not live like that anymore?

It was so cold outside I had to leave the car running. I sat there, knowing that if I were to keep my sanity, I would have to leave Dan. A surge went through my body and I quivered at the thought. Because I knew, leaving could be the very thing that destroyed me completely.

"Why, God? Why would you put Dan in my path? Knowingly. Lord, I accepted You into my heart when I was twelve years old. I have tried my best to be a good Christian, daughter, and wife. Please...make me understand. Tell me why, Lord. What have I done wrong?"

Tears were running down my face. My head ached from straining to think. Of course, there were no tissues in my car. I wiped my nose on the back of my hand. Banged my head on the window, then I looked up at the sky and realized it was ice blue. In front of me, ice crystals were everywhere. Even Dione, the water goddess, was crying for me.

"Lord, I know you're up there." I closed my eyes, hoping He was. "I stayed with Dan because I believed in my wedding vows. You know that. You know my heart better than I do. Lord, I have tried my best. Obviously, my best wasn't good enough." I opened my eyes, adding, "I'm sorry, Lord, I'm asking for your forgiveness."

At three-thirty, I drove home on the icy roads, wondering how I was supposed to make it through another night, pretending the note did not exist. That my husband loved me as I loved him. That all my suspicions were nothing but a nightmare. How was I supposed to do something so simple as cook dinner, when I didn't even know if I could carry on with my marriage?

Cooking alongside Dan...how was I supposed to get through that?

I opened the refrigerator, thinking I would start dinner. Instead, I stood there, drifting into space. When the refrigerator door alarm went off, I closed the door. Sat on the floor. With my back against the kitchen cabinets, I stretched out my legs; pulled them up to my chest and buried my face.

A few minutes later, I went into our bedroom. I thought about lying down, until I saw Dan's picture. This time, I picked it up, held it to my chest and closed my eyes.

When men shook Dan's hand, they knew he was someone they could trust. He's a man's man, not so tall, barely six feet, but solid; hair once golden blond has turned gray, making his seductive glances even more tempting. I should have married a Bill Gates. No, I had to go for the good-looking guy. Make him my world and share everything with him. Including my kitchen.

Because Dan was a homebody at heart, cooking became our passion. If we went out to eat, it was usually for dinner. Always celebratory. Whenever anyone asked Dan why he stayed home so much, he'd always say, "Why go out? I get exactly what I want every night in the comfort of my own home."

Being in the kitchen with him was one of my favorite memories of all. I loved to watch him create his own concoctions. When Dan cooked, I was his sous-chef. Often, I would scribble down the recipe as fast as I could, so he could recreate the dish for our dinner guests.

I set the photo down. With my heart beating, I sat down on the chaise lounge.

Dan was the kind of husband every woman dreamed of marrying: a hardworking man with an excellent work ethic, handy around the house, smart, seductive, and damn if he was not good looking. Even after all those years, I still thought he was the sexiest man I had ever known. Forget all that, the man could *cook*. In fact, I rarely cooked on the weekends. Breakfast was his specialty. From omelets to serving up my eggs exactly the way I like them – over hard.

I loved being with him. Near him.

I could deal with his inability to share his emotions. Even the fact that he was a little reserved, because I believed in him. His goal in life was to keep what he had. To know that no one would take away his home, his

hunting rights, his lifestyle. I admired how he never went over his means. Unlike me, he was a true saver. Unlike me, I was afraid he didn't know how to remain faithful. "Thirty years!" I hollered.

It was 1976. October 2<sup>nd</sup>. I was an innocent girl. He was the handsome best man. If I had known I was about to meet the man who would shatter my heart like Baccarat, I would have skipped my friend's wedding.

His wink and smile were intoxicating. When the wedding was over, Dan asked me to go to a private party and I accepted. Later that night, he wanted to go back to his apartment for some pot, but only if I went with him.

Before I knew it, I had a helmet on my head, and I was on the back of a motorcycle for the first time in my life. It was a Kawasaki 900, and he knew how to handle it – and me. Five-minutes into the ride, Dan reached back and pulled me into him so tight, I thought I was driving the bike. When he took a corner, we moved as if our bodies were one. When we arrived at his apartment, all I saw was a twin bed and a stereo – nothing else. No television, no table and chairs, not even a dish to eat from. He did, however, have charisma. When we got back on that bike, I lost my heart for the first time in my life. I could not let go of him. When he called me the next day, I knew my life would never be the same again.

"Oh, Lord. What am I to do?"

I got up, went into the bathroom and took two aspirins.

When Dan got home from work, dinner was on the table. I had planned to cook chicken, but knowing chicken *piccata* was one of Dan's favorites, I opted for meatloaf. I did not want to be near him. That night, or any time soon.

I ate my dinner forkful by forkful, knowing I must learn how to live alone or lose my mind.

## Chapter 4

I was driving to work when I passed a teenager driving an old Jeep Wrangler, the kind with a serious roll bar and plastic windows that zipped open and closed, that was nearly identical to Lynnae's. The car was fitting for her free spirit. She insisted on having the top down regardless of the season. The only time she put the canvas top on was when her two little sons were in the backseat. Or when it was raining or snowing. When Lynnae stopped at a traffic light, people would turn the palms of their hands up, as if to say, "What's up?" She'd smile at them and turn her music up a little louder. She didn't care if it was forty degrees outside.

She answered to no one, and everyone knew it. That was one of her qualities I admired about her. Lynnae was both vivacious and brilliant. She only needed to read something once, and she had a clear understanding.

She was eighteen when she started working for me. The same age I was when I met Dan. Like me, she dropped out of high school. In her first few months on the job, Lynnae was diligent, enthusiastic, and a bright-eyed employee, the sort of worker who volunteered for every project. She wanted to learn everything there was to know about the business of baking. It didn't take her long to become the best baker in the valley, and the mother of two very energetic, smart, adorable little boys. Sam was eight and Max almost five.

In spite of her having to deal with a man who refused to acknowledge his own son, and dealing with a child who had dyslexia, she was the most positive person I knew. Lynnae had a deep affection for people. My customers loved her. Her greatest asset was her gift of gab. Women loved to tell her their troubles. Men loved looking at her. I could not imagine running that bakery without her. For the past ten years, Lynnae had been the best assistant, friend and confidant a person could ask for. Ten



years and such different lives, yet we shared a bond as special as any mother and daughter.

Somehow, Lynnae knew the exact moment when my spirit needed a lift. She was always there for me. She knew exactly what to say. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do for her. Including hiring additional help for her when she announced she was pregnant with her first child. As if the angels heard my prayer, Brooke and Stephanie came into the bakery looking for jobs.

If they hadn't told me they were sisters, I never would have guessed. The only things they had in common were their body sizes and the rings in their noses. Brooke was a petite blond, with blue eyes, while Stephanie had brown hair and brown eyes. Brooke was a lot like my Lynnae: chatty, loved her music and loved baking.

Stephanie, on the other hand, hated baking, but she drew masterfully. She was the quiet sister. If she said three words all day, we were surprised. She was so good, I let her do her own thing. After all – she was an artist. First thing she did was turn on her iPod, then placed the earplugs in her ears, glanced at the order board, opened her sketchpad and began drawing. Unlike Lynnae, she didn't sing. And unlike Brooke, she didn't move to the sound of the music.

When Stephanie was done, she handed her drawings over to Brooke. Brooke was a master cake decorator. I was amazed at what she could do with fondant. But it was Lynnae's food that everyone loved. Her specialty was spices. She used black and white chia seeds in her morning glory muffins to help you feel full. And in every sugar-free cupcake, she put a dash of cinnamon, ginger or turmeric. She said it helped to reduce one's sugar cravings.

One day, a man asked if we could put a drawing of his wife's present on top of her cake. The woman actually tried to pick the pearls up! That's how good an artist Stephanie was. In fact, her goal in life was to be recognized as a true artist. The three women worked flawlessly together, creating one masterpiece after another.

I was standing at the back of the bakery, speaking to a customer about our Davey Crocket bars. "They're so simple to make," I said.

"I would love the recipe."

"Come with me, I'll write it down for you."

“Seriously?”

I wrote the recipe down. Handed it to her.

“Butter mixed with graham cracker crumbs, followed by a layer of chocolate chips, then a layer of nuts, coconut, and topped with condensed milk? That’s it?” she said.

“Pretty much.”

“I’m going home right now and making these. Thank you!”

I looked at Lynnae. “What?”

“Did you just give her your recipe?”

“She’ll never make them the way you do.”

“Hey, wanna go to the farmer’s market with me?” Lynnae asked me as I turned around.

“Now?”

“No. After work. Brooke and Stephanie can close. It will be good practice for them.”

“Umm, sure.”

“We have to be there right at six, so do whatever you have to do now.”

Forty minutes later, I opened the door to Lynnae’s Jeep but had to wait for her to move two magazines and a container. I sat down and she asked me, “Want one?”

I took one of the treats. “Are these Cheerios?”

Lynnae was backing out of the parking lot. When she turned to face me, she nodded her head, “Yep. I’m addicted to them. The boys love them. Just don’t tell them how healthy they are.”

“What do you call it?”

“A Cheerio bar.”

“We should sell them...”

“Why, so you can turn around and give out the recipe? I’m joking. We should and we’re gonna.”

“I promise, no more handing out recipes.”

“Julie...”

“Yeah?” I took another bite.

“Do you think it’s wrong of me not to tell Max about his father?”

“Lynnae, Max’s father was wrong to lead you on. It was *his* decision to exclude himself from Max’s life. He’s the one who lied to you about

having a fiancée. When the time is right, by that I mean when Max is old enough to understand, you can tell him the truth. Right now, all he needs to know is... that he has a fantastic mother. That he is a blessing to you.”

We rode in silence for the next few miles. Then I heard her say, “I never wanna know a day without you and Dan in my life.”

“Lynnae, we both love you...”

“Seriously. When I think about Max never meeting his father, I think it’s a good thing. At least he doesn’t have to worry about having someone you love in your life only to...”

“Lynnae.” I put my hand on her leg. I turned and looked out my window. Sadness filled my heart. I didn’t want to tell her about the note.

Lynnae stopped for a red light. “I frigging love you guys so much.”

“And we love you.”

She turned the radio on. Pink was singing a familiar song, but Lynnae was driving in silence. I glanced over at her. Her elbow was on the door, her head resting on her hand and I wondered what else she was thinking.

A moment later, Lynnae pulled into the farmer’s market. “Make sure you buy whatever you can from the Fresh Gourmet. They have the best produce.”

I went to get out of the car, but Lynnae reached for my hand and stopped me. “Julie, Dan loves you.”