

WHO ATTACKED THE BABYSITTER?

Why had the intruder come after Marissa? Was it something to do with Teddy Ryerson, or the Ryerson family as a whole? Was it something to do with there being a babysitter? That made no sense at all, but these two bookended crimes over twenty years couldn't be completely random, could they?

No. They were too similar. A knife wielded against a babysitter at the very same house. There had to be a connection. But what? Why?

Emma . . . Jamie had wrestled all night with whether she should alert her sister to what had happened. Emma had already mentioned that she didn't like the Ryersons. She still seemed slightly bemused by the fact that Teddy and Serena were grown and that Teddy had twins of his own.

Her gut told her not to tell Emma anything that had happened last night. But on the other hand, if Emma found out from some other source, someone who might not know her full history . . . Jamie had a vision of Emma yelling, "*It's his eyes . . . his eyes!*" and inwardly shuddered. . . .

THE BABYSITTER

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BUSH



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Chapter One

Then . . .

Jamie stuck her head under the coffee table, with its deep sides that made it damn near impossible to reach the tossed cards from the Memory Game she'd been playing with Serena and Teddy, the Ryerson twins. They were in bed for good now, God willing. The seven-year-olds had had their last drink of water, their last story, their last *everything*. Jamie was honestly sick of them. She'd been babysitting them for *eons* and she was supposed to be at the Stillwell party tonight. She'd been invited by Cooper Haynes himself. Coolest guy in school. He'd smiled at her this afternoon and asked if she was going to be there. And she was only a sophomore and wouldn't be able to drive until the summer, but he'd specifically asked *her* even though he was in her sister Emma's class.

Emma was supposed to babysit the twins tonight. Jamie had begged and begged her older sister to take over for her. She'd promised her *anything*. Emma had wanted to know what the big deal was. To her, the party at the Stillwells' was just another senior get-together for her class, of which she'd been to *kazillions*.

But Cooper Haynes had invited her, Jamie Whelan, specifically!

“Please, please, please,” she’d begged Emma, dramatically prostrating herself on her sister’s bedroom carpet.

“Jesus, what’s the big deal? There’ll be another one,” Emma said.

Jamie would rather cut out her tongue than admit that Cooper had asked her to go. Emma would laugh or make fun of her. Emma and Cooper were friends, had once even gone together for a short time when they were in junior high. If Emma knew of Jamie’s secret, secret crush, it would be all over the school.

“I want to go to this one,” Jamie said, rising into a squat, her hands in front of her in prayer. “Just, *please*, Emma. Take over for me.”

“Mom won’t let you go to a senior party anyway.”

“She doesn’t have to know. And I’ll get there somehow.”

“Oh, you will?” A smile played on Emma’s lips. She was the rebel and Jamie was the good girl, as far as their mother knew. And it was true, up to a point. Jamie worked on her grades and stayed in and babysat for extra cash because the Whelan family was damn near dirt-poor since Dad had his midlife crisis and took up with that bitch with the fake boobs and big hair and houseboat on the Columbia River. Jamie and Emma had visited him exactly once and it had been an epic fail.

“What do you need from me to make this happen, Emma?” Jamie asked, rising to her feet and shifting into business mode.

“Fifty dollars.”

“*What?*”

“I’ve got some things to buy.” She lifted a shoulder and started to walk away.

Jamie swore a blue streak in her mind, then said quickly, “Twenty. It’s all I’ve got.”

“You’ve got scads in your savings account.”

“I’m saving for college. I’ve got thirty. Please, Emma.”

“I’ve got things to do and wouldn’t be there till nine at the earliest, so . . .”

“I’ll babysit them till nine, and you can take over.”

“I don’t know . . .” She made a face.

“Fine. I’ll get you fifty!”

“This must be really important,” Emma said, turning back to give Jamie a long look.

“I can’t be the total nerd any longer,” Jamie said, the truth popping out. Emma’s popularity was legendary and Jamie, who’d finally gotten her braces off—which had taken for-effing-ever, thank you, God—had grown her hair out from the short bob Mom had given her since she was three, and was working on matching a little bit of that popularity. “Take my place at nine and I’ll give you the fifty and all the money from tonight’s babysitting, too.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

It had taken Emma a few more agonizing moments to consider, but then she’d finally agreed. “But if I get killed, it’s on you,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah.”

She was referring to the two babysitters who’d been attacked that summer, one in Vancouver, apparently the victim of a masked robber who’d stabbed her during his getaway, and the other falling from a rooftop deck in Gresham, where she’d supposedly been trying to meet her boyfriend. Neither of those places was close to their River Glen neighborhood, a suburb of Portland’s westside.

Now it was eight forty-six. Jamie had checked the Ryersons’ mantel clock before ducking under the table. About fifteen minutes to go. She had a brush in her purse to fix her hair and some lipstick and mascara. The Stillwell house, really an estate, was only about twenty blocks north

of the Ryersons', down a long, hedged driveway so the neighbors, noise, and cops wouldn't be aware of the party, fingers crossed.

As Jamie started to slide out from under the table, a shadowy figure standing to one side caused her to shriek and smack her head on the table's underside.

"Shii—ouch!" She just managed to stop herself from swearing a blue streak when she saw it was Serena standing there in a pale nightgown. "Serena. What are you doing up?"

Jamie shimmied out from under the table and stood up, rubbing her head. Irrked, she frowned down at the little girl.

"I had a dream that I was dying."

"Oh, honey." Jamie's annoyance dissipated, and she gently put her hands on the girl's shoulders, turned her around, and slowly marched her back to bed. "You're fine. Your mom and dad are going to be back soon. Just try to sleep."

"Is your friend coming?" Her voice wavered.

Jamie had told the twins that Emma might spell her and not to be scared if they woke up to find her there instead of Jamie. "My sister. You've had her babysit you before."

"I want Mommy," she sobbed, clinging to Jamie's leg.

"Don't be a baby." Teddy's voice rang from down the hallway to his sister's room, which made Serena cry even harder.

It took Jamie till after nine to calm Serena down and get Teddy, who hadn't wanted to give up chastising Serena, back to bed. Their mother had assured Jamie that the twins would sleep soundly because they'd been to the Oaks Park amusement center for the day and ridden on all the rides. Nadine Ryerson had said, "Don't worry, they'll sleep like the dead."

Ha.

Jamie half-expected one or the other or both of the twins to get up again, but they seemed to have finally settled down for good. But then, where was Emma? She was late. And because neither Jamie nor Emma owned a cell phone—they

were too expensive and Mom didn't trust that they wouldn't lose them—Jamie was stuck waiting for her sister to show up. She paced the living room floor, her eyes on the clock above the stone mantel. It felt like the minute hand wasn't moving at all.

Where the hell was she?

At nine-thirty Emma finally appeared, knocking on the door so loudly, Jamie flew to answer it in a panic. "Don't wake the kids!" she shushed angrily.

Emma just pushed her way inside. "You're lucky I'm here at all," she declared, nearly running into Jamie in the process.

"Are you drunk?" Jamie demanded, panicked.

"No. God, no. I'm just . . . pissed."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Go on to your party. I had to walk from there and it's a long, long way. You owe me. More than what you said."

"Whatever." Jamie was out the door in a flash.

It turned out Emma was right. The twenty blocks or so, half of them up Stillwell Hill, to reach the entrance to the Stillwell estate, felt like forever. Her steps slowed as she climbed to the crest, her steps slowing even further as she headed across the last few yards to the wrought-iron gate set between towering laurel hedges. The gate was open, but now that she was here, she was reluctant to step foot on the ribbon of tarmac that led to the house. She could see lights at the end of that long drive, but suddenly she felt naked and alone. She desperately needed a girlfriend to be with her, Camryn or Rosie, but their parents would never let them attend an unsupervised senior party either. Maybe Gwen, whose Mom and Dad were like hippies or something and not as concerned with keeping tabs on their daughter's every move, but Gwen was a weirdo and not a real friend anyway.

Jamie hovered by the main road, loathe to walk between the hedges. Now that she was here, she felt like the uninvited. Cooper was the only one who'd really asked her to come, and what if he wasn't here? She should have asked Emma about him, but that would have given the game away, and Emma would know and tease her mercilessly and probably tell Cooper to boot, so that was a no-go.

What to do . . . ?

The answer was taken away from her when she heard the roar of a sparking engine and saw car taillights flash red far ahead. A car was backing out and turning toward her. Moments later, a dark blue Mustang, Race Stillwell's car, came right at her, headlights blinding. She would have melted into the hedges if she'd been able, but as it was, she was pinned in the twin beams, frozen like a deer.

The Mustang's engine rumbled beside her. The passenger window rolled down, and Dug Douglas threw out a cigarette butt. It was late October, dry as a bone, and Jamie immediately stamped out the ember even though it had landed on the asphalt.

"What're yer doin'?" Dug slurred.

A million excuses raced across Jamie's brain, but in the moment, she just said, "Walking."

"Go on up to the party," Race said, leaning past Dug to get a hard look at her. "Who're you?"

"Emma's sister. Jamie."

"Well, there's booze up there. Help yourself. We gotta little thing to do," Race said. "Later."

And then they pulled onto the street and roared away.

Jamie trudged the rest of the way toward the house. SUVs, sedans, and one or two mini-vans that had to be parents' cars were parked along the drive. She heard the thump of music from outside, the bass resonating inside her, as she let herself in the front door. Kids were standing around holding red Solo cups full of drinks. They eyed her as she

walked by, into the kitchen. All her desire to attend, the raging torrent that had been building inside her ever since Cooper asked if she was going, was leaching away, and she was almost embarrassed to be there. For hours, all she'd thought about was being at this party. Now all she wanted to do was turn tail and leave.

But not before finding out where Cooper was.

"Beer?" a guy in the class ahead of her, Ken somebody, asked. He was standing by the keg, leaning an elbow on the counter.

"Sure."

It was a relief to be treated as if she had a right to be there.

He straightened to pour her a foamy capped cup of beer. She accepted it and stood to one side for a few moments. Icky Vicky, one of the girls in Emma's friend group, was making out with her boyfriend in the corner by the back windows. His hands were running all over her and she was riding his thigh. There was a lot of heavy breathing, smacking noises, and moaning.

Half-embarrassed, Jamie sidled out of the kitchen and up some back stairs, hoping Vicky wouldn't notice her. If Vicky recognized Jamie, she'd probably make a big deal of it, because she was fierce about keeping the line separated between grades. She'd pretty much slept with all the senior guys when she was a sophomore and had been excoriated by all the senior girls for poaching, so she wasn't about to let any underclassmen get away with what she already had.

Jamie wandered the second floor, looking for Cooper, then went back downstairs and checked out all the rooms down there as well.

"Looking for something?" It was Race's younger brother, Deon. He was a junior, one year behind Race. And he was smaller and meaner and looking at Jamie with cold suspicion.

"I was hoping Gwen was here. Gwen Winkelman?"

“Don’t know her.”

Of course he did. Everybody knew Gwen. She’d made a name for herself by reading fortunes and selling crystals. Normally, Jamie steered clear of her one-time grade school friend because she was so odd, but now she was desperate to make a connection.

“I don’t see her,” Jamie said, moving away. She yelped in surprise when his hand shot out and he dragged her to him. His other hand went right to her crotch. “Hey!” she snapped, immediately grabbing that hand and flinging it away from herself.

“Babe, you asked for it.” He leered, white teeth gleaming.

She wrenched herself out of his grasp and practically ran out the front door, shaken. No Cooper. She stood at the front of the house, drew several deep breaths, then looked up at the white, three-quarter moon. October 21, or maybe 22 by now, and all she wanted to do was be home in bed.

And then Gwen suddenly appeared. Running up the driveway, laughing, her long, brown braid swinging behind her, a guy chasing her whom Jamie didn’t immediately recognize. “Hey, Jamie!” she said in surprise and delight. “What’re you doing here?”

Now she saw the guy was their classmate, Nathan Farland, and he said, “Where are your books? There must be some test to study for.”

“Shut up,” Gwen said good-naturedly. “Jamie doesn’t study all the time.” She grabbed Jamie’s arm to propel her back inside. “What’re you having? Beer? Nah. Let’s have some vodka. Nate’s got some.”

“Sure,” he said.

Jamie really didn’t want to go back inside with them, but she didn’t have a ride home, and it would feel like a lot longer to get to her house alone in the dark than the trek she’d just made to get here. She’d had some hazy idea about cadging a ride, but that hadn’t been looking so good until

Nate appeared. He had a driver's license and an older Toyota Celica.

Back in the foyer, Jamie made certain to steer clear of Deon Stillwell. She hung close to Nate and Gwen, who was really being nice, which made Jamie feel kind of bad for thinking she was such a weirdo.

Hours slid by. At one o'clock, Race Stillwell returned alone, his Mustang roaring back up the drive just as Jamie, Gwen, and Nate were getting ready to leave. No Cooper. Jamie had consumed one beer and two glasses of vodka and Sprite, but the slight buzz she'd gotten had already worn off.

Race was wild-eyed as he burst into the room.

"What the fuck?" Deon muttered. He was waaayyy loaded and staggering by then.

"Shit. The cops. Get everybody out. *Everybody out!!*" His bellow reached to the upper floor. The smart kids, the ones still sober enough and aware, didn't wait to be asked again. They trampled down the stairs and out of the house, running for their cars. Jamie, Gwen, and Nate did the same. All of them tore down the driveway, nearly rear-ending each other in their haste. Only when he was well away and driving out of town did Nate heave a sigh of relief. "Think we're okay. If the cops come, they won't find us."

"You know where my house is?" Jamie asked. Now she was anxious to be home. Her mom worked graveyard at the hospital, but anything could happen time-wise and she could come home early.

Nate grunted an assent. He dropped Gwen off first at her family's sprawling ranch with the trees adorned with fake Spanish moss and the birdhouses and the whole crazy garden thing. Jamie's house was a two-story Craftsman style with a wide porch and a mostly trimmed yard. Mom was death on weeds. After their father's defection, she'd gotten out the edger and beaten back the crabgrass and dandelions and thistles as if her life depended on it. Gardening seemed

to be her way to get out her frustrations and put her life in order, and she spent most afternoons working on their grounds before heading to her job.

Jamie lightly ran down the driveway to the back of the house and jogged to the right in front of the detached garage toward the back steps. She was pretty sure Mom was still out, but she didn't want to explain herself just in case. She picked up the gnome near the bottom stair, the only whimsical piece to the yard, saved by Emma when Mom had tried to throw it out in her never-ending need to put things right in the yard. She shook the gnome and the key fell into her hand. Quickly, she tiptoed up the outdoor steps, turned the key in the lock, and let herself inside, grimacing at the soft creak the door made. She paused. Nothing but the familiar tick of the clock on the wall.

Hurrying upstairs, she passed her sister's room. Emma's clothes were tossed about, some hanging on the chair, others on the bed, a pair of jeans on the floor. Mom's door was closed, but it always was.

Jamie's room was next to Emma's, which was at the end of the hall. She let herself inside, slipped off her shoes, ripped off her clothes, and slid into an oversize T-shirt with a picture of the Hollywood sign on the front before climbing beneath the covers. She was wide awake. Unsettled. She'd given up her babysitting job to find Cooper Haynes and he hadn't even been at Race Stillwell's party. She recalled Deon's hand on her crotch and her blood boiled. She punched the pillow several times, furious with herself and the world as a whole.

Emma was the one who'd scored tonight, which really pissed Jamie off. The Ryersons always stayed out late, which made for good babysitting money, and Emma was reaping the benefits.

Jamie was still awake when she heard the distant sirens.

An auto accident? Her mom was an ER nurse. Saw all kinds of bloody, mangled victims. Ugh.

She covered her head with her pillow.

Brrrinnnggg!

Jamie jumped when the landline down the hall started ringing. Middle of the night. Mom?

Reluctantly, she climbed out of her warm bed and scurried down the hall to her mom's bedroom and the phone. She opened the door and nearly ran into her mother, who was standing by the side of the bed, nearly right in front of her.

"Oh, God!" Jamie gasped, surprised, as Mom, who was still fully dressed apart from her shoes, was reaching for the phone.

"Hello . . ." she answered, hitching her chin to let her know she was handling things and Jamie could go back to bed.

Jamie, who'd hoped she wouldn't have to explain why she was home and Emma wasn't, turned back toward her room.

"Oh, God . . . oh my God!" Mom gasped.

"What? What?" Jamie stopped cold, her hand to her throat.

"Okay, I'm . . . on my way. Right now. Right now!"

Mom slammed down the phone, reeling.

"What is it?" Jamie cried.

"It's Emma. She's been hurt. Attacked. The police are there." She whirled around, staring at the floor, searching for her shoes, grabbing her coat.

"At the Ryersons'?" Jamie's voice was a squeak, but she was shrieking inside.

"Yes. Emma's at the hospital."

Stumbling into her shoes, Mom was heading out, but Jamie said, "I'm going with you," and ran for her clothes.

"I'm not waiting," Mom said, halfway down the stairs.

"Wait! Wait! Please!"

“What are you doing here?” Mom suddenly demanded. “You were babysitting them. What happened?”

“I—I’ve got on my jacket and jeans.” She’d thrown the jacket over her sleeping T-shirt and was hopping on one foot, the other inside her jeans. She grabbed her forgotten socks and sneakers and ran into the hall.

Mom led the way downstairs and Jamie stumbled after her. They raced to the car. Jamie shivered in the passenger seat.

“Is she okay?” she asked in a small voice.

“I don’t know. Why weren’t you there?” Mom demanded.

“I . . . we traded.”

Twenty minutes later, they pulled into River Glen General, Glen Gen to the locals. Jamie was told to stay in the ER waiting room while Mom went through the double doors to the inner cubicles. All Jamie could do was shiver. She’d gone to bed without taking off her makeup, and now, after waiting a few minutes, she found the restroom outside the ER and looked at herself in the mirror. Her makeup had turned to dark smudges below her eyes and she was white-faced. She tried to clean herself up a bit with the end of her little finger and water. When she returned to the ER waiting room, Mom was there, pale and stern.

“You were fixing your makeup?” she demanded in a flinty voice.

“Well, just . . .”

“Your sister’s been stabbed in the back and she has a head injury.”

“What?” Jamie whispered. Did she mean literally stabbed in the back? “With like . . . a knife?”

“Yes. Someone came into the house and stabbed her.”

“Oh . . . God . . . Oh my God. She’s gonna be all right, though?” Jamie quavered.

“She’s unconscious. They think she hit her head on the mantel as she fell. They’ve stitched her wound.”

“But she’s okay?”

“I don’t know, Jamie! She hasn’t woken up! I just don’t understand what happened. Tell me what happened tonight. Tell me everything!”

“Okay . . .” Haltingly, feeling sick with worry, Jamie told her mother about wanting to go to the senior party, bargaining with her sister, leaving the kids with Emma.

Mom’s face, already grim, grew grimmer still. “Did you tell the Ryersons?”

“Well, they kind of rushed out and I . . . no, I told Serena and Teddy, and they know Emma.”

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“I know.”

“By the grace of God it wasn’t you.”

Jamie felt stabbed herself. Right in the heart. She knew Mom was scared. She knew she probably didn’t mean it. But it felt like the wrong daughter had been attacked.

They waited in silence. Mom pressed the button on the wall to release the locked doors and went back and forth from the waiting room to the examining cubicles several times. She was with Jamie about an hour later when a doctor she knew came out to see them again. “We’ve moved her to a room,” he said.

“She’s still unconscious?” Mom asked.

He nodded.

Mom looked at the floor for a moment. “Okay, I’m taking my daughter home and I’ll be right back.”

“I want to stay with you,” Jamie said, but Mom wasn’t listening to her, and they drove home in silence. “Are you mad at me?” Jamie asked weakly when she was getting out of the car.

“I’m not happy with you,” Mom said.

“I . . . why weren’t you at work?” Jamie deflected. Her mother never got home much before seven a.m.

“Half shift tonight. It was my night off, but they needed me.”

Jamie watched her turn the car around and head back toward the hospital, then walked heavily up the stairs to her room and to bed. She lay awake a long time, unable to stop the all-over quivering that afflicted her. Emma’s words, that she didn’t want to be killed, came back to her. *But it’s not my fault*, Jamie thought. *It’s not!*

What had happened? Was it that same robber from Vancouver? The one in the ski mask they never caught?

When her mother came back late the following day, Jamie was in the kitchen. She’d made tuna sandwiches and offered one up, but her mother sank onto a chair at the table in silence.

“Mom?” Jamie quavered.

“She came to. She’s having trouble speaking. Can’t focus very well.”

“Ohhh . . .” Jamie felt tears gather behind her eyes, and her nose got hot. “But she’s going to be okay. . . .”

Mom said tightly, “Yes,” in a way that made Jamie’s blood run cold. She’d seen that determined resolution in her mother once before, when she’d nodded that yes, the marriage was going to last, almost as if her mother was going to make it so by sheer determination.

But it hadn’t happened for her marriage . . . and it didn’t happen for Emma either.

She came home three days later, walking with a shuffle, as if she’d forgotten how it was done, silent as a tomb, lost in a distant world outside of reality. Mom took care of her during the day while Jamie was at school, and Jamie was in charge of her at night.

Emma Whelan, one of the most popular girls in school, Jamie’s outgoing older sister, was gone. In her place was the special-needs woman with the dark memory that would rise

up almost every night into shouting screams that Jamie would try to soothe away.

“I see his eyes!” she would cry. “I see his eyes!”

And she would say it and say it and say it until she fell back into exhaustion.

After three years of it, Jamie eloped with the first guy she met at community college. She rode on the back of his motorcycle to her new life in Los Angeles, leaving Emma in her mom’s care. Even though Emma’s nightly fits had subsided by that time, she still was childlike enough to need some supervision. Jamie came to realize that her mother expected her to help out indefinitely, but when Emma was well enough to dress and feed herself and work part-time at Theo’s Thrift Shop, Jamie left.

Irene Whelan never forgave her youngest daughter, and Jamie never forgave herself.

Chapter Two

Now . . .

Come home.

Jamie sat straight up in bed, heart pounding, half awake, fumbling for the light switch.

She'd heard the words plain as day. In her mother's voice.

The light switched on, flooding her bedroom with warm, yellow illumination. She could see the worn, marred chest of drawers at the end of her bed, with its untidy array of makeup items, ones she'd used, ones she'd set aside to throw away.

No one there. The room was empty.

Her pulse still rocketing, she sank back against the pillows, eyes wide open. She was no stranger to fear. She'd lived with it ever since the babysitting attack eighteen years earlier.

Five a.m. Too early to call Mom to make sure everything was all right with her.

Maybe it had something to do with Emma.

Jamie was swept once more by her age-old guilt. More than half her life had passed since her sister had been changed forever. Closing her eyes, she drew in a shuddering breath and blocked out the memory, but it was etched into the

curves and whorls of her brain, never to be forgotten or even diminished. She could push it away, but it was never gone. Just out of reach every time she sought to kill it entirely.

Throwing back the covers, she jumped out of bed, grabbing up the robe she'd tossed over the end bedstead. She walked to the window and stared out. Beneath the yellowish streetlights, she could see the roofs of other apartment buildings and the cluster of other residences, houses, and condos, all jammed together in this part of Los Angeles. Wires overhead. The beat of helicopter rotors seemingly a daily occurrence. The roads and alleyways crammed with parked cars. She had a designated parking spot for her aging Toyota Camry, but more times than she liked to admit she had to shoo somebody out of her spot. The only positive was that the school where she mainly substitute taught was a quick drive away. She'd been trying to get on full-time, but it was almost fall and she'd yet to be called. Over the summer, she'd been working at a nearby Vietnamese restaurant, serving up banh mi sandwiches and hearty bowls of Pho to make ends meet. She was trying not to dip too far into her meager savings. It was barely enough to get by, and her daughter, Harley, was doing her part by babysitting as well.

Babysitting . . .

Everything came back to the night of Emma's attack. Sometimes Jamie felt a spurt of pure fury. Why hadn't the police caught the guy? There'd been three attacks that summer and fall. One in Vancouver, one in Gresham, and one in River Glen. Maybe they were connected. Maybe they weren't. But why didn't somebody know? Emma's attack was a cold case, but damn it, whoever did it was still out there.

"Emma deserved better," she muttered, fully aware that she'd run away from the problem.

After a few moments, she crawled back in bed, still in her robe. She drew the lapels up to her chin and watched the

digital clock work its way to six. Her cell phone was on the nightstand. She unhooked the charger and picked it up, scrolled through her favorites list. Her mother's number was fourth, just below the two school districts she worked for most often. After that, she had the number for CPK, California Pizza Kitchen, Harley's favorite restaurant, which made great salads along with pizza, one with easy pickups.

She put a call in to her mother and braced herself for the icy reception she was sure to receive. Mom loved Harley and was always eager to see her, whenever Jamie returned to River Glen, which wasn't often. But Jamie's relationship with her mother was fraught. It had been ever since Emma's attack.

The phone went to voice mail. As soon as it clicked on, she cleared her throat and said, "Hey, Mom. It's Jamie. Just wanted to see how things were going." She cringed at the sound of her voice. So light and careful. "I'll call back later."

She hung up and got out of bed again. Shrugging out of her robe, she pulled off her sleep shirt and headed for the shower. She let the hot water stream down her face. In her mind, she pictured how Emma had looked that last year of high school. A cheerleader with a bright smile, glinting blue eyes, and long, lustrous, light brown hair. Her attacker had carved a jagged line down her shoulder blade that looked like a jack-o'-lantern's mouth. The scar had faded, but it was still easy to see. Had he meant to kill her? A murder gone wrong? Emma was running from him and likely slipped and—

A dark, shadowy figure appeared on the other side of the frosted glass.

Jamie shrieked and dropped the soap.

"God, Mom, it's just me," Harley said, half-annoyed. "Sorry."

"It's all right." Her pulse raced.

"Your phone's ringing. It's probably the school."

Harley didn't like it much when Jamie substituted at her school. But then, Harley didn't like much of anything when it came to school. She'd asked to be homeschooled by Jamie. Ha. There was no way Jamie was going to put herself through that living hell. Harley was smart, capable, and tough as nails. Like her father. She just wasn't good at taking directions.

But then, neither was Jamie at her age.

Harley left and Jamie towed off and hurriedly found her phone, on the bed where she'd tossed it.

It was indeed the school district, and she quickly called back and said she would take the job. It was at Harley's school, of course. Well, too bad. Jamie needed to put food on the table. Paul Woodward might have been Harley's father, but he was more of a teenager than his daughter could ever think of being.

"Her name'll be Harley," he'd insisted, christening her after the motorcycle company, Harley-Davidson. Paul had been a motorcycle freak from the get-go, who'd moved Jamie and his young daughter from place to place around Los Angeles, where he'd attempted to be a stuntman. Jamie had worked as a waitress and finished up her aborted college career with night classes, finishing her fifth year literally weeks before Paul's death on the 405 freeway. Paul had pooh-poohed her outrage at the motorcycles that would drive between the cars during traffic tangles, maniacally changing lanes, careless of when the stalled cars would start moving again. "It's legal," he kept saying.

And then he'd become a victim of that very same thing. Clipping a car as it suddenly slowed, unable to stop himself from flipping end over end to his death.

Spooky Karma.

Jamie quickly dressed and called to her daughter as she headed out the door to her car. When Harley climbed in and

learned Jamie was subbing at her school, she groaned. "Tell me you're not in my classroom."

"I'm not in your classroom."

"Good."

Jamie squeezed the Camry into a spot in the school lot. She only had five more payments on it. That would help.

Briefly, she thought of the house she'd grown up in, the one Mom had won in the divorce. It had been in her father's family for years, but her dad lost it when he drifted away with his girlfriend. He'd been a ghost in Jamie's life ever since Emma's attack. His perfect Emma was broken, and he'd gone so far as saying they were all cursed. At least he hadn't blamed just Jamie.

Harley was silent as they climbed out of the car. Fifteen years old and moody as hell. She and Jamie had always had a bit of a push-and-pull relationship, but the last few years had been a living nightmare. Jamie, aware of how difficult those years were, was giving her daughter lots of space. She loved her fiercely, but the ingratitude of youth sometimes caused words to fail her.

Jamie purposely let Harley walk ahead of her so her daughter wouldn't be seen entering with her mother. But today Harley decided to hang back, her steps slowing, almost as if she were waiting for Jamie to catch up.

They reached the double doors together. Harley made no move to open them, so Jamie, aware that students were coming up the steps behind them, clasped a handle.

"Mom," Harley said, in that tone that bodes serious stuff is about to be revealed.

Jamie's pulse sped up again. She looked into the anxious face of her daughter. Her heart clutched. "Yeah?"

"I had a weird nightmare. Grandma was standing at the door to her house and saying something I couldn't hear."

"My mom?" The hairs on the back of Jamie's arms lifted.

"I think it was . . . 'come home.'"

Jamie's ears buzzed. She felt faint. She could see the same image of her mother, as if Harley had planted it in front of her eyes.

"Mom! You okay? Mom?"

"Yeah, yeah." Jamie drew a breath. "I'm fine. I gotta . . . make a call. You go ahead."

"Jesus. You're freaking me out!"

"Just . . . give me a minute."

Harley threw her an angry, frightened look as Jamie stumbled back down the stairs, breaking through a clutch of girls who called hello to Harley. She shoved her hand into the purse slung over her shoulder, scrabbling for her cell. Pulled out the phone.

One missed call.

Mom.

How hadn't she heard it?

She punched in the number and it rang and rang and finally went to voice mail. She clicked off, feeling like she was having an out-of-body experience.

There was a message, she realized belatedly.

Heart beating heavily, she pushed the button. She was oblivious to the noise surrounding her, the students parting around her as she stood on the grass by the flagpole, the sea of faces blurring as if in an impressionistic landscape.

"Hi, Jamie. You should come home. Mom's dead," Emma's voice said matter-of-factly. "You'd better come home. The po-po's here. Mom's dead. And I'm gonna need help."

Chapter Three

It took two weeks for Jamie to put things together, sell her already secondhand furniture, ship necessary items to River Glen, and generally wrap up her life in Los Angeles. When she was finished, she was surprised at how little there really was to do to effect the move. She'd thought Harley might object to being yanked out of school when the school year had barely begun, but she was completely sanguine and almost eager for the move, if you could even use the word "eager" when describing the teenager. Resistant, recalcitrant, suspicious, and reluctant were better adjectives.

However, Jamie had overheard a snippet of conversation between Harley and a friend, and it appeared that a boy Harley had been interested in had been seen with one of Harley's friends. "It doesn't matter, I'm leaving," Harley had told the person on the other end of the call. "They can do whatever the hell they want."

So maybe that was the reason Jamie hadn't heard one word of flak. As soon as she'd announced that they were moving back to Oregon, Harley had started packing up, as if she'd just been waiting for her mother to make that decision.

They stuffed the Camry to the gills and drove straight through, almost sixteen hours from Los Angeles to River

Glen, taking a few bathroom stops and two turnoffs for fast food drive-throughs. Harley, who was flirting with vegetarianism, had fallen on her Big Mac like a ravenous wolf, and Jamie had hidden a faint smile and done the same. They were in crisis, of a sort. They could get back to being their better selves once they were home.

Home.

As the miles passed beneath the Camry's balding tires, Jamie's thoughts hovered around her mother and Emma and the events of eighteen years earlier. The guilt she'd felt upon leaving, which had been a constant companion, was magnified a thousand times. Though she knew none of it was her fault, like always, she couldn't quite make herself believe it. If she hadn't wanted to go to the Stillwell party so badly, if she hadn't switched her babysitting job with Emma, if she hadn't raced off to her new life with Paul so eagerly, almost maniacally, maybe all their lives would have been substantially better.

Except now Mom was dead. She'd died on the very night Jamie—and Harley, apparently—had received those eerily creepy messages of her death. Irene Whelan was a victim of heart failure, according to Emma, who was very short on serious information. Jamie managed to connect with Theo Reskett, from the Thrift Shop, but she, too, had been kept in the dark about Mom's deteriorating health.

"Emma never said a word," Theo revealed. "You'd think she would have told me, but she never said a word about your mother."

No one had told Jamie either that Mom was ailing from heart disease and had been for a while.

But then, you didn't ask, did you? You didn't want to know.

That wasn't exactly true . . . she *had* wanted to know. She just hadn't wanted to be sucked into a conversation with

Mom, or even Emma, that would go round and round and only serve to exacerbate her guilt, which it invariably did.

Theo owned and managed Theo's Thrift Shop, Emma's place of employment ever since she'd recovered from the attack that nearly killed her. Since Mom's death, Theo had stepped in and stayed with Emma, though Emma had insisted that she was fully capable of taking care of herself, which was almost true, except it wasn't. Emma left alone was a little like leaving a teenager in charge of a house while the parents were away. Most things might be taken care of, maybe all, but there was also the chance of serious problems erupting, bad choices being made. Emma, nearing forty, had the mind of a twelve-year-old . . . maybe. She'd regressed after the attack and had never fully moved forward developmentally since.

"I see his eyes!" she still cried whenever she was stressed. Mom had told Jamie that much. When she was still living with her sister and mother, Jamie had tried and tried to learn what that meant, but pressing Emma had only increased her fear and distress, and Mom had angrily told Jamie to back off. Though Emma's hysteria had diminished in the years after the attack, her attacks of fear almost gone by the time Jamie left with Paul, they'd never completely disappeared.

Now, as she and Harley reached the outskirts of River Glen, Jamie drew a calming breath. She hadn't seen Emma in nearly two years and was anxious about meeting her again and the living arrangements that would need to be made. Emma needed a caretaker, and that caretaker had been Mom. Now it was going to be Jamie, at least for the time being. It was hard to know what to expect next, impossible to plan. Jamie was going to have to take things day by day.

But one thing was for certain, at least in Jamie's mind, and that was that she was going to fulfill all requirements needed for her to get her teaching license in Oregon. She was duty bound to be in the state at least for a while, and

though substituting was fine, Jamie really needed a full-time job. She'd made a point of lamming out all those years ago, but she felt almost glad to "come home" as her mother had requested in her dream . . . and Harley's. . . .

Jamie shook that off. She and Harley had left for Oregon in the early hours of the morning and now, as they reached the outskirts of River Glen, it was about six p.m. Harley, who'd been half-sleeping most of the trip, suddenly straightened in the passenger seat. Her long, dark hair was tangled and she brushed it away from her face. A soft smattering of freckles crossed the bridge of her nose and her blue eyes were intense, a gift from Paul as Jamie's eyes were brown. Paul had called her his "Little Doe" or sometimes, "my brown-eyed girl," other times "Raggedy Bitch," or even more often, "What the fuck, Jamie?" which was how she most often remembered him and their relationship. A sad truth.

"That's the Stillwell place," Jamie said as they drove past the entrance to the long drive that led to Race and Deon Stillwell's home. She'd learned from her friend, Camryn, whose contact with Jamie was mostly through Christmas cards, that both of the Stillwell parents were gone and the two sons had apparently inherited Stillwell Seed and Feed and still lived in the family home.

Harley peered down the long, passing drive that wound through the hedges and out of sight. Only the roof of the house could be glimpsed from the road. "That's where you were the night Emma was stabbed."

"Yes," Jamie said soberly. She always felt that same stab of guilt. Maybe she deserved it. Mom had never hidden her feelings about how she felt about Jamie's switch with Emma, and she'd never been afraid to talk about that night in front of Harley, even when Jamie had protested.

"It's really too bad," said Harley.

Jamie silently agreed.

“But if things hadn’t happened that way, I wouldn’t be here. You would have never run off with Dad.”

Jamie wasn’t sure whether that was an olive branch or a jab of some kind. Or maybe it was neither. Just Harley relating what was on her mind. “Hard to say.”

They drove into River Glen proper. The downtown area was made up of restored storefronts and a central square. It looked better now, Jamie decided. Fresh paint on the buildings and crosswalks. A new set of traffic lights. Modern city meters that allowed for credit card payments. A row of Kelly-green motorbikes, which she saw were rentals, the kind you could take around town and exchange for another.

“Wow,” Harley said in surprise, staring at the bikes.

“I know, right? I thought those were only in large cities, like Portland.”

“How old do you have to be?”

“Sixteen, I’m sure, at least. With a license.”

“Damn.”

Jamie would have berated her for swearing, as she automatically did as a matter of course, but they were turning onto Clifford Street, the street she’d grown up on, and she could see the outlines of her mother’s house. She glided to a stop on the opposite side of the street, taking her measure of it. The maple trees lining the street had grown, and the dogwood in the center of the front yard still had a few green leaves. Autumn hadn’t gained its harshest grip yet.

An older, green Chrysler minivan was parked on the street in front of the house, its side stenciled with Theo’s Thrift Shop and a phone number. Theo was eager to pass off her increased caretaker responsibilities to Jamie.

“Aren’t you going to pull in?” Harley’s blue eyes regarded Jamie critically.

“Yeah . . .”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s just kind of . . . strange.”

“’Cause Grandma’s gone.” She said it with a nod, as if she understood completely, though there was no way for Harley to grasp the intricacies of Jamie’s relationship with her mother. Jamie had trouble grasping those complexities herself sometime. She’d resented her mother, especially for blaming her, but she’d loved her, too. Fiercely. Which had made Mom’s anger at her all the harder to accept.

“All right,” Jamie said now, and cranked the wheel, aiming the Camry toward the driveway. They bumped along the cracked asphalt, and Jamie pulled up in front of the garage door. “Leave everything for now. Let’s just go inside.”

Harley followed Jamie up the back steps. Jamie wondered if the keys to the house were still in the backyard gnome. One of these days she was going to have to find out, but for now, she just banged on the door.

She heard a dog barking, small, excited yips, and she and Harley exchanged a glance. While Irene Whelan had been alive, there had been no pets.

“Dogs dig up gardens,” Mom had said.

“We don’t have to have a dog,” Jamie had argued. “How about a cat?”

“No.”

Even Emma had tried to persuade their mother. “A small dog. I’ll make sure it doesn’t get into the garden.”

“No.” Mom had been adamant. Emma had started wheedling, but for once, Mom was proof against Jamie’s older sister’s tactics. No dog. No cat. No pets.

Emma came to the back door, throwing the lock and yanking it inward. “Hi, Jamie. Hi, Harley,” she said in her monotone way.

Emma’s hair had grown out to her shoulders, the light brown tresses darker and streaked with gray. She blinked at the bangs hanging in her eyes, but didn’t brush them aside. Her shirt was light-and-darker-gray-striped, the tails

hanging over a pair of black sweatpants. Her feet were in once-white sneakers that had seen better days.

“Good to see you, Emma,” Jamie said, sounding somewhat stiff, not how she wanted to come off.

Harley said, “Hello, I—” just as a black-and-white streak of fluff shot from the front of the house and swarmed their feet, nearly tumbling down the back steps in its haste to greet them. A small dog of indiscriminate breed, Jamie determined, its bright, beady eyes nearly obscured by a thatch of white-and-black fur that fell forward, much like Emma’s bangs.

“How cute!” Harley cried, reaching for the animal. It lithely sidestepped her attempts to catch it and started barking madly, as if it suddenly decided it was a watchdog pointing out an intruder.

“That’s Dummy,” said Emma.

“Dummy?” Jamie repeated.

“He has a stupid name, so I call him Dummy,” she explained as they entered the house. “He’s Theo’s.”

“I saw her van outside,” said Jamie. Harley was still trying to corral the speeding dog.

“It’s the Thrift Shop van,” corrected Emma.

“Yes . . . well . . .” Jamie was reminded how everything had to be precise with her sister.

They followed Emma inside, with “Dummy” squirreling after them, squeezing between their legs, nearly tripping them, then shooting forward like a dart when Theo, who’d been in the living room, ducked her head around the corner so they could see her.

“Oh, we’ve been waiting for you!” she declared, unable to hide her relief. She’d called Jamie several times, urging her to hurry home, but Jamie had been unable to get here any sooner than she had.

Theo’s hair was a mop of gray curls and she wore a pair

of half-glasses at the tip of her nose. She was in jeans and a red plaid flannel shirt open over a black T-shirt.

"I saw the van outside," said Jamie.

"That thing is on its last legs. Truly. I don't know what I'm gonna do when it's gone, but that day is coming."

"I'll get you a new one," said Emma.

"I know, doll." Theo smiled indulgently at her.

With what money? Jamie almost asked, but she knew that would be a waste of time. Emma's reality was Emma's reality.

Harley asked, "What's the dog's name?"

"Bartholomew," Theo said. "He charged to the back door before I could catch him."

"Dummy," Emma said with a nod, as if her point were proved.

"He's so cute!" said Harley.

"Yes, well. He's a charmer." Theo made eye contact with the dog and shook her head, which caused "Dummy" to dance around on his hind legs and bark some more. "Oh, stop it," Theo said with a wave of her hand, but she was smiling indulgently all the same. "I've got to go. I laid out some dinner for you. Nothing much. Just wanted you to have something when you got here. That's quite a drive, isn't it? I'm no good in a car that long."

"I'm no good in a car that long," repeated Emma.

Bartholomew had started growling, but Jamie thought it might be a good-natured, playful kind of noise. At least she hoped it was.

"Come here, you," Theo said, swiftly moving to grasp the dog's collar before he could shoot away, which he'd definitely gathered himself to do. She dragged him forward until she could get her arms around him. "Okay, now. Stop wiggling, you little beast." Over her shoulder as she headed toward the front door she said, "I'm going to leave and give you all some peace."

“You’re going to leave us?” Emma asked, alarmed.

“Your sister’s here now, Emma.” Theo regarded Emma soberly, making eye contact. “I’ll see you at the store.”

“But you’re coming back?”

“No . . . not here, to your house. Jamie and her daughter are here. I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name.” She peered at Harley, who was still enamored with the dog.

“Harley,” said Jamie.

“Oh, yeah. Hi,” said Harley.

“Harley. How could I forget? I won’t forget again. It’s memorable. I gave the lawyer your number. I told you that, right? I have his number on my desk and I’ll text it to you.”

“He called me,” Jamie assured her. “I’m meeting with him on Monday.”

“Oh, good.” She hesitated, holding the dog close to her side as he was wont to wriggle free. “You need anything else . . . ?”

“I think we’re okay. Thanks, Theo,” Jamie said, meaning it.

She gave Jamie a sad smile. “It’s been a hard month,” she admitted. “Take care.”

When she was gone, there was a moment of silence. Harley was looking through the front windows wistfully, her eyes on the dog. Emma seemed kind of shell-shocked. Clearly she hadn’t expected Theo to leave her with, well, a family that were mostly strangers to her.

She swiped at her bangs, said, “Mom always cut my hair.”

“I’ll get you to a stylist,” Jamie said.

“I can do it,” said Harley. “I can cut your bangs and trim up your hair.”

“Since when?” asked Jamie.

“Since . . . about now. I’ve cut some girls’ hair at school.”

“I don’t think—”

“Okay,” said Emma, and walked toward the small dining set off the kitchen.

“Right now?” Harley was surprised.

“No time like the present,” Emma said succinctly. Another Mom-ism.

Harley looked happy. “Okay.”

“Wait. Maybe we should just try the bangs first?” Jamie suggested, seeing this was going to happen.

“I can do it,” Harley said again, a bit more belligerently, following after Emma.

Jamie couldn’t help glancing at the tabletop, unerringly finding the place where she’d carved her initials, JW, into the maple top. Mom had tried to sand them off, but even with her ministrations they were still visible. A stupid, childish whim that had caused one of their huge fights.

Emma said now, “It’s still there,” and Jamie looked up to realize her sister’s eyes had followed her gaze. “You should talk to Mom about it. It will make you feel better.”

Jamie’s pulse jumped, and she wasn’t quite sure how to take that. “Well, Mom isn’t here. . . .”

“Oh, yeah, she is.” She flung out an arm and pointed to the mantel. “There.”

A plain wooden box sat in center place.

“Are those . . . ?” Harley’s lips pressed into a grimace.

“Ashes.” Emma nodded importantly. “Mom went to the funeral place and signed up for it, so that she would be with us when we got together. She paid for it herself. The man told me.”

“The man?” Jamie asked.

“At the funeral place. He said she was in good hands. Theo agreed. She took me and Mom home and put Mom there. You should talk to her. It will make you feel better,” she said again.

“Well, that’s creepy,” said Harley, definitely put off.

“It’s not creepy,” said Jamie.

“Yes, it is!” her daughter disagreed. “Really creepy. I can’t even look that way. Where are your scissors? Do you have

some?" she asked Emma, turning a cold shoulder toward the fireplace.

"I'm not supposed to use them. Mom said."

"Could you just show me where they are?" Harley asked.

"Okay."

Emma led Harley down the hallway to the downstairs bathroom. Jamie could hear the medicine cabinet open and shut, and then several drawers pulled out and slammed closed again. She wandered toward the wooden box, reaching a hand up, then closing her fist before she could touch its smooth sides. It wasn't her mother. Her mother was gone. What remained were only ashes.

"I don't know if this is such a good idea," said Jamie when Harley had Emma seated in one of the kitchen chairs, scissors in hand.

"Could you get that out of my sight?" Harley asked, half-turning away as Emma was facing the mantel with a full-on view of the box.

"We are supposed to spread her in the garden," Emma said. "Theo said that's what you're supposed to do. Spread her out. Mom loved the garden, so we need to spread her out there. I was waiting for you."

"Sooner the better," muttered Harley. "And I think I'll pass."

"No. You come, too," stated Emma.

Jamie could see her daughter's expression even if Emma couldn't, and she had to smother a smile, the first moment of levity she'd felt in a long time. Harley was horrified, but didn't find it as easy to put off Emma as she could her mother.

"I'll start getting things from the car." Jamie headed away from the makeshift beauty shop.

"Can we get a dog, Mom?" Harley's voice floated after her.

"No dog. Mom won't allow it," said Emma.

"We'll see," Jamie called back.

“Mom won’t allow it!” Emma stated more emphatically.
Well, Mom’s not here.

Jamie stepped into the cool October evening. She stood outside for a minute, inhaling the sweet, heady scent of the roses that lined the side of the detached garage and bobbed their heads toward the yard. They were almost over, the leaves nearly gone, the petals growing limp. She recognized the brilliant red of Mr. Lincolns, her mother’s favorite.

This experiment of stepping in and taking care of Emma was going to be . . . different. A challenge, for sure, but maybe also a taste of family for Harley in a way she’d never had before. Paul had been gone too long for Harley to remember him as anything but a dim figure, more lore than reality. Jamie wasn’t sure how long she planned to stay, but it didn’t look like Emma could really live by herself. She was compromised and always would be.

Heart heavy, Jamie hefted out several boxes and set them on the driveway, which was spiderwebbed with cracks. For all the beauty of the garden, the house and garage, the drive and walkways, all looked like they could really use a good handyman. A good handyman and a cheap one. Jamie wasn’t entirely sure what her mother’s finances were, but she’d been contacted by one Elgin DeGuerre, the lawyer Theo had mentioned, and undoubtedly he’d be able to clear things up.

Before she’d left LA, Jamie had gone online and learned what her requirements for teaching would be in Oregon, and was planning to get started right away. Tomorrow morning, she was registering Harley in school. That was priority one. Preliminary information had been filed, but the school needed to see both Jamie and Harley to admit her.

Paperwork and more paperwork. A lot to be done to re-settle. Just thinking about it made Jamie tired and dispirited. What she could really use was a nice glass of wine, something crisp, clean, and dry. A glass of rosé, or Pinot Gris.

But not yet. There was still too much to do.

“Ta da!” Harley said, tossing her hands in Emma’s direction as Jamie came downstairs after her second trip to the car.

Emma’s bangs looked all right, good even, but one side of her shoulder-length hair was noticeably higher than the other. Jamie debated on what to say and decided to hell with the truth. “Looks good,” she stated brightly.

Harley regarded her suspiciously, then looked at Emma. Her face clouded. “It’s shitty.”

“Don’t swear,” Jamie and Emma said together, with Emma adding, “Why is it shitty?”

“It’s uneven. I might have to make it a little shorter on this side.” She pointed to the longer sweep of hair.

“Okay.” Emma sat back down.

Jamie spent the next hour finishing unloading the car and putting their things in their respective bedrooms. Emma, looking better after Harley’s corrections—Jamie had to admit the cut was not too bad—was still ensconced in her old room, and Harley had pounced on Jamie’s one-time room next to it. Jamie found herself placing her belongings in her mother’s room, though she made up the fold-out couch in the tiny office-cum-storage closet-cum-guest room next to Emma’s. She could dress in Mom’s bedroom, but she couldn’t sleep in her bed just yet. Maybe never. It seemed sacrilegious in an indefinable way. It was Mom’s bed. No one else’s. She’d bought it new when Dad lammed out. Jamie would figure out what to do over time.

In the back of her head, she was seeing this move home as temporary. Maybe she and Harley would stick around the Portland area. Maybe not. Being in the house she grew up in felt like going backward. She didn’t want it. Didn’t even know if there was enough money to keep it. If she and Harley did stay in the area, they would need to find their own place.

But what about Emma?

An inner part of Jamie was already rebelling. Emma was capable of taking care of herself on a day-to-day basis, at least domestically. She could dress herself, take a shower, brush her teeth, even put on makeup, pretty much the full-on toilette of anyone else her age. But she had difficulty in so many other areas. Socially, for sure, but also the comment their mother had made about her inability with scissors. She'd never been able to cook because she struggled with processes. She was forgetful, yet sometimes frighteningly insightful. There was no accounting for what she was thinking at any given time.

Traitorously, Jamie wondered if Dad would be willing to take care of Emma. At least some of the time. And maybe there could be a helper, an aide of some kind.

She's your responsibility.

Jamie looked at her mother's clothes, hanging in the closet. She was going to have to gather them up and donate them. She was going to have to do a lot of donating and cleaning up . . . and organizing . . . and figuring out what to do.

Chapter Four

Jamie went downstairs to find Emma watching a cooking show and Harley checking out YouTube on the laptop she and Jamie shared.

“What’s that?” Jamie asked Harley softly, nodding her head toward the television. Emma was seated on the couch directly in front of it, rapt.

“Emma’s favorite show. They’re making risotto. She watches it every day, along with a whole bunch of other episodes on the DVR.”

“Did you set it up for her?” They were both whispering.

“Uh-uh. She’s good at it. She told me not to DVR anything because it takes up her space. She said Grandma was terrible at it.”

“My mom thought TV was a brain drain. She never watched anything but the news.”

Harley made a disgruntled sound. “She was wrong.”

“Yeah, well . . .”

Into the pause that followed, Harley said, “Should we tell her that Grandma contacted us?”

“She didn’t contact us,” Jamie denied.

Harley didn’t say anything, just looked at her, silently calling her a liar.

Jamie turned away and opened the refrigerator door. "Looks like we're going to have to go out to dinner."

"I already ate," said Emma, never turning from the television set.

Had she heard them? Jamie wasn't sure. "Harley and I need to get something. Is Deno's Pizzeria still at the end of the street?"

"Uh-huh."

"Can you stay here alone while we go eat . . . ?"

"Uh-huh. But I want to go with you."

"Oh, okay."

They all found their coats and climbed in the Camry with Emma in the back seat. "It's safer," Emma told them, which tickled Harley, who claimed shotgun with no qualms about usurping her aunt's position.

Friday morning dawned dark and gray, and before Jamie could get to the school, huge raindrops fell, turning into a rattling storm of hail.

"Whoa," Emma said from the back seat, staring out at the white balls of hail bouncing on the rain-drenched street all around them.

Harley said, "Holy hell."

Jamie and Emma said together, "Don't swear," and Emma added, "Mom said it costs a quarter every time you swear."

"My mom'd be broke if we lived here," said Harley. "She swears all the time."

"That's not true," Jamie said, but thought, *Okay, maybe it is*. But she'd starve for a month rather than admit it. "We won't be long," she added as they pulled into one of the few spots and waited while hail continued to pelt them.

"Mom should be in the garden. She would like this," said Emma, peering through the fogged windows.

“You mean her ashes,” Jamie said carefully.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . .” Emma quoted flatly. “She should be in the garden.”

“I was thinking about a memorial service, small,” Jamie said. “A few people over to the house and then we could spread Mom’s ashes.”

“I am not doing that.” Harley slid a glance into the back seat to Emma, who was still trying to peer past the steamy window.

“She will haunt you,” said Emma, which drew a gasp from Harley.

“Grandma liked me. Loved me,” she shot back. “She would never do anything to hurt me!”

“Now, wait, let’s keep it real. She’s not going to—” Jamie began.

“She wants you to be with her when she’s put to rest.” Emma was adamant. “In the garden.”

“We’ll spread her ashes this afternoon,” Jamie said quickly. “After Harley’s back from school and you’re home from the Thrift Shop. We’ll have people over later.” Harley said nothing, just stared through the windshield. Emma looked perturbed, her expression darkening. “Mom wants to be in the garden,” Jamie rified. “I get that. We want her to be happy. We’ll make sure she’s happy today, okay? Okay, Emma?”

“Harley needs to be there, too,” she said stubbornly.

At the school Jamie slid a look toward her daughter, whose face was tight and white. Feeling the weight of her gaze, Harley flicked her a look back.

“Okay,” she agreed reluctantly.

“Emma, we’ll be right back,” Jamie said. She’d wanted to leave Emma at home to drive her to work after she saw Harley off, but Emma refused to be alone.

“I’m coming,” Emma said.

“Would you mind waiting?” asked Jamie. “I’d like to take Harley by myself. It’s her first day and all.”

Emma scowled and looked as if she were about to argue. “Don’t be long,” she said.

“I won’t.”

Though the hail had abated, the rain continued, and Harley flipped up the hood of her coat and ran ahead of Jamie into the school. The office was the first door on the left and it was open. There was a din of voices and scuffling footsteps and slamming lockers as Jamie opened the door. She tried to get Harley to go in ahead of her, but she stayed right behind her.

At the counter, Jamie was conscious of the water dripping from the hem of her raincoat onto the tile floor. She explained who she was, and the administrative receptionist clicked some keys on her computer and pulled up Harley’s paperwork. There was some question over her address. They wanted proof that Harley lived in the school district and Jamie had nothing in her name to support that fact. With a dark look, she handed Harley a packet and said there was a map of the school in there, among other helpful items. After promising her that she would get the school all the pieces of information needed ASAP, Jamie turned to Harley, who looked aghast when she offered to walk with her to her first class.

“Don’t worry. I can find it,” Harley told her. “They all know I’m coming, right?” She glanced at the administrator.

“Your teachers, yes. If you would like another student to show you around, I can—”

“Nope. Got it. I’m good.” Harley hitched her backpack onto her shoulder. She wore a denim jacket over a cream-colored T-shirt, a pair of ripped jeans, and sneakers that looked as if someone had tumbled them through the dryer with rocks.

“See you this afternoon.”

“Yeah, for the ashes. Great. Can’t wait.”

And she pushed through the door and disappeared into the hall, heading in the general direction of the noisy students.

Jamie made sure her name and correct phone number were on the list for substitutes. She was impressed by Harley’s fortitude, yet fully aware it was because her daughter would rather face a pool of sharks than be seen being escorted by her mother.

She headed back outside. The hail and rain had stopped and there was a watery sun playing tag with some fast-moving clouds. A woman in a blue suit and white blouse, her blond hair swept into a chignon, was hurrying up the walk. She and Jamie made eye contact at the same moment and the woman stumbled a bit.

“It’s . . . Jamie, right?” she said on a surprised intake of breath. “Jamie Whelan?”

Jamie took a half beat before saying, “Yes. Uh . . .”

“Victoria Stapleton. Victoria Barnes Stapleton. It’s good to see you! What a surprise. Do you have a student in high school? My son’s a junior.”

Icky Vicky.

“Um, my daughter. Harley. She’s starting today, actually. She’s a sophomore.”

“Harley. Huh. My, my, you got going about as fast as I did on the parent track.” She laughed. “Did you just get into town?”

“Last night.”

“Are you staying?”

There was a navy Kate Spade purse slung over her shoulder and her blue pumps were the same shade. The ring on her left hand was big and sparkly and ornate, a ribbon of diamonds sweeping across her finger.

“For the time being. My mother just died.”

“Oh. I heard that. I’m so sorry. How’s Emma doing?”

Though Icky Vicky and Emma had been friends and classmates, Jamie felt a swelling of protective instinct and anger . . . anger that Icky Vicky had clearly prospered since high school, whereas every day was, in its way, a struggle for Emma. The anger melted almost as soon as it formed, however, and guilt took its place. Guilt. Her old friend.

“She’s doing all right.”

“Are you . . . well, I know your mom was taking care of her . . . so are you now . . . ?”

“That’s the current plan.”

She brightened. “Well, your daughter will love it at River Glen High. My son’s on the football team, and River Glen has a real chance of winning district this year, maybe even taking state!”

“Wonderful.”

She shot Jamie a quick look, clearly uncertain if there was sarcasm behind the word. There was, but Jamie had carefully kept it from being heard.

“Well, I’m kind of in a rush. I’m in real estate, you know,” she said, slipping a hand into the purse and magically producing a red card with gold lettering. “If you need anything, anything at all, just call. I would love to personally reacquaint you with the town and all our friends.”

In her peripheral vision, Jamie saw Emma getting out of her car. “Thanks, Vicky,” Jamie said, accepting the card. If there was room in Harley’s shark tank, Jamie would plunge right in rather than be trotted out in front of anyone she’d known from her River Glen days.

“It’s Victoria. And that’s my cell phone,” she said, pointing a navy-blue lacquered nail at the number on the card. Do you have a number, or email?”

Jamie had no interest in handing out her cell number yet. Emma was standing outside the car, looking at both women. Jamie worried that she would come over and prolong the

conversation with Vicky, so she rattled off her email and Vicky whipped her hand back inside her purse to grab a small notepad with a pen attached to write it down.

“Your phone?” she asked.

“Not set up yet,” Jamie lied.

“There’s a new Verizon store where Barnaby’s used to be,” she said helpfully.

“Oh. No more Barnaby’s, huh?” Barnaby’s had been a kind of tired-looking diner that Mom had long felt should be shuttered.

“Nope. But the Waystation is still in business, if you can believe it.”

The Waystation was a dive bar where, once upon a time, kids from high school had been able to pay some of the regulars a little extra cash for them to buy them beer.

“Okay. I’ll see you later, then, huh?” she said with a brilliant smile. Icky Vicky had had some dental work done over the years, it appeared.

Jamie hurried over to where Emma was still just standing by the car.

“I saw him,” Emma said.

“Who?”

“The guy who did this to me.”

“What?” Jamie froze in the act of pulling out her keys. “Who did what?”

“Why I have trouble.”

“Who are you talking about?”

She pointed up the street. “He just drove by. Going to the police station. That’s where he works.”

Jamie’s mouth formed the word, “Who?” but she never said it. She only knew one guy from high school who’d gone into the police force.

“Cooper.” Emma’s mouth quirked. Maybe a smile. “You had a big crush on him.”

Jamie fleetingly felt surprise that Emma had known, but

there was too much else to unpack in her statement right now. “What do you mean, he did this to you?”

“He was there. You know he was there.”

“The night you babysat for the Ryerson twins?”

Emma nodded.

“A bunch of the guys from your class were there, trying to scare you,” Jamie pointed out. That had been established long ago, though none of the boys had been at the scene when Emma was attacked.

Emma cocked her head, frowning.

“They all came forward to the police,” Jamie reminded her. “You saw them. They admitted to it, and you said so, too. But that was before you were . . . hurt.”

“But he came back?” She asked it as a question, clearly confused.

“I never heard that. You never said that before. He’s a police officer now.”

“They came back,” she said, looking past Jamie as if to the long-ago past.

Jamie waited. She realized her heart was pounding triple time, like she’d just run a blisteringly fast race. Emma had never said as much about the night she was attacked, at least not to Jamie’s knowledge.

And there was no way Cooper Haynes had attacked her. No way. As she’d said, the man was a police officer now, and he’d been a decent guy in high school, too. After Emma’s attack, a group of her male classmates had come forward and told the authorities that they knew she was babysitting and had decided to scare her. Emma was a popular girl they all liked. Halloween had been less than a month away that night, so they’d decided to spook Emma and therefore tapped on the Ryersons’ windows, rattled the garbage cans, found one unlatched window that would *creeaaakkkk* when they sawed it back and forth. It was teenage high jinks; nothing sinister. According to them, Emma had come out on the

porch and good-naturedly told them all to go back to fourth grade where they belonged. Two of the guys, Race Stillwell and Dug, who was really Patrick “Dug” Douglas, had been on their way to “haunt” Emma when Jamie ran into them leaving the Stillwell party just as she was arriving to it that night. In fact, they were the two boys Emma had yelled to as she stood on the porch, but there had been a number of others there, too, Cooper Haynes among them.

Jamie, like almost everyone else, had learned this information when it was reported in the paper. She could still recall Mom swearing softly beneath her breath after reading it, crumpling up that newspaper into a myriad of tight, little balls, her face a cold, stone mask. Jamie had gathered the pieces of newspaper surreptitiously from the trash and unwrapped all the little balls till she found the offending piece of print about Emma’s classmates. She, too, had felt a wave of fury at them. How could they? *How could they?* And yet, it was clear that whatever had happened to Emma was after they’d all left.

Now she looked at her sister and asked cautiously, “Who came back?”

Emma, who’d been gazing in the direction she’d said she’d seen Cooper go, jerked as if goosed. “Who?”

“The night you were hurt at the Ryersons’? You just said ‘they came back.’ You mean the guys from your class.” She swallowed and added, “Cooper.”

“Cooper Haynes. You had a crush on him. That’s why you wanted to go to the party.”

“Yes,” Jamie admitted. Clearly, Emma had that information, so it was no good denying it. “But was he one who came back?”

“He liked me.” She sounded wistful. “They all did.”

“They did,” Jamie agreed. “You said they came back,” she reminded her, opening her driver’s door. Emma remained outside, staring down the road, almost as if she were waiting

for something. "You'd better get in before it starts raining again."

"It won't rain." She turned her face to the sky.

"Or hailing."

Emma took a few more minutes and then finally climbed into the back seat again.

Jamie drove away from the school and in the direction of the Thrift Shop, a route that took her past the police station.

"No one ever said they came back," Jamie said, hoping for even the slightest bit of further information.

"No one ever said they didn't," said Emma wisely.

"Who came back?" Jamie was tired of this pussyfooting game.

Emma's eyes were glued to the police station as they went by. Jamie flicked a look at the unimposing, one-story, tan brick building, but her gaze came right back to Emma in the rearview mirror.

"We should tell Dad that Mom died," Emma said, meeting Jamie's eyes in the rearview mirror. "That's the right thing to do. You always need to do the right thing."

"Dad knows," Jamie told her.

Emma nodded gravely. "He's an asshole, but Mom still loved him. He should be with us, too."

Jamie clamped down her frustration. It felt like there was something very important in Emma's revelations about "they all came back," but maybe it was blither-blather. A lot of what Emma said was. Sometimes she repeated things she'd heard on television . . . even from commercials . . . that she incorporated into her own reality.

But still . . .

"We're going to spread Mom's ashes today, and I doubt our father can make it," said Jamie.

"All you can do is ask," Emma said in an eerily on-point mimicry of their mother's words and tone.

"You're right about that."

Ten minutes later, Jamie watched her sister mount the rear steps to Theo's Thrift Shop's back door and disappear inside. She drove home slowly, reviewing their conversation. Talking to Emma was like starting ten different conversations and never finishing even one. Was her comment about her guy classmates even true? The boys' statements had been vetted by the police, and Cooper had even gone on to become part of law enforcement himself.

You really, really don't want him to have any part of it.

"Let it be Race, or Dug, or any of the others," she said aloud.

If it was even true.

Which was unlikely.

Most people had initially believed it was the Babysitter Stalker who'd attacked Emma that night. Jamie had wanted to be in that camp. But further information on those other attacks had poked holes in that theory, and it didn't appear to be so. Jamie had wanted that version to be the truth so she wouldn't have to look at anyone close to Emma: her friends, her boyfriends, anyone.

How did she know how you felt about Cooper?

Was it more obvious than you believed?

The thought made Jamie cringe inside even now, decades . . . a lifetime . . . later.

She spent the rest of the day on her laptop, researching her next moves. She could get an Oregon Reciprocal Teaching License, which was good for a year, while finalizing other requirements. The school year had already started, so it was unlikely she would get a full-time job somewhere, but currently, substitute teaching was all she could probably handle anyway.

She drove back to the school at three to pick up Harley, who was standing outside the front doors with a group of girls, huddled under the front overhang, though the rain

and hail had been replaced by fretted clouds. This was promising, Jamie thought. Harley made friends fairly easily when she wanted to. It was the wanting to that was hard to define.

She got out of the car and started heading Harley's way. Maybe the fact that school had only been going a few weeks was working in her daughter's favor. Relationships hadn't gotten cemented in concrete yet.

It didn't bode well, however, when she realized Harley was a few steps away from the group of about six girls, with others coming outside and joining in, their voices growing louder as more kids exited the school. Jamie felt oddly exposed as she walked across the parking lot and toward the steps, wondering if she'd be heard over all the excited voices if she yelled to get Harley's attention.

"Hey! There you are!" a voice cried above the rest. "Jamie!"

It was coming from behind her. Reluctantly, she turned around, recognizing Icky Vicky's voice. In her navy suit and shoes, she was hurrying toward Jamie. Her blond hair had fallen out, or been taken out, of its chignon and fell around her shoulders. Jamie remembered her at the Stillwell party, riding a guy's leg while his hands groped her familiarly with a lot of moaning and hard breathing. Jamie had enjoyed sex with Paul . . . for a while . . . but it had never been so eager and overt. She'd always been a little embarrassed and would have died a thousand deaths to have people *walking by* when she was with someone. Yet Vicky hadn't seemed to mind, and clearly didn't think much of it anymore.

"I want to meet your daughter. Tyler would be heading right to football practice, but we have a dental appointment. Is she out here yet?" Vicky looked toward the front steps.

Harley was actually engaged in talking to another girl and

was *smiling*. Jamie marveled a bit. How long had it been since she'd actually enjoyed something?

"She's the tall one with brown hair talking to the dark-haired girl in the blue sweater," Jamie said, the weight on her heart lifting a bit. She hadn't even known it was there until now. If Harley could make this work, maybe things wouldn't be so bad in River Glen.

"Oh, with Marissa Haynes, well, Dalworth. Marissa's a really nice girl. I keep hoping Tyler picks someone like her instead of Dara Volker." She barked out a short laugh. "Dara's a slut, unfortunately, and Tyler thinks she's a hottie, which she is. I should know, right?"

This was an unexpected nod to her high school reputation and there was no right way to answer it. Besides, she'd said something that had definitely caught Jamie's attention.

"Marissa Haynes?" Jamie asked carefully.

"Oh, I know. She's Cooper Haynes's stepdaughter. Her real last name is Dalworth, but she took Cooper's. You remember him from high school?"