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## Beneath the Foundation

Michele Cooley  
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**BUTLER  
UNIVERSITY**

**Efroymson Center  
for Creative Writing**

530 W. Hampton Drive  
Indianapolis, IN 46208-3485  
(317) 940-8733

Name of Candidate:

*Michelle Cooley*

Thesis Defense:

Date: *May 8, 2017*

Committee signatures:

*[Signature]*, Thesis Advisor  
*[Signature]*, Thesis Reader

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MFA Director signature:

*[Signature]*

Beneath the Foundation

By  
Michele Cooley

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of  
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## Friday

### Chapter 1

The gulls swooped and looped the loop, hovering almost stationary and then plunging into the blue waters of Lake Michigan. As I sketched the birds on scrap paper, I imagined their calls back and forth to each other, but all I could do was watch, insulated within my 20th floor office. What did the birds think about? Was it exhilarating to dive after the fish, or just an ordinary every day thing? Like this job. Did they fly over the water every day because that's simply what they did, how they survived? If they stopped to think about the monotony, would they swim to the bottom of the lake and not come back up?

The phone rang and I reached for it, still gazing out the window.

"Sean Thomas's office," I said.

"Seriously, Cheryl, what the hell are you doing in there?"

The familiar voice pulled my attention away from the gulls and back inside Thomas Real Estate Development. Alice was once again calling me from across the hall, and I swiveled around in my chair to look at my friend and co-worker.

"Just admiring the view," I said.

"Let's knock off early," Alice said.

"I can't. I haven't finished proofing these closing documents for the Garland Building. And the fundraiser is tonight."

"That damn fundraiser. Have you been able to figure out why Sean and James are so hellbent on funding this art gallery?" Alice asked.

“It’s a ‘collective’, Alice. That is *so* different,” I said. “And, no, I have no idea. I never get to sit in on the real discussions about the project. Just party planning and sketching designs for invitations.”

Scanning the office while we talked, my eyes landed on a photo of my dad and me. It was the day I graduated from Indiana University, nearly a decade before. We were in the Arboretum, the pond behind us full of blooming lily pads. I was still in my cap and gown, grabbing Dad’s arm, both of us with mouths frozen open in laughter. I couldn’t remember what had been so funny or why I was still wearing the grad get-up, but every time I looked at the picture I tried so hard to recall why we were laughing, wondered why I hadn’t managed to commit more of that day to memory.

In that moment, the world had been mine for the taking. Six months later, it all fell apart.

“...said what time does it start? Hellloooo? Where do you keep going?” Alice asked.

“What? Sorry. I’m just ready for this week to be over. Sean’s been on my ass, James will be here Tuesday, they’re both on edge because of this deal, and I am tired of being a fucking secretary.” I took a breath. “Sorry.”

“Stop saying sorry. Don’t be sorry. Quit. It’s time you did something for you. You’re too smart for this place.” Alice paused and looked down the hallway.

“What?”

“Sean’s heading your way.”

We hung up and I turned back to my desk, picked up my red pen, and pretended to go through the pages in front of me.

A shadow fell across the desk as Sean’s frame filled the doorway. Sean was a large man, not fat, but tall and broad shouldered with a bit of a potbelly. His hair was a weird shade of

wheat, some days looking blond, others white, but always parted in a terrible comber that made me wonder who he believed he was fooling.

Like most rich people I interacted with in the Chicago real estate development industry, Sean drove a fancy car and dressed like my 90-year-old grandpa. Elastic-waist pleated pants, loafers with white socks, sweaters under sport coats. My theory was that it was an unspoken rivalry, like whoever dressed the worst was the most successful because he (and they were all men) was simply too busy closing deals to go out and shop. They were all divorced, so there were no wives at home to send out to the Magnificent Mile.

I acted engrossed in my review and didn't look up until Sean cleared his throat.

"I'm going to need you to come in tomorrow morning. Say around 8:30."

My mouth opened and closed a few times, like the gulls I'd been watching, while I tried to think of what to say.

"Sorry, Sean, I don't do weekends," was the first thing that came to mind, but what I actually said was, "Oh, OK, sure." As much as I hated my job, I needed it. And I could not live with the embarrassment of getting fired.

"Great. To make it less painful, I'll pick up some coffee on the way in. Intelligentsia, right?"

I gave him a thumb's up and a pinched smile as he walked away, then flipped him off. I hated coffee. Alice was looking at me from across the hall, eyebrow raised. All I could do was shake my head and rub my temples with the heels of my hands. Anticipating another call from her, I reached for the phone before it even started ringing.

"What was that about?" Alice asked.

"I have to come in tomorrow morning."

“What?” Alice said so loudly that I didn’t need the phone connection to hear her. “For what?”

I hesitated. That was a good question. Why hadn’t I asked it?

“I-I don’t know.”

“Then why did you agree to come in on a Saturday? No one else works on Saturdays.”

“I don’t know,” I repeated, wondering the same thing. Wondering again why I was spineless, why it was so hard for me to stand up for myself, to say no. I hadn’t always been such a pushover.

“Go tell him you forgot you had plans.”

“At 8:30 in the morning?”

“Go!”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “What else do I have to do?”

“I can think of ten things. But I know I won’t convince you. Text me after the fundraiser.” Alice hung up without looking at me. All I could see was the back of her, but the slight shake of her head told me she was disappointed.

I watched her pack up, turn off her office light, and walk out at 3:30 on a Friday afternoon. The other offices and cubes were all empty, too.

“Fuck it,” I said, deciding that I, too, would leave when the phone rang again. “Damn,” I said, recognizing the number of the art collective owner. The corners of my mouth turned up into a fake smile as I attempted to sound cheerful.

“Hi, Brooke,” I said. “Everything on track for tonight?”

“Cheryl, yes, everything is looking great. Thank you again for all your dedication and attention to detail.”

My eyes rolled involuntarily as I once again found myself annoyed with Brooke and her over-enunciated, clipped manner of speaking. Who was she trying to impress? As for my “dedication,” I’d had no choice. It was still not clear to me how Brooke had connected with Sean and James, and murkier still as to how she’d convinced the two developers to invest in this project. For the last three months, I’d spend nearly as much time on this fundraiser as my actual job responsibilities. Sean didn’t seem to mind, even though that work had caused me to run up against closing deadlines.

“This event will introduce the artists and this collaboration to the public,” Sean had said. “All of the investors want it to be successful.”

Other than Sean and James, I had no idea who the other investors were. The whole thing was bizarre.

Brooke cleared her throat. She was waiting for me to acknowledge her compliment. “Of course,” I said.

“Cheryl, do you know yet whether Sean’s plans have changed? Will he be able to join us?”

I rolled back in my chair, extending the phone cord as far as it would go so that my head was in the hallway and I could see whether Sean was still in his office. He was.

“Sorry, Brooke, as far as I know, he’s still booked tonight.” I rolled myself back into the office and clicked on the shared Outlook calendar. One of the few things I was not expected to do as executive administrative secretary was keep Sean’s or James’s calendars, but IT had set up every department into calendar groups so you at least knew when people were busy. I had no idea what Sean had going on, but then I rarely did unless I had to be there, too.



For a while I'd wondered whether Sean or James had a romantic interest in Brooke, but neither of them seemed concerned with attending this very important public introduction, so that didn't seem to be the motivation.

"Well, no mind. I'm sure it will be a wild success. I'll see you soon."

No mind? Wild success? What real life person actually talked like that? And what did that even mean? What qualified as a wild success? Many people in attendance? A bunch of stuffy rich people wrote a bunch of checks? The press raving about Brooke Sullivan's genius? Once again, I was angry about being forced to go to this. I had no funds to hand over, and I didn't feel comfortable as the "face" of the project's main sponsor, which is the excuse Sean always gave me. On multiple occasions, I'd recommended various VPs within the company who would be better suited for the role.

"What about Doug? Shouldn't the VP of Finance go?"

"How about Sam? This seems like a great event for Marketing to attend."

"But I need *you* there," Sean would say, as if this answered the question.

"You've been so integral to the event's planning. I need your institutional knowledge," Brooke would say, pronouncing integral with emphasis on the second syllable.

"I'm not a fucking party planner," I wanted to shout every time we'd had this discussion, but instead I'd just nod. Now going was inevitable and I wanted nothing less than to squeeze myself into a fancy dress so I could hang out with a bunch of snooty people I had nothing in common with.

I cruised through the rest of the closing documents, making changes here and there about the scope of construction services or a requirement for insurance. Business had been slow, but it was slow for the entire city. Banks weren't as willing to lend money. Contractors weren't as

eager to take on large-scale mixed-use projects. It had been like this for six months, so I couldn't figure out why Sean was so on edge about this particular deal. It was no different than any other project we worked on. Buy a vacant building in an up and coming neighborhood, drive up rent, force out long-time residents, make a ton of money.

Actually, that wasn't a fair assessment of what the company did. I was just pissed off about having to come in on a Saturday. Truthfully, I had a lot of respect for James and Sean. Occasional gentrification aside, most of what they did was develop affordable housing in neighborhoods that truly needed it. They generally treated employees well, and provided good benefits even though they didn't have to.

Sean has also given me a job at a time in my life when I was lost, no plan, family in turmoil. I'd certainly never aspired to be an administrative assistant, but at least I had a purpose, a reason to get out of bed. For the first couple of months, I'd kept to myself, and then I was working on something that required Alice's help. I didn't remember exactly what she's said, but was funny and sarcastic, and I genuinely laughed for the first time in months. That moment made me realize how much I'd missed being around people and interacting beyond the surface level.

Still, I was pissed about Sean's request. "I'll bring coffee," I mimicked. "He knows I don't drink coffee." Deep down, I wasn't really pissed at him. It wasn't his fault I was an administrative assistant. I had options. I'd made choices. This is where they'd led me. I had no one to blame but myself.

It was nearly five, and time to get dolled up for the fundraiser. I walked out of my office and saw that Sean's light was still on.

"Hey, Sean?" I called as I put my planner in my bag and turned off the computer. "Sean?" I said again. What the hell was he doing?

Most of the lights on the floor were off. Sean was a bit of a hard ass about wasting electricity. He said it was because it was the environmentally conscious thing to do, but I'd seen the electricity bill for the office.

I poked my head in his doorway, mouth open, ready to say his name again when I saw that he was sitting with his back to me, staring out the window, slowly spinning a crystal tumbler in his hand. I started to say, "A little early to break out the booze, don't ya think, Boss," but something about his body language – he was still as stone except for the turning glass – made me stop. Instead, I cleared my throat.

"Uh, Sean?"

The chair rotated towards me slightly, and it took a few seconds before I realized that was the only response I was going to get. "See you tomorrow," I said, my voice rising slightly at the end as if I were asking a question.

"Have a good night," Sean said and half-waved, all without turning around.

This deal was important, but it wasn't like we were going to have to close our doors if it fell through. Any other day I might have stayed and asked what was bothering him, but he was the one making me go to the fundraiser, making me come in on a Saturday, and I just didn't feel very sympathetic.

The door to our office suite clicked behind me and I waited alone for the elevator. Thomas Real Estate Development occupied the entire floor and the elevator bank was in the center of the footprint. I always wondered why architects designed buildings like that. You could maximize space and improve esthetics if the elevators are along an exterior wall. My side of the office was virtually blocked off from the finance people, which made for inefficient communication.

The bell dinged as the doors slid open. I stepped in and fumbled around in my purse, trying to find my headphones for the walk home. When the elevator stopped moving, I walked into the lobby without looking up and nearly plowed into one of the security guards.

“Oh, geez,” I said. “Sorry, Stan.”

“In a hurry to start your weekend?”

“It’s not going to be much of a weekend, I’m afraid. Sean’s got me coming back tomorrow morning.” I sounded like a petulant child, but I couldn’t stop myself.

Stan nodded. “I hear that. One of the guys already called off for weekend duty. Guess who gets the pleasure of overtime. I suppose we’re both suckers.”

I laughed. He was right. I was a sucker. Just like Alice said. As I started to walk away, Stan pressed the elevator button.

“What’re you up to?” I asked.

“Just some quick floor rounds. We’ve had a few reports of the Camlocks not locking right at five, so I’m going to do a check before Tim leaves.”

“Well, see you in the morning, I guess,” and I headed toward the exit. Stan saluted me and disappeared into the elevator.

## Chapter 2

For a brief instant, I closed my eyes before I pushed open the door. The heat shimmered up from the blacktop and I braced myself for the blast of hot July air. It didn’t help. I hated the Chicago humidity and could feel my hair immediately grow bigger with the moisture. Soon it would be time to go back to using public transport instead of walking everywhere. I put in the ear buds, started the 90s station on Spotify, and opened Pinterest hoping to find an easy solution for the hair nightmare.

A phone call popped up on the screen in the middle of scrolling and I accidentally answered a call from my sister. I held my breath and didn't say anything right away.

Cassie said, "Cher?" just as I said "Hello" and then I stopped. She knew I hated to be called Cher.

"What's up?" she asked.

She only called me when she wanted something, and I thought about calling her out on it. But instead I just said, "Not much."

"Look, Mom's gone off the deep end again. Can I come crash with you for a while?"

Typical. "Cassie, you are five hours away from me. It's not possible to just 'crash' with me. We've been through this. Not to mention, you can't leave the state of Indiana."

"I can get permission from Davidson."

"Who?"

"My P.O. You know this," she said, stretching out the word know.

I should have known it. In the years since my dad's murder, we'd all had our ups and downs, and our downs manifested themselves in different ways. Our mom became incapable of making decisions. I dropped out of law school and hid among the other three million people in Chicago. But Cassie turned to drugs. Mostly meth. We are from rural Indiana after all. She'd been picked up a dozen times over the last eight years, and I doubted that she would ever get off parole. She'd been dealing with the same officer the entire time. So, yes, I should have known who Davidson was, but I'd been pretty successful in blocking all of that from my every day life and pretending like it didn't exist. Like she and my mom didn't exist. It was easier that way.

"Cassie, now is not a good time."

"When is a good time? We haven't seen you in over a year," she whined.

It had been closer to two. The conversation was quickly escalating into something I didn't want to deal with. I didn't have time for it, and I didn't want her to ruin my mood for the rest of the night though it was probably too late for that. My knuckles were white I was gripping the phone so hard. She continued to yell at me until her words all ran together, and I tuned her out, unaware that she'd hung up on me until I stepped into a crosswalk when I wasn't supposed to and a car horn blasted at me.

“Dammit, Cassie,” and the thought that I should block her number crossed my mind yet again. Almost immediately the phone vibrated, but it was just a text from Alice.

*Drinks l8r, yes?*

I started to type out *Drinks now*, but erased it because, if I sent that, she would be at my apartment before I got there. Instead I replied, *Could b convinced*.

I turned towards my apartment building and away from the noise of the traffic. I never understood why so many people drive in the city. It took me a few years, but I finally sold my car after spending thousands of dollars to park it in the garage and then going months without even setting eyes on it. If I had to go home, I took the train or the Mega Bus, and Mom or Cassie picked me up in Indianapolis. The last time I did that they were over an hour late and Cassie was obviously high. We all pretended like everything was fine.

About a block from my apartment building, I felt a tug on my bag. Raising my right fist, I pulled the bag back and turned towards the person.

“Whoa, hey, it's just me.” Brandon, my best friend, neighbor, and date for the night, stood there with both hands in the air, palms facing me.

“What the hell? Why did you do that?”

“I've been trying to get your attention for the last few blocks.”

Once again, my sister had totally consumed my concentration. “Sorry. Lost in thought.”

“Thinking about all the fun we’re going to have tonight?”

“I think you know the answer to that.”

We walked the last block talking about our days. Brandon had a big trial coming up at the end of the month and was in full prep mode. Secretly, I loved it when he was like this because most of our conversations centered on the law and I enjoyed the intellectual conversation. Being a secretary was not challenging work, but I wasn’t sure returning to law school was the right thing.

Our vintage-styled building came into view. I loved my apartment and the neighborhood, but it was bittersweet. The only reason I could afford it was because my dad died. The place was built in the 1930s and lacked most modern amenities, but the charm and history made up for it. One of the doormen, Jake, greeted us as we entered.

“We should probably leave in about an hour,” I said.

Brandon got off on his floor, and I continued up. I dropped my stuff inside the door. The living, dining, and kitchen spaces all ran into one another, and at this time of day during the summer were tinged in gold. The sunlight streamed through the bay window in the living room, and as I did on most sunny days, thought about getting a cat. Such a waste of sun, otherwise. But then I’d look at all the frames, plants, and other knickknacks sitting on the bookshelves, and picture the cat’s entertainment prior to the sun’s arrival.

The dishes were still sitting in the dish drainer and I paused for a moment to consider putting them away. “Stop procrastinating,” I said out loud, and walked back to my bedroom to get ready.

The plastic garment bag was stuffed in the back of the closet. It felt brittle, and I was afraid it would crumble to bits as I pulled down the zipper. Shiny sequins littered the bottom of the bag and for a moment I hoped the dress would disintegrate, too. I should be so lucky. In all of my thirty-two years, I'd only ever been to one semi-formal event and thankfully I'd had the forethought to buy something classic. God, I hoped it was classic. I stood before the mirror, held the dress up in front of me. Unless it really did fall apart, it would have to do.

I didn't have a lot of time, but I contemplated showering. Too much work. What was the point? I rooted around in the back of my underwear drawer in search of my Spanx and strapless bra. My hand hit something hard.

I immediately recognized it, and I jerked back as if stung by a bee. I didn't need to pull it out to know what it was, although I'd forgotten it was there: my father's state trooper badge. Instead of looking for the underwear, I sank onto the bed. The universe played no part in my life. No one was trying to send me a message. It was just a coincidence – a weird uncanny coincidence, but a coincidence all the same – that Cassie had called that day, and now, the box had grabbed me.

Grabbed me? Where did that thought come from? It had been almost nine years since I'd moved to this apartment. When I quit law school, it seemed best to change the scenery. The South Loop didn't have much to offer me anyway. I packed, moved, and unpacked all in a weekend, leaving most of my stuff – physical manifestations of memories – in the dumpster behind the old building. Brandon convinced a few of his non-law friends to help. It wasn't that I was embarrassed about dropping out. I just didn't want people pitying me or feeling awkward because they didn't know what to say.



The day I unpacked must have been the last time I'd touched that box. Now that I'd found it, I remembered thinking I should display the badge in the apartment as a tribute to my dad since he was the reason I could live in Lincoln Park at twenty-three.

My phone buzzed on the dresser. I picked it up, reluctantly. What if it was Cassie? It was just Brandon.

*Uber in 15?*

Fifteen minutes? I looked at the clock. Shit. How long had I been sitting on the bed? I texted back, *Make it 20*, though that would still be rushing it. Once I found the Spanx, it would take five minutes to wedge myself in them. I shoved the box all the way to the back of the drawer. I found what I needed and went about making myself presentable. Much to my dismay, the dress did not disintegrate. There was nothing I could do with my hair at this point so I twisted it into a low bun and plastered my head with hairspray. I inspected my face in the mirror. My skin was paler than normal, the circles under my eyes a shade of plum. Hopeless.

I wrestled with a pair of strappy flat sandals, grabbed a small purse, and was about to walk out when there was a knock at the door.

"I thought we were meeting downstairs," I called out as I turned the knob. "Couldn't you --" There was no one there. I looked up and down the hall. No doors closing. No lights on the elevator. I hadn't imagined the knock. Had I? Where had the person gone?

My phone buzzed again. "Car here in 3." I pulled the door shut, locked it, and got to the elevator the same time as my neighbor, Wes. His dog, Lola, immediately started nipping at the sequins.

"Where were you an hour ago?" I asked her. She cocked her head to the side, tail thumping emphatically as if to say, "I would have, but I hadn't known."

“Blind date?” Wes asked.

“Worse. A fundraiser.”

“How is that worse?”

“Small talk with one person versus a hundred. Trying to balance your plate and wine glass while you eat standing up. Being expected to buy silent auction items when you already paid to attend.”

He raised a hand. “Well, when you put it that way. Try to have fun anyway.”

I waved as they took off towards the small dog area behind the building. Brandon was talking to Jake. When he saw me, he whistled loud enough for everyone in the lobby to hear and look up. Heat crept into my face, a mixture of anger and embarrassment. What I would have given for the floor to open up and swallow me.

I jerked my shoulder back when he tried to hook his arm through mine. “Let’s just go,” I said through clenched jaw.

“What? You look great,” he said.

“Thank you, but I didn’t need everyone staring at me.”

The car was waiting when we walked out, and we drove in silence for a few blocks. Brandon nudged me. “I wasn’t trying to embarrass you. You’ve been dreading getting dressed up and I wanted you to know how great you looked.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m just…” My whining was even starting to annoy me.

“Let’s just try to have fun. What’s the plan?” Brandon asked.

“Appreciate the art, contemplate it deeply, and most importantly, do not abandon me. I don’t want to get cornered.”

“Deal.”

Traffic was a mess, and I stared out the window, replaying my conversation with Cassie. Maybe I'd been too harsh. But there was no way she could stay with me.

"Penny for your thoughts," Brandon nudged again. When I didn't respond he said, "Don't worry. It'll all be over before you know it."

I nodded, letting him think that was the issue. We arrived at Factory Loft and I scooted across the backseat. Brandon grabbed for my hand as my foot got stuck on the lip of the car. "Careful. No casualties this early in the evening."

The venue was an old manufacturing plant that had been converted into a beautiful green, LEED-certified event space. The location had been Sean's suggestion, and I had to admit it looked amazing. I was shocked to see how many pieces were on display. The outside walls were covered with paintings and photographs. Two large sculptures anchored the middle of the room. I had no idea what they were supposed to represent. They looked like hulking piles of half-melted metal scraps.

Brooke's project was fully developed on paper, but no steps had been taken to bring it to life yet. That was the point of the night. Considering the number of pieces, she must have already been in contact with artists about joining the collective.

We'd barely made it inside when I heard, "Cheryl!"

I squeezed Brandon's arm. "That's her," I said out of the side of my mouth, then plastered on a smile. Brooke glided over, her elegant gown fitting just so, and I immediately felt frumpy. Sunlight bounced off the jeweled comb holding back her hair.

"Brooke, everything looks so great. I'm impressed."

She handed me a glass of champagne, tilted her chin down, and said, “Now, who’s this?” as if I’d brought a puppy. Before I could say anything, Brandon stepped forward, hand outstretched, and I cringed.

“ADA Brandon Rehnquist. No relation to the Justice. Narcotics Bureau,” he said, all while pumping Brooke’s hand in an overly enthusiastic greeting. “This is great. Just fantastic.” Any other time I would appreciate his subtle sarcasm, but this time I pinched the back of his arm.

“Excellent. Your presence is greatly appreciated. Cheryl, no Sean?”

What was her freaking obsession with Sean? I shrugged. “No, Brooke, nothing changed in the last two hours.”

“Well, his loss. Please relax and enjoy the art. I’ll make a short presentation at seven-thirty. I would love you to accompany me to the podium.”

“No, Brooke, I don’t think that –”

“I insist. You have no choice.” She smiled weirdly with her lips curled in towards her teeth, turned, and walked off.

Brandon whistled. “That’s her? Sean and James are giving money to her?”

“I told you. I don’t know what to make of any of this.”

“Illicit affair?”

“I already thought about that. But, wouldn’t whichever one she’s having the affair with be here? And don’t you think they’re both too old for Brooke?”

“Love knows no age, Cheryl.”

I passed Brandon my champagne, and took off in search of some wine. It was not quite six-thirty. Looking at the exhibits would take some time, which would get us to the presentation, and then we could take off. When I turned away from the bar with my Chardonnay, Brandon was

nowhere to seen. The one thing I asked of him! I did not want to get stuck talking to some pretentious snob about art I didn't understand, so I stood in the back, sipped my wine, and surveyed the crowd.

None of the faces were familiar, not that I was expecting to know anyone. Temporary walls were up to display all of the pieces of art, so I didn't have a clear view of the whole room. Brooke had made her way to the entrance and appeared to be greeting and directing people. Her backstory remained a mystery. I'd Googled her, but found only a couple of the usual suspects – Twitter and LinkedIn. I decided not to click on her LinkedIn profile for fear she'd get notification that I was looking at it. She'd studied in France, a fact she reminded me of constantly, but I hadn't been able to find much else about her, like how she came into money.

I watched her interacting with people. She seemed to be introducing herself to everyone. No one greeted her with a hug or anything signifying friendship. A hand touched the small of my back and I jumped, sloshing wine all over myself and the floor. "Shit."

"Sorry, I thought you heard me," Brandon said.

"That's twice today," I said.

"I'm not sure that's my fault. You're the one zoned out, staring off into space." He grabbed some cocktail napkins. "C'mere. I want to show you something."

We wound our way through the maze of art and people to a literal wall of black and white photographs. They were suspended from the ceiling on thick wires that were anchored to the floor. Brandon stood there looking from me to the photos and back.

"What?" I asked.

"Just look."

I looked at the photos. At least it was realistic photography, something I could understand, unlike the melted metal sculptures. The pictures were all similarly composed, a person or small group of people on front steps or a porch, or standing in a doorway. Different genders, different races, different ages. All seemingly poor based upon their clothes and general grooming. Some were in front of single-family homes, but most were duplexes or apartment buildings. Peeling paint, cracked or broken windows, sagging railings. Yet in every photo, each person was smiling.

I looked towards the end of the “wall” for the artist’s biography or exhibit description. My eyes landed on a photo that was slightly different than the rest. There was still a house, and someone sitting on the front steps, but it was a rural setting and taken from a distance. It was impossible to make out any of the person’s features.

“You like?” Brandon asked, referring to the pictures generally. I nodded. “They remind me of that sketch hanging on the wall in your bedroom,” he said. I nodded again. He was talking about a pencil sketch of my childhood home, my parents standing on the front porch, arms wrapped around each other, my dad’s chin resting on my mom’s head. I’d drawn it after my dad died. Brandon didn’t know any of that.

“Do you want me to buy you one of them?” he asked.

I laughed. “That’s sweet, but I’ve yet to see prices on any of these pieces. This stuff is probably out of ADA Rehnquist’s price range.”

We made our way through the entire room, oohing and ahing, but doing a fair share of snickering, too. Over the last half hour it had gotten quite crowded, and we tried to stick to the exhibits with no people around.

“What about this piece?” I pointed to an abstract painting of bright fluorescent blobs. “Doesn’t it just scream ‘spring’?”

“It screams all right, but it’s more like a manifestation of the brain of a psych ward patient,” Brandon responded.

I nodded thoughtfully. “I can appreciate that interpretation.” We giggled, moving on quickly once people started gathering behind us. When I looked back, a man was nodding and pointing to a red blob. “Maybe you can get a side gig as an art critic.”

The next exhibit looked like small piles of hardened clay. “Um, inspired by Stonehenge?”

“I don’t think that’s art,” Brandon said. “It looks like something Mitzi puked up after eating a mouse.”

We walked by exhibit after exhibit, and there was no artist information for any of the pieces. Still curious about the photographer, I made a mental note to ask Brooke. We grabbed fancy finger foods off passed trays, sipped more wine, and continued to have faux intellectual conversations about art.

“Why, Cheryl Suzanne, if I didn’t know you so well, I’d think you were actually having fun tonight,” Brandon said.

He was right. I was enjoying myself. When I looked down to check my watch, I was surprised to see it was almost time for Brooke’s presentation.

“Let’s get one more drink and head over to the podium. I want to jet as soon as Brooke’s done talking.”

“Then what?”

I'd never mentioned meeting up with Alice. He might be more inclined to say yes now that he'd had a few drinks. Alice's friends could be exhausting, and I wasn't sure who she was out with.

"This afternoon Alice begged me to meet up with her later. How does that sound? I'm not sure where," I said.

Ear splitting feedback ran through the sound system and we all turned towards the front of the room. Brooke was holding up her glass, hitting it with one of the tiny forks from the shrimp cocktail.

"Ladies and gentlemen. My dearest friends and colleagues. Thank you so much for coming out on this lovely July evening."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Brandon pretending to gag and I elbowed him in the ribs.

"Cut it out," I hissed.

"Thank you for your interest in, and support of, this project. It has lived in my brain for decades now, and to finally see tangible steps forward is an accomplishment I cannot find the words to describe."

Polite clapping as I looked around, wondering again who all these people were. They did not seem to be her dearest friends and colleagues. I'd caught glimpses of Brooke talking to people throughout the night, and each time it was someone different. I suppose that's exactly the point of a fundraiser, but I thought it odd that she didn't appear to be with anyone – no date, no close friend, no business partner.

It was Brandon's turn to poke me. "I think she's about to acknowledge you," he said.



Damn. I was really hoping she'd leave me out of this. "And now, a moment to thank the woman without whom this event would never had occurred. One of The Foundation's most valuable supporters graciously allowed me to monopolize her time over the last few months. Cheryl, will you come up here?"

I vigorously shook my head, looking around for an exit, but I was in the middle of everyone. A hundred pairs of eyes were staring at me, boring into me, trying to figure out who the hell I was. There was no polite clapping.

"Cheryl and the generous owners of Thomas Real Estate Development worked tirelessly to make this evening a success, and I hope you are all enjoying yourselves."

Where was she going with all of this? Yes, Sean and James donated a bunch of money for the whole project, and I designed the invitations and made a few calls to vendors, but most of the time we spent with Brooke was reassuring her about choices she'd already made. She'd procured all the artwork, she arranged for its display and the physical configuration of the space without me even knowing. I was hardly instrumental.

"You may be wondering about the specific pieces on display tonight. You may have noticed there are no names or prices. This was intentional. There are pieces from established artists and from those just getting started who will benefit from The Foundation's existence. But I didn't want you focusing on who created the piece or letting that influence your appreciation. If you want to purchase something, offer what it's worth to you, based upon the value it will add to your life. Offer what you can afford if it's a piece that you simply can't live without."

Brandon gave me a confused look while the rest of the crowd murmured around us.

"What's she up to?" Brandon asked.

Setting your own prices seemed counterproductive for this event, and she'd never mentioned this plan in any of our meetings. I could see doing this for future events, once the collective was full of members. Without bringing in a lot of money tonight, there was a good possibility the project would never get off the ground. Let someone pay five grand for a name even if they liked some up-and-coming artist's piece better.

I was so perplexed by what Brooke had said that I didn't hear the closing remarks or instructions for purchase. Brandon was tugging on my sleeve.

"C'mon. Pick out one of those photos. Then we can find out who the photographer is."

"What do you mean?"

"Were you not listening again? Brooke said when the art is delivered there will be information about the artist with the delivery."

That was clever, but again, for future events. Now people were going to try to guess the artists and pay as little as possible for something of value. Hopefully, I was wrong. Brooke knew her audience, presumably, and I did not.

We went back to the photographs and spent some time discussing them. I finally settled on a picture of a young woman sitting on the steps of a building that I was convinced was a Thomas Real Estate Development affordable housing building. Like the rest of the photos, she too was smiling, but it was forlorn, not happy. Her eyes were puffy, as if from crying. I was hoping the artist information included the backstory on the photograph itself. Or a way to track down the artist so I could ask.

"I'm going to find Brooke and tell her good night while you pay," I said. Brandon had finally agreed to pay no more than five hundred for it, but I'd had to negotiate the limit with him.

The crowd was thinning, but Brooke was nowhere to be seen. I took a lap around the room and finally found her talking to a couple of people. Her back was to me, and I stopped, not really wanting to interrupt. To just leave would be rude, so I took a deep breath and reached out to tap her on the shoulder. But it wasn't Brooke. What I'd thought was her fancy hair comb was just a pair of glasses flipped up onto the woman's head.

Blood rushed to my face, and I stammered, "Oh, sorry. I thought you were someone else." I turned to walk away, and the woman said, "Wait. Aren't you the party planner? Do you have any cards?"

I started to walk faster. Being a party planner *was* better than being a secretary, but since I wasn't actually a party planner, I didn't want to engage in that conversation. I found Brandon at the door and said, "Let's go."

"Did you find Brookey?"

"No, I thought that was her, and now I'm being recruited for party planning and want to go," I said as I pointed towards the woman.

"My God, how much have you had to drink? They look nothing alike." Brandon laughed as I shoved him out the door.

"I haven't really had anything to eat, you know," I said.

"Here's your delivery info," he said, handing me a slip of paper.

"Where's the receipt?" I asked.

"It's my write-off," he said.

"Yeah, but we agreed on the limit. I want to make sure you honored it or the picture is going to your place."

"Don't worry. I heard you loud and clear."

We walked for about a block, this time in comfortable silence. “Thanks,” I said.

“For what?” Brandon asked.

“Coming with me. Getting the artwork. You didn’t have to do any of it,” I said.

“You’re my best friend. You don’t have to thank me.”

I slipped my arm through his. He was my best friend, but that wasn’t how we’d started out. We were two of only a few people that stayed in Chicago and around school during our first year fall break, and we spent a lot of time together. By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, we’d been out on a few dates. Then my dad died. He was there for me after that, and saw my family and me at some of our lowest times. After some time had passed, we tried to rekindle the romantic relationship, but I felt too vulnerable with him knowing such personal and private details about me.

I’d been saying the same thing for a long time now – that we just didn’t work romantically. But the truth was I didn’t know how I felt, and it was just easier not to deal. So, we stayed in the friend zone at my insistence.

My phone buzzed. “Alice is at Rokit’s. How does that sound?” I asked.

“This is your night.”

I looked at my watch. It was barely eight. The responsible part of my brain was telling me to go home. If this were a regular work night, I wouldn’t be going out for drinks at eight o’clock in the evening. But the part of my brain that I usually ignored, it was telling me to let loose, have fun for a change. And why the hell not? There couldn’t be anything that important to work on tomorrow morning.

“Screw work,” I said. “To Rokit’s!”

The bar wasn't busy yet, and I found Alice and her friends at a table near the stage. The band was still setting up.

"You actually came!" Alice shouted. I'd forgotten to send my response to her text. "Shots for the table," she told the server.

"Not for me," I said.

"Bullshit. You never come out with me. One shot won't kill you," she said.

I looked at Brandon. He pressed his lips together the way he always did when he was trying to suppress a grin. The expression that first caught my eye at law school orientation. No, stop. Don't go there.

"The woman's right," he said. "One won't kill you."

"I'm too old to be dealing with peer pressure," I said, and everyone at the table looked at me expectantly. "Fine!" There was a group cheer as Alice called out, "Mind Erasers."

I protested again, but in the end gave up. The rest of the night was a blur. I maintained my one shot limit, but the wine kept coming.

"So, how was the thing?" Alice leaned across the table so I could hear her. I rolled my eyes and told her about Brooke introducing me.

"I think she and Sean have something going on," she said.

"Me, too," Brandon said, and they started discussing all the signs.

"Guys, no. Trust me. You haven't seen them together. That's what I thought, too, but I've never seen them touch, not even casually."

"That's exactly how you *would* act if you were trying to hide a relationship," Brandon said.

Alice sort of snorted, and then started coughing. “Wrong pipe,” she choked out and then took a deep breath. “What if she’s his long-lost daughter?”

“Now you might be on to something,” I said.

The 90s cover band had been warming up the entire time we’d been there. When they finally opened up with Matchbox 20’s 3 A.M., Alice squealed and ran onto the dance floor, dragging me with her. Soon after, I pulled Brandon up with me.

I was sweating and singing along to “My Own Worst Enemy” at the top of my lungs when I said, “OK, time to go.”

“But we’re just getting started,” Alice said. I gave her a quick hug, and followed Brandon out the door.

We got into the cab and I put my head on his shoulder. “Here’s a bag if you need to puke,” he said.

“I’m fine.” I shoved his hand away, mainly because the bag had some weird perfumey scent that made my stomach turn.

“Mm fide? What’s that mean?” he teased. I closed me eyes for what felt like a second, and then we were at our building.

“Let’s go, Cinderella. You’re pretty close to turning into a pumpkin.”

The evening doorman was waiting for us. “Ms. Simpson. Mr. Rehnquist. A good evening, I take it?”

Not trusting myself to speak without slurring, I smiled and nodded. Brandon insisted on getting me into my apartment.

“I’m fine. Really,” I said as it took me three tries to get the key into the lock. He followed me in and sat on the couch.

“Can you help me?” I called out as I struggled to get my dress unzipped. Brandon came down the hall to my bedroom. He pulled down the zipper and then leaned against the doorframe. I left the dress in a heap on the floor, pulled on shorts and a t-shirt, and fell into bed.

“Good-night, Cinderella,” Brandon said from the door.

“Stay,” I mumbled into the pillow.

“What?” he asked.

“G’night,” I said, and was asleep before he left the apartment.

## **Saturday**

### Chapter 3

The alarm began screaming at 6:45, and I smacked the snooze button. When it went off again, I peeled open one eye, immediately noticing that the sun streaming through the partially closed blinds was too bright for seven-ish. “Shit.” Eight o’clock. It would take me almost thirty minutes to walk to the office.

My head felt like a bowling ball. As I got out of bed and rushed to the bathroom, my brain thudded back and forth inside my skull, the pain intensifying. The day would not be pleasant. I got ready as fast as I could, which was not at all fast.

My hair was still dripping wet as I ran out of the building, trying to suppress waves of nausea. The early heat of the July day wasn’t helping. For a second I considered getting on the red line, but it wouldn’t be any quicker between the Saturday schedule and stopping to buy the fare. Had I seen a cab, I would have jumped in.

I traveled the twelve blocks to the office in near record time, guzzling a bottle of water along the way. As I ran up the mezzanine stairs, the clock on the bank building across the street said 8:37. I stuck my hand into my purse and fished around for my key card. Not finding it in the

pocket I usually kept it in, I reached for the button to call Stan. The card was probably buried at the bottom under months-old receipts, and I didn't have time to dig for it.

Stan caught my eye before I hit the call button, and the release on the door clicked.

"Good morning," he said as I rushed through the door.

"Thanks, Stan. Is Sean here yet?"

He hit a few buttons on the keyboard while looking at the computer monitor, then shook his head. "Doesn't look like it. Used the card in the elevator last night at 9:06."

Maybe I was in luck. But 9:06? What was he doing here so late last night? The elevator seemed to take forever. I finally got to my floor, and the doors opened onto the reception area. Why was it so bright? Weird. All the office lights were on, not just the security lights. OK, so maybe he was here. I made a quick stop at my office to put down my purse and workbag and walked to his office.

I tried to make my voice extra cheerful. "Good morning, Sean. Where's the coffee? I'm sorry I'm a few minutes late. I misplaced my..."

The words died in my throat. His chair was still turned towards the window, as it had been when I left last night, but his head was twisted at an unnatural angle. Thick red drops covered his entire desktop. I stepped through the door of the office.

"Sean?" As I got closer to him, I saw that the back of his head was a bloody, mangled mess, his white-blond comb-over tinged with a pink hue.

Saliva filled my mouth and I swallowed hard. Closing my eyes, I tried to slow my breathing and stop from throwing up. It didn't work.

My feet started moving even as I was silently willing them to stop. I was standing in front of Sean even though I didn't want to be that close to him. My stomach turned again, making



audible churning noises that seemed deafening in the silence created by Sean's lifeless body. His eyes were bruised, and his face was distorted. Asymmetrical. My whole body started to shake. There was so much blood. But I couldn't pull my eyes away.

The anniversary clock on his desk began to chime. Why was I just standing there? I had to call the police. I stared a few seconds longer, then backed out of the room, terrified of having my back to Sean's body. The receptionist's desk was right outside his office. For the first time in my life, I dialed 911. When the dispatcher answered, she said "911, what's your emergency?" just like on TV.

"My boss. He's been shot. Murdered. I don't know. He's dead." The words all rushed together and my voice got higher and higher.

Sean was dead. What had happened here?

"Ma'am, my name is Jessie and I'm going to help you through this."

Help me through what? He was already dead.

"Can you confirm your location?" The tone of her voice told me she'd had to repeat herself. It was difficult to concentrate.

"Thomas Real Estate Development. I'm on the 20th floor of the Daly Building, at Hubbard and State.

"Are you in danger?"

"No, I'm not in danger," I said. Except when I got there, I'd made a beeline for my office, then a beeline for Sean's. I hadn't bothered to walk around the whole office. Why *were* there so many lights on? Was someone else in the office with me? I'd like to think I'd be able to sense

another presence in here, but I hadn't gone to the other side of the floor. It was possible I *was* in danger.

"I – I don't know. Should I look around?"

"Stay where you are. There's no one else there with you?"

"I don't think so."

"What is the nature of your boss's injury?"

"Gunshot wound."

"Do you see a weapon?"

"No, I didn't." An unaccounted for gun. A possible murder. Should I get underneath the solid-wood L-shaped reception desk?

"The police are close by. I'm showing 24-hour security for your building. Can you call down to your on-duty guard and let him know the paramedics and police will be arriving shortly?"

I agreed and she again told me to stay where I was. "And don't touch anything." We hung up and I called down to the security office.

"Hey, Cheryl, what's up?"

"Stan, Sean's dead. He's up here...dead."

"What? What happened?"

"I don't know. The police are on their way."

"Do you need me to come up there?"

"No, that's why I'm calling, so you can let them in."

“OK. Hold tight.” From the tone of his voice, I pictured him wiping his hand over his face, the way he did the time a bomb threat had been called in.

An eerie quiet fell over the floor. I’d been alone in the office before, but this was different. My hands shook and I couldn’t just sit at the reception desk even though I’d been instructed to stay put. For one, it was too easy to see Sean’s body. After walking a lap around the cubicles, I found myself in the kitchenette. The Scotch from last night was sitting on the counter. Sean always kept it in his office, locked in a cabinet. Two of the crystal tumblers were in the sink. I picked one up. The bottoms of the glasses were coated in the sticky remnants of the drink. Sean never let the glasses sit unwashed. Damn. I nearly dropped it on the floor as I remembered Jessie’s last words before we hung up. What had I done? What should I do now? I set it back down and started back to the reception area.

As much as I never wanted to see Sean’s office again, I found myself standing outside his door. I couldn’t bear to go in, so I just looked from the hallway. Other than the Scotch and the tumblers, nothing appeared out of place. The stacks of papers on his desk looked the same as they had last night.

My eyes scanned everywhere in the room except the back of Sean’s chair. On the floor, there were drops of blood, splattered almost to the doorway. As before, I started walking forward while my mind said, “Stay put!” I followed the path of blood to the base of the chair. There. The gun. A small caliber, probably a 9 mm. It was right on the edge of the patterned rug that spread out from underneath the big oak desk. The rug was a mix of deep reds, browns, and blacks, and the gun had blended in. Suicide? Was there more riding on the Garland deal than I knew about?

The longer I stood there, the more it seemed like something was off. Something didn't fit, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

The elevator finally chimed, but I stopped mid-step when the doors opened.

"James?" I said. He stopped mid-stride, too, and his face seemed to pale a bit, but that could have been my imagination or a trick of the fluorescent lighting.

"Cheryl, what are you doing here?"

My mouth was open but I couldn't form any words. I got out "Sean" and then the elevator opened again. Two paramedics wheeled in a stretcher.

"What in God's name is going on here?" James asked. The four of us looked at each other until I pointed towards Sean's office and started to cry. Great, heaving sobs racked my body. James said, "No. No, please God, no," and the last *no* was like the wail of an animal caught in a trap.

Not sure what to do, I started to reach out to comfort him when more officers came off the elevator. Crime scene technicians wearing Chicago PD windbreakers and carrying hard black plastic cases got off first, followed closely by two men in dark suits. The first one had dark, curly hair and an attempt at a goatee. He immediately started looking around and writing in a notebook. The second one had silver hair, was wearing a too-big suit, and moved so slowly that the door into the suite was almost closed by the time he reached it. Both hands were shoved into his pockets.

With so many people converging on the space, I lost track of James. I heard another wail and saw him standing in Sean's doorway, hand covering his mouth. The paramedics were trying

to pull him away. The older detective went over to talk to him as the other one headed in my direction.

I'd grown up around cops. My entire life I'd been surrounded by law enforcement. They were the good guys. But as I watched this man stride towards me, I felt a cold bead of sweat roll down the small of my back and my mouth felt dry.

Relax. Deep breaths. I'd done nothing wrong.

"Ms. Simpson?" he asked.

"Cheryl," I said, although no sound came out at first and I ended up saying "Eryl." I cleared my throat and tried again. "Cheryl Simpson."

"Detective Carter Hamilton. You found the victim?"

Victim. Impersonal. Distant. As if we were discussing a stranger, which was exactly what Detective Hamilton was doing.

"Sean," I said. "His name is – was – Sean."

"Yes, of course, Sean," Hamilton said, a blush creeping to his cheeks. I looked closely at his face. He was quite young. "Can you tell me what happened?"

I definitely could not, but I told him everything I'd done or seen since arriving that morning.

"And what is your position here with, uh..." He started flipping pages in his notebook.

"Thomas Real Estate Development. I'm the executive assistant."

He had been scribbling furiously since he'd walked through the door, but he paused at that.

“Typically work Saturdays?”

“No.”

“Never?”

Closing my eyes, I thought back over the last eight years. “Maybe two other times,” I answered.

“What was the reason for those Saturday shifts?”

I shrugged, not sure what this had to do with why Sean and I were there on this particular Saturday. “Finalizing closing docs that came in late for a Monday closing, prepping wire instructions, stuff like that.”

“What stuff were you planning to work on today?” he asked, emphasizing “stuff” in an almost playful way that struck me as odd.

“I wish I knew,” I said and told him about my conversation with Sean the day before.

“You really have no idea why he asked you to be here today?” Hamilton asked, making a jabbing motion with this pen.

“None,” I said.

“And who is that guy over there?” he asked, pointing at James.

With everything that had gone on that morning, I hadn’t stopped to consciously think about this, but what the hell *was* James doing here? He wasn’t scheduled to arrive until Tuesday. I knew his schedule; I’d booked his flight.

“James Bentley. He’s the other owner. He’s not supposed to be here,” I said.

“Why’s that?” he asked sharply.

“I mean, he lives in California. He was supposed to get here early next week for a closing.”

“When *did* he get here?”

“Do you mean the office or Chicago?”

He paused a beat before answering, the corners of his mouth twitching up. “Both.”

“I don’t know when he got to Chicago. He walked into the office about thirty seconds before the paramedics.”

“Walk me through exactly what you did when you got here,” Hamilton said.

I went over it again, starting with Stan letting me in.

“Stan. The security guy who met us?”

Nodding, I continued on. When I told him Stan checked the card log for me, Hamilton stopped writing.

“Card log?”

“Yeah, we have key cards to get us in and out of the building during certain times and to access certain floors.”

“And what did Stan tell you?”

“That Sean left last night at 9:06 and hadn’t been back.”

Hamilton looked around and locked eyes with his partner. He held his index finger up to me and walked away. I’d somehow managed to get stuck at the reception desk again, and had a clear view of the crime scene techs. The paramedics were standing outside the office.

“How much longer?” I asked.

“Beats me,” the one closest to me said. “An hour? Two?” It was like she was asking me.

“Is it OK for me to go into my office?” I needed to get away from all of the activity. She walked over to one of the techs, he looked at me, nodded slightly, and said something I couldn’t hear.

“Sure,” she said. “Seems like suicide, so they won’t need to comb through the entire office.”

Surprised, I stared at her. Could they make that determination so quickly? She just said it could take two more hours to go through the office. What if it wasn’t suicide? They were OK with me just mucking up evidence? As I walked down the hall, I struggled with the idea of suicide. Why would Sean kill himself? We didn’t have a friendship outside of the office – or inside of it either, for that matter – but I felt like I knew him well enough to sense whether he was suicidal. For the last eight years, I’d spent some part of every working day with him.

I sat down at my desk, looked at the picture of my dad. Who would call Sean’s kids? When Dad died, it was Thanksgiving Break, and I was at home. I’d arrived the Sunday before the holiday. My first law school finals were coming up, and I was holed up most of the week in the den, studying and working on class outlines. It was one of the rare years that Dad didn’t have to work on the actual holiday, but we’d really done nothing to celebrate the fact that we were all together.

He was back to work the next day, and I was back to studying. As had always been Mom’s habit, she had the police scanner on in the den during Dad’s shift. It was basically white noise to me at that point in my life, and the exchanges barely even registered. Until I heard my



dad's voice. That was unusual enough, but the urgent tone and the words he kept repeating – “Code Green. Code *Green*.” – caused me to call for my mom and Cassie. We spent the next two hours glued to either the scanner or the news. Off-duty officers gathered in our living room while no one said much of anything. The phone rang off the hook – neighbors, friends, the mayor – until finally the sergeant unplugged the phone.

A routine drug bust gone wrong. A hostage situation no one expected escalating before the crisis negotiation team could arrive. My dad, always the hero, tried to take charge of the situation. He was apparently making progress, but it's impossible to reason with someone high on the drugs he was supposed to be selling. The lunatic didn't believe my dad was a police officer, was convinced Dad was there to kill him for stealing the drugs.

My family, Dad's unit, our entire small town, we held our collective breath when we heard the shot. For an instant, the people on the TV screen were frozen. We heard “Officer down! Officer down!” over the scanner at the same time the officers on the TV began to swarm the house. My mom collapsed. I grabbed for Cassie, but was too numb to cry or scream. All I could do was stare at the TV and wait.

The ambulance sirens began wailing in stereo as we heard them pass by the house and come through the TV speakers. It was too late though. Dad had died instantly.

How would Sean's kids react? Would they ever get over it? Would they struggle with school and finding their path in life like I did? Use drugs like Cassie? Stop talking to each other? Or was that just the Simpson family?

I physically shook myself from the memory. It had been years since I'd thought about that day. I was heavy from the morning's emotion, and ready to get the hell out of there. What was going to happen next? Would we all show up to work like normal on Monday?

James. Why was James here? Considering the two-hour time difference, he must have arrived last night. I turned on my computer and logged into the travel account. He'd changed his ticket Wednesday and had arrived Thursday afternoon. Something was going on. Everything about these last two days was off.

"Ms. Simpson?"

I jumped out of my seat.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," Detective Hamilton said. Slowly reaching for the mouse, I tried to nonchalantly close the window, but Hamilton's head tilt made me think twice.

"My partner, Detective Roberts, believes the matter will be ruled a suicide." Something about his tone made me look more deeply at his face.

"But?" I said.

Hamilton shook his head as if he shouldn't say what he was about to say. "Doesn't make sense. The preliminary forensics tend to match suicide, but there's still no why. Just doesn't make sense. There's not much to be done, though. Not without something concrete."

Still staring at his face, I tried to figure out what he was getting at. "What about the card log? And the glasses? Someone could have been here with Sean last night."

"Mr. Bentley said the second glass was his," Hamilton said.

"What? James was here last night?" I asked.

“Do you have reason to believe otherwise?” Hamilton asked.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I believe at this point.”

He pulled out his wallet and handed me a card. “I don’t have any other questions for you at this point. You’re free to go. Roberts and I will finish up with Mr. Bentley. If you think of anything, call me.”

Alice was going to flip out when I told her about this. When I went to shut down my computer, the new mail icon on my taskbar caught my eye. After last night’s debauchery and this morning’s nightmare, I hadn’t even looked at my phone to check new messages or emails. It was unusual for me to get work emails outside of normal business hours.

There were two messages. The first was from Brooke to me, Sean, and James, going on about how successful the event had been. She’d sent it after midnight. The second was from Sean. No subject, one line in the body of the email: “Can you bring your keys to the storage room?”

Goosebumps broke out on my arms. Was this the last email he’d sent before...I couldn’t finish the thought. And what was he talking about? He had his own keys, and mine were always in my desk drawer. He knew that. Is that why he’d asked me to come in? To pull shit from storage?

It was time for me to get out of there. I needed to sort through all of this. But I wanted to talk to James first.

The door to his office was open and I could hear a low voice talking. He was sniffing as if he was still crying so I couldn’t understand what he was saying. I wondered if he’d called

Sean's kids. As he turned and saw me, the phone slipped from his hand and his face flushed as he held up a finger.

He turned away from me, and I wondered how the person on the other end could even understand him, he was holding the phone so close to his mouth. When he hung up, he passed his hand over his face before looking at me.

"Sean's kids?" I asked.

His brow furrowed for an instant. "What? Oh," he said, then nodded.

"What are you doing here?" we both said at the same time, then laughed for a moment before recognizing it felt wrong to laugh. James shook his head. "What is happening?" he said softly. "Why were you here this morning?"

"Sean asked me to come in."

"But why?"

"He didn't say."

James stared past me, not lost in thought so much as just lost.

"What are *you* doing here?" I asked him.

"Sean asked me to come early." We looked at each other, and he broke the gaze first. I was certain he was lying, but I didn't know why. If Sean asked him to come early, why hadn't one of them asked me to change his flight? Why did he come in on Thursday, but not come to the office until today? James had always been a mystery, and I wasn't going to start questioning him now.

"What about the office?" I asked.

He looked confused, like he had never contemplated the fact that this was going to impact more people than those of us here.

“I-I don’t know? What do you think?”

What did I think? What the hell did it matter what I thought? I wasn’t an owner of the company, or a senior manager. James was so out of touch with the day-to-day of this business.

I just said, “Is there a Senior VP we can call?” I wasn’t about to be the one to send out a company-wide email announcing Sean’s death.

“Yes, you’re right. I’ll get in touch with Doug.” He paused and looked past me, rubbed both hands over his face. His actions and the sound of squeaking wheels were enough to figure out they were taking Sean away. James’s eyes grew watery again, and I didn’t know how to comfort him.

“Detective Hamilton said it’s going to be ruled a suicide,” I said, as if that were comforting. James continued to stare out the door. “Do you think that’s possible?”

Without breaking his gaze he said, “I don’t know what to think anymore.”

I’d expected a different response. I don’t know what I was expecting, but definitely not an almost exact echo of what I’d told Hamilton not thirty minutes earlier. Perhaps he was still dealing with the shock of the death. I turned to go.

“Cheryl, please don’t tell anyone about this. No other employees. No friends. The press will get wind of it soon enough. Doug and I will come up with a plan and I’ll be in touch.”

“Sure, James,” I said, because that’s what he wanted me to say, but he couldn’t be serious. Of course I was going to tell someone. You don’t find a dead body and keep that trauma to yourself.

“No one,” he said again.

“I got it.” It came out a bit more harshly than I’d intended. “I understand.”

“But you don’t.” He was quiet, as if talking more to himself than me.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll be in touch, I said,” and he dismissively waved his hand.

I looked after him. Had I expected compassion? Even with Sean’s death, he was still James Bentley, still wrapped up in his own world.

I tried to catch Hamilton’s attention, but he didn’t look up. Pushing the door open with my back, I surveyed the office. It was like I was a kid again, in the living room, huddled around the police scanner. Once again, life as I’d known it was over.

#### Chapter 4

Why had Sean really asked me to come in? It was rare to pull files from storage. Usually it only happened when someone threatened to sue us over a construction defect or accessibility issue. What was he looking for that required such privacy that no one else could be around? Why was it OK for me to be around? Murder or suicide, what did Sean’s death mean for the office? The Garland deal wouldn’t make or break us, but without Sean, I had serious concerns about the viability of the business. There were insurance policies, but would a suicide impact coverage?

As I reached for the elevator button, I worried that I might end up in the same car Sean had been in so I turned towards the stairwell. Most people in the building thought the stairs were for emergency exits only, which wasn't the case. A few times a week I'd walk down the twenty flights when I needed a reset. My shoes were soft-soled, but they still managed to make a slight echo as I made my way down.

I thought back over the last eighteen hours. Friday had been a normal day up until Sean's request. What exactly had he said to me? Had I missed something? As I contemplated this, I hit a disturbing conclusion. Why would he ask me to come into the office if he was planning to kill himself? Or, why would he kill himself after asking me to come in, knowing I would be there? He wouldn't do that. Would he?

I was halfway to the bottom of the building when a door above me creaked open. It startled me and I missed a step, nearly falling down. It was illogical, but I held my breath and moved towards the wall so I couldn't be seen. The lock clicked and I pictured someone standing on the landing.

"What have you done?" The person was whispering loudly, but I could still hear what was being said because the acoustics of the stairwell cause the sound to bounce. "No, no, I understand." A telephone call? "Yes. OK. Right." Definitely a phone call. There was about a five second pause, then a loud "Fuck." The voice was finally loud enough that I could tell it was James.

There was a thud, a dull metallic ringing, and a sharp intake of breath, making me think he'd just punched or kicked the railing. I felt uncomfortable eavesdropping, but I didn't know how to get out of my hiding spot undetected.

He took a few slow, heavy breaths, as if he were trying to calm himself down, then “Doug? It’s James. We have a situation. Call me as soon as you get this.” The card reader beeped, the lock clicked again, and James left.

I slowly exhaled. At first I thought maybe he was talking to himself, that he needed a moment alone and came out here to make sure he wasn’t bothered. But he was talking to someone. What about the call made him decide to go into the stairwell of all places? I sped up, not sure where James was going and worried what would happen if we entered the lobby at the same time.

When I exited the stairwell, there was no one in the area except for Stan. He was still at the desk, and I’d never seen him so stiff. He was like a mannequin. It had taken almost ten minutes to get down the stairs with the James delay, and I’d expected one of the detectives to be talking to Stan already.

“Stan,” I said, and he jumped in his seat. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. Have you talked to anyone?”

He shook his head repeatedly. His face was pale and had a slight sheen, as if he had a fever.

“Are you OK?” I asked.

Again, he shook his head. “Never been that close to a dead body before. What happened?”

“There was a gunshot wound. The detectives think it was a suicide.”

Stan shuddered. “But he left last night. There’s no record of him coming back.”

“One of the detectives isn’t concerned with that. The other one, Hamilton, he might ask you about it.”



“Do *you* think it was suicide?” he asked, and I wondered how many times I would be asked that question over the next few days.

“I don’t know what to think.” It was becoming the standard response.

Stan rubbed his face, and then rested his head in his hands. “I’m done with Saturdays.”

I wasn’t sure how to end the conversation. Thankfully, Stan said, “You should really get home. Have a rest. Let the professionals take care of this.”

Nodding, I started to go, but thought of something else. “Oh, did you see James Bentley come in?”

“This morning? No, why?”

“He showed up just before the police.”

“Probably came up through the garage.”

“Probably,” I said, but that made no sense. James didn’t keep a car in Chicago.

The day wasn’t yet scorching, and I took my time walking home. People were sitting outside enjoying the still pleasant weather and I wondered if I looked normal to them, or if they could tell what I’d just been through.

For the first time all morning I looked at my phone. Three missed texts.

Alice: *Make it in OK? What r u doing?*

Brandon: *Good morning, Sunshine. Lunch l8r?*

Then finally, my mother: *I talked to your sister. Call me.*

She'd sent it about thirty minutes ago, which meant she was about to start calling me. I couldn't deal with her right now. As if on cue, the phone vibrated, but it was Alice again. *Lunch?* I couldn't remember a time I'd been so popular for Saturday lunch, and now the thought of eating made my stomach turn. Would I ever have an appetite again?

I responded to Alice first. *Come over? Pick up sammies?* Then Brandon. *Home n 15. Come up?* Brandon could eat whatever she brought for me. I didn't want to explain to either why I was asking them both over. They wouldn't be expecting the other, but I couldn't tell this twice.

The queasiness in my stomach wasn't letting up, so I stopped at the convenience store about a block from my apartment and grabbed a can of 7-Up. The store stocked the most random stuff. Cans of 7-Up, but not plastic bottles. Glass bottles of grape Fanta, but not orange. One time I'd asked the manager (and one of only two employees) how he decided what to order. He just shrugged and said the deliveries came and he put them away.

The can hissed as I cracked the tab, and I took a drink. When I was a kid and my dad was sick, before I figured out he wasn't sick but had just been out all night, that's all he would drink. One time, I was trying to help out and brought him a Sprite. I was around five at the time.

"Oh, thanks, Sweetie," he'd said, "but that stuff's too sweet. It's like drinking syrup." From that moment on I was convinced he was right. He was. My adult taste buds agreed.

As I approached my building, Jake had the door open. "Miss Cheryl, a very large package was delivered for you this morning. We took it up to your apartment."

"Large package? I'm not expecting anything," I said.

"Square. Flat. Pretty heavy," he said as he approximated the size with his arms.

“Oh, a framed picture?”

“Could have been,” Jake said.

Already? I thought Brooke said the pieces would be delivered in two weeks or so. How much had Brandon spent to get next day delivery?

I got into the elevator and leaned against the back wall, practicing what I would say to Brandon and Alice. If I knew exactly what I was going to say, maybe they wouldn't bombard me with questions. I needed some time alone. My head was still pounding. I was lost in thought and didn't even register that the elevator had stopped.

“Good timing.” Brandon got on with a grin.

Surprised, I started to ask how he knew I was there, then thought better. “You were watching out the window weren't you? Creeper.”

He laughed, and when I didn't, he asked, “So, how was the morning? What top secret stuff were you working on?”

I closed my eyes. “Can we put that on hold? Alice is bringing over lunch.” I couldn't look at him because I knew he would have that look he always got when I invited a third wheel: slightly confused, slightly hurt. “I know you were expecting just us, but please give me this without any questions.”

“OK. You must have your reasons.”

Leaning against him and trying to lighten the mood, I said, “How much did you pay for the photo last night?”

“I told you I stayed within budget. Why?”

“Jake said it was delivered this morning,” I said.

“Wow. Maybe I shouldn’t give Brookey such a hard time.”

We walked into my apartment and the package took up nearly the entire living room. Jake had set it against the back of the couch and they were almost the same length. Somehow creating a wall out of pictures had caused them all to look smaller on display than they were in real life.

“Do you want to open it?” Brandon asked. Last night’s excitement over the purchase was completely gone, and right then Alice called up on the intercom. The 7-Up had calmed my stomach but my nerves were still on edge. The teakettle was sitting on the stove half full, and I switched on the burner. Brandon nodded, but he was concerned because the corners of his mouth kept turning down into a slight frown. I stood in the kitchen staring at nothing, waiting for Alice to get to the apartment and for the water to boil. I still hadn’t worked out exactly what I was going to say.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Alice said as she came through the door. “Oh, hey, Brandon. I wasn’t expecting you.” Her tone was off, a bit sharp, but when I looked at her, her smile was normal. Perhaps I was imagining things.

“So, what dumb shit did Sean make you do today?” she asked while unpacking the food at the table.

How to start? Brandon was looking at me, and when I didn’t answer, Alice turned, sandwich held in mid-air.

“Sean’s dead,” I blurted out. Alice closed her mouth, but otherwise didn’t move. Brandon said, “What do you mean? Like a car accident?”

My lower lip began to twitch, my eyes filled with tears. He came over to where I was standing in the kitchen.

“His office. Gunshot.” Those first five minutes after I arrived were still so clear in my mind.

“What does that mean? He was murdered?”

“I don’t know. The detectives think it was suicide,” I said. “Well, one does.”

“Alice?” Brandon said. She was still standing at the table, back to us. “Are you OK?”

Slowly she turned, her face blotchy, angry. “You could have told me before I came over.”

Her anger was surprising, confusing. “I didn’t think it was appropriate to tell you something like that over the phone,” I said.

She shoved the bag holding the rest of the food. “I have to get out of here.” She left without saying anything else, slamming the door behind her.

Brandon put his arms around me.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “What was I supposed to do?”

“You did the right thing. Whatever that was has nothing to do with you. That was about something else entirely, and that was a shitty thing to do to you.”

What did she have to be so angry about? She wasn’t any closer to Sean than I was, even though she’d worked there longer.

Brandon led me over to the couch. I went through the morning again, ending with overhearing James in the stairwell.

“Maybe you should call that detective,” he said. “That conversation is weird, and if he was there last night, it might be relevant.”

“What I heard doesn’t confirm that he was there.”

“Regardless of the explanation, if this were my case, I’d want to know that information.”

He was right and I agreed to call Hamilton later. Brandon started to speak again, but grabbed my hand instead. “We don’t need to talk about it anymore.”

Grateful, I put my head on his shoulder. “I’m exhausted.”

“Do you want anything to eat?”

“No.” He got up and put all of the food in the fridge.

“I think you should rest. If I haven’t heard from you in a few hours, I’ll come back up and check on you.”

Brandon was the most intuitive person I knew. It was part of what made him so good at his job, and why we remained friends even when I tried to push everyone away. He’d always been able to read me, and was one of the few people who supported my decision to quit law school, understanding that it wasn’t a knee-jerk reaction because of my dad, but that I’d actually thought about my life goals and priorities. He was also one of the few people, along with Alice, encouraging me to do something more than secretarial work.

He hugged me, and I buried my face in his chest and squeezed him. My throat tightened up as he pulled away, and I couldn’t speak, which was probably a good thing because I would have asked him to stay. “You know where to find me,” he said and closed the door behind him.

After about five minutes, I finally found Hamilton's card in my back pocket. I stared at the phone – six digits punched in – for a few minutes before I finally finished dialing and hit send. It immediately went to voicemail, which seemed strange. I was already nervous about calling him, and the voicemail threw me off, so I left a dumb-sounding message. “Hi, this is Cheryl. I was just calling...oh, Simpson. I mean, Cheryl Simpson, from this morning, the dead Sean. I mean, oh, could you call me if you get a chance?”

My face grew hot. I hadn't left my phone number. If his phone was off, the number wouldn't register, and I'd have to call back. How mortifying. I hadn't even said why I was calling.

It was too late to do anything about it now, so I walked back to the bedroom to change. My bedroom felt too closed off, so I opted for napping on the couch. As soon as I lay down, I knew I was too wound up to sleep, so I grabbed a notebook off the coffee table to doodle for a few minutes and clear my thoughts. The only image that kept coming to mind was Sean's bloody head, so I gave up on that, pulled a blanket up to my chin, and went back to trying to sleep.

As I closed my eyes, images from the day ricocheted through my mind: Sean's office, the blood, the gun on the floor, the two glasses in the sink.

I sat up. That was it. That was what had been nagging at me this whole time. I just needed some time for everything to come together. Friday morning I had been in Sean's office to get his signature on a few documents. He had such a strange manner of writing, curling his left hand back into itself so that he nearly pulled the pen across the page like a right-handed person. The first time I watched him do it, I must have had an odd look on my face because he said, “When I was growing up, no one knew how to teach a left-handed kid to write.”

The office appeared before me again. I was standing in front of him, looking for answers. The gun had been on the floor to the right of Sean's body.

Trying to slow my thoughts, I closed my eyes and pictured what I had seen in Sean's office. He was in front of me, still sitting in his chair. There was a small hole in his right temple, a small streak of blood down his right cheek. The left and back of his head were all but missing. Why would he reach around with his left hand to shoot himself on the right side of his head? I went through the motion of putting my index finger to my opposite temple. The more important question was *how* would he do that.

I put my head back down on the arm of the couch. I'd never be able to get to sleep now. My gaze went from the bookshelves across from me, to the slow turn of the ceiling fan above, and over to the black screen of the TV. I was convinced that Sean's death was not a suicide. Should I call Hamilton again, leave a more coherent message? Back and forth I went, until my tired body gave in, and I fell into a fitful sleep full of odd dreams.

Hard knocking on a door entered my dream and woke me. I had no idea how long I'd been asleep. My eyes adjusted to the light and the length of shadows on the floor told me it was late. The knocking came again. I hadn't been dreaming. Someone was at my door. I got up and walked the few feet, glancing at the clock on the wall. It was already 4:30. I'd been asleep for three hours. When I looked through the peephole, I saw Detective Hamilton, alone. I started to sweat. Why had he come here? Couldn't he have just called me back?

Pressing my palms against the door, I watched him. He stood there with a hand in one pocket, his other arm propped on the wall. Too casual a pose for a detective. Hamilton still had his suit on, complete with tie. It fit him well. He was looking down the hall, and I found myself staring at his profile, drawn to the angular line of his jaw. His dark brown hair was no longer



neatly parted, but messy, as if he'd been running his fingers through it all day, its curliness more noticeable than it had been this morning. I wondered what it would feel like to run *my* fingers through it.

Hamilton knocked on the door again. I jumped and let out a little squeak.

“Ms. Simpson, I know you’re in there.”

I held my breath. He probably said that every time he knocked on someone’s door. I could still wait him out.

“Seriously, I know you’re there. I can see you blocking the peephole.”

My face grew warm again, and I slowly unlocked the door, hoping the flush in my cheeks would subside.

“Hello, Ms. Simpson. Do you mind if I come in?”

Feeling like I had no choice, I let him in. “You got my message,” I said as I led him over to the small kitchen table and motioned for him to sit in one of the two wooden chairs.

“What message?” Hamilton said and reached into his pocket.

“No, please, don’t listen to it,” I said.

“Well, hell,” he said looking at his phone. “I have five new messages and a bunch of missed emails. I swear, the Department needs to find a better carrier.”

How was it possible that Chicago PD had such bad cell service that detectives weren’t receiving phone calls? Was he being serious or had he actually listened to my ridiculous message and was sparing me the embarrassment?

He tossed the phone on the table and his mouth turned down into a scowl. “Why did you call?”

“Please just delete the message,” I said, and told him about the stairwell conversation. “It seemed like it might be important since he told you he’d been there with Sean last night.”

He pulled out his notebook again, and flipped through it before he started writing. “It’s certainly interesting as Mr. Bentley is the reason I’m here. I wanted to go back to the scene and look at something. When I called Mr. Bentley to ask permission, he refused, saying it wasn’t a crime scene and there would be no reason for us to return.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither did I. When I pressed him, he said we could return with a warrant.”

What was James getting at? Why wouldn’t he let the police do their job? He was hiding something. “What are you looking for?” I asked.

“I’d rather not say at this point.”

We looked at each other. What was the real reason for this visit? I couldn’t read anything in his face. I contemplated telling him about the gun and how early James arrived, but if he wasn’t offering information, I wasn’t either.

“Will whatever you’re looking for make a difference? Roberts seemed certain it was suicide.”

“Roberts has, uh, been taking a cautious approach to investigative matters these days. Not wanting to waste manpower hours and such.” Hamilton’s bright blue eyes stared intently into mine, as if he were willing me to read between the lines.

“So, he’s lazy.”

Hamilton spread his hands out, palms up. “I didn’t say that. But the man is scheduled to retire at the end of the year. Why turn a suicide into a murder investigation when he can just coast through the last few months of his career?”

Roberts and Hamilton were both detectives. Why didn't Hamilton have the authority to continue the investigation? What was their partnership like, if Hamilton believed Roberts would ignore a murder and his response was 'well, nothing I can do about it'? More importantly, what the hell was going on at the Chicago Police Department if murder was classified as suicide and that was the end of it?

"You said you were here because of James. Why?"

Hamilton flipped through his notebook, then closed it. When he started to speak, he was still looking down. "I asked Bentley if he could think of any motive for Thomas's murder. Specifically, I asked him about insurance proceeds. He became very angry, and asked what I was accusing him of."

James frequently overreacted, but that seemed odd even for him. I again thought about telling Hamilton about the change in travel plans.

"I wasn't accusing him of anything, but after that he was no longer cooperative."

"You think someone killed Sean for insurance money?"

"Not necessarily, but Bentley's reaction was suspicious. Roberts's suicide determination is supported by the evidence that we have. If I can find something more, something concrete, I can send it upstairs. Go above his head."

"You're a detective, too. Why can't you proceed with an investigation?" I asked.

"Because I'm still new. I'm not in charge. I'm not even on equal footing. As it stands, there are a innocent explanations for the Scotch, the card log, Bentley's reaction. Not enough for me to get a warrant."

"How are you supposed to find more evidence if there's no investigation? How do you get back into the building if James says no?"

“That’s where I’m hoping you can help me.”

“Me? How can I help?”

“Find out what Bentley’s up to. Why did he show up early? Who was he talking to? Are there insurance policies?”

“But, I’m not, I can’t,” I stammered, not at all comfortable with what he was asking me to do. Did I want to get involved in this? If someone was trying to steal the insurance money, the whole company could go under.

“I’m not asking you to interrogate him. Keep your ears open. He’ll be in touch with you about what to tell the rest of the office, I’m sure of it. See what you can learn from him.”

Taking some deep breaths, I finally nodded, still not sure I could do that.

“You can do it,” he said, as if reading my mind, and when I looked up at him he was peering at me as if he were trying to look into my soul. It was unnerving, but all I could think about was how startlingly blue his eyes were. What was wrong with me? Maybe this was how he got people to do what he asked, by mesmerizing them with his eyes, and I was playing right into it.

“OK,” I agreed, hoping that James would not call me, but I knew Hamilton was right. I wasn’t sure he knew there was a company listserv, let alone how to post to it.

“You know how to get ahold of me.”

“Please don’t listen to that message,” I said under my breath as he turned to walk out.

“What?”

“Nothing. Oh, wait a second,” I said. “How did you get up here?” When I opened the door in my half-asleep state it didn’t even register that no one from the security desk had buzzed to let me know I had a visitor.

Hamilton pulled out his badge and grinned. “You’d be surprised where this gets you. This and my boyish good looks,” he said and then winked.

I laughed and said goodbye, but the way he said it and the look on his face made my stomach clench. There was a coldness to his tone, hidden just under the surface of his grin. After being distracted by his good looks, I now felt genuine unease towards Hamilton. It was definitely too soon to trust him.

## Chapter 5

Hamilton’s request was odd. Even if he was new, didn’t he have ways to get information without involving someone like me, a civilian with no investigation experience? He never told me what he was looking for, which made sleuthing pointless.

I searched my pockets and the couch before figuring out my phone had been in the bedroom this whole time. Certain that my mom had called, I reluctantly walked back to get it. Four new voice mails from her.

There was also a text from Alice. *Sry bout earlier. Can we meet?* She’d sent it while Hamilton was here. It took her that long to apologize? I let Brandon know I was up, then listened to the messages from Mom. I couldn’t avoid her any longer.

“Hi, it’s me. Call me when you can.” Not exactly cheery, but not yet strained.

“It’s Saturday. Where are you?” Emphasis on Saturday, as if I couldn’t possibly have anything to do on a weekend.

And then the icing on the cake. “Cheryl, it’s your mother. I know you think you’re better than us, but I need to speak with you.”

She always knew how to make me feel like shit, even though there was no reason for me to feel guilty about missing those calls. That didn’t matter to the knot that was growing in my

stomach, or stop me from worrying about what I'd done wrong this time. I knew how the return call would go. I'd act like I hadn't listened to the messages. She'd pretend like she hadn't left them. Everything would be fine until we started arguing about Cassie. This was how nearly every conversation had gone over the last eight years.

Emotionally I was drained and I didn't want a fight, but I knew things would be worse if I waited. And who knew what else the weekend had in store.

As the phone rang I hoped she wouldn't pick up. Phone tag could stretch out for a day or two.

"Hello," she said. I could envision her face from the tone of her voice – mouth pursed into a tight line, looking straight ahead, not blinking. If we'd been in the same room together, she would be staring through me.

"Hi. I saw you called." I could never fake a normal tone with her. My voice always came out just a bit higher than usual.

"Must be having a busy day."

"Yeah, strangely. I had to go to work."

"To be honest, Cheryl, you need to go back to law school. Do something with your life."

I didn't have the energy to engage her, so I ignored the comment. "You said you talked to Cassie." I emphasized Cassie in an attempt to remind her which of her daughters needed to do something with her life.

"She can't come stay with you."

"I know, Mom."

"She won't get permission to leave the state, and to be honest, if she did get permission, I think she'd skip out on parole."

Since Dad died, my mom's goal was "to be honest" about everything. "Life is just too short to not be truthful." She never saw that her words weren't truthful, but just her hurtful opinions that she now, for some reason, felt empowered to speak, never once thinking about their impact. And if anyone dared be honest with her, watch out. She was never so angry as when someone called bullshit or pointed out her hypocrisies.

"Is this why you called? To tell me something I already know?"

"She's been...different lately. Something's going on. I think she's using again. I don't know where she gets the money. Can you talk to her? She listens to you."

Of course she was using. She was never not using. And she got the money from her trust account. Mom had this misconception that we had to get permission – from whom, I'm not sure – to pull money from those accounts, even though I'd explained the process to her many times.

"Sure, Mom." It would be useless, of course. Cassie never listened to me.

"Maybe you can come home before the end of the summer? Or maybe for the Marigold Festival?"

"Yeah, Mom. I'll think about it."

There were moments here and there when she sounded like my old Mom. Her request was *honest* and I know we were both picturing the town's big annual festival. When I was in college I'd always come home for it, even though it was right after classes started. But now I couldn't imagine going ever again. Too much had changed.

We ended the conversation with good-byes, neither of us saying "I love you."

My stomach gave a rumbling gurgle, and I felt hungry for the first time all day. With Alice's abrupt departure earlier, I'd never finished making the tea, so I turned the burner on

again and opened a box of Triscuits. There were three short raps at the door, Brandon's signature knock. I let him in.

"How was your nap? You were out for a while."

"I had a visitor." I filled him in on Hamilton's theory about the insurance money and how he had asked me to snoop for information.

"Insurance money? That seems so ordinary. What would be the point?"

"I don't know. The business is the beneficiary of his owner's policy," I said.

"How much do you know about the finances? Could he have killed himself to generate some cash for the business?"

"I don't have direct access to financial information, but I know enough to say that it seems unlikely that Sean killed himself for insurance money." It did seem unlikely, so how exactly could this play into his death? "I also heard from Alice. She's sorry and wants to meet me."

"She should be sorry."

"Do you think it's strange that Hamilton is asking *me* to look for information?"

"It's not standard, but it's also not unheard of. If you find information and pass it on to him voluntarily, he doesn't have to mess with a warrant. It's easier for you to snoop for information than him because there aren't any Constitutional violations if you're searching. That's why he didn't tell you what he's looking for. Otherwise you're acting as an arm of the State."

"I have no idea what he could be looking for. There should already be enough."



“You’re going to have to be a mind reader. Do you want to get some dinner? I see the box of Triscuits over there.”

“Yes. I never thought I’d be hungry again, but I’m starving.”

“Your pick. Ready now?”

“Yes, I want to do something normal. Let me change first.”

“After we eat, we can hang your picture.”

I looked at the huge wrapped frame again. “I’m not sure I have the tools necessary to hang it.”

“I’ve got it covered.”

“So, how should I respond to Alice?” I called from the bedroom.

“Tell her you’ll meet for brunch tomorrow. If she’s going to unload on you, it can wait until then. You don’t need to deal with that.”

“You’re so smart.” I took a quick look in the mirror, and tried to wipe away the makeup smudges. “I want pizza.”

“That seems like a good post-finding-a-dead-body meal.” He paused. “Too soon?”

We walked around the corner to our neighborhood pizza joint. As we slid into the back booth, our waitress was already on her way over with two 312s.

“You look rough, Cheryl,” Mia said. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

“Some stix and the usual?” she asked.

I nodded, and started pushing my beer glass back and forth in front of me. Brandon reached out and took my hands. “How are you?” he said.

“I’m sad, but mostly confused. A little scared about what’s going to happen to the company. I don’t know who to trust.”

“If it was murder, who could it have been?”

“I don’t know. James? He actually would benefit from an owner’s policy. No, that’s ridiculous.” Over the last few hours I’d wondered who might have done this—James, someone else in the office, a competitor—but I kept getting hung up on the “why.” “Sean wasn’t an evil person. I don’t know how anyone could hate him enough to kill him.”

“Ex-wife?”

“I don’t think so. They’ve been divorced for over fifteen years, and their kids are adults. No child support or college expenses to fight about anymore.” My phone started to ring, and I held up a finger as I answered. “Hi, James.” It was like he knew we’d just been talking about him.

“Cheryl, I talked with Doug. We’re going to close the office until after Sean’s services. Doug will notify everyone. Can you meet with us Monday morning?”

“Sure. Why?” *Now* I decided to ask why, but had blindly said yes to Sean when he told me to come in on a Saturday.

“Doug raised some financial concerns. You probably have a better idea of where the info is.” Better than the Vice President of Finance? Concerns about the company generally or Sean specifically?

“Yes, I’ll be there.”

“We’ll meet in the building conference room. The office is being cleaned.”

“Already?” I panicked. He was cleaning away evidence!

“No, Monday.”

“Oh, I see.” This narrowed the window to help out Hamilton. Was there any way I could get into the office before Monday?

“Have you been contacted by anyone? Reporters? Detectives?”

“No one.” The lie came so easily. “Have you?”

“There have been a few reporters. I confirmed Sean’s death, but made no further comment.” He was lying, too.

“I’ll see you Monday.” I hung up.

“Any insight?” Brandon asked.

I shook my head and decided to respond to Alice’s text. Before I could even close the app, the three bubbling dots popped up.

*Can’t wait.*

More typing bubbles.

*2nite?*

“Alice wants to meet up tonight. She says it can’t wait,” I told Brandon.

“She’s probably being her normal melodramatic self.”

Another text came through. *Please?*

“I’m not sure it’s the normal drama. She never sits on her phone waiting for responses.”

Against my better judgment, I responded to her in the affirmative. *K. @ dinner now. 7:30?*

Instant response. *K.*

Between James and Alice, I had yet to have a bite of pizza. I put the phone away. We ate for a while, each lost in our own thoughts.

“What a messed-up day,” I said.

“Agreed.”

“Let’s talk about something else. Anything else. Have you figured out how you’re going to deal with your witness credibility issue?”

I didn’t feel like talking, and I knew getting Brandon going about his trial would keep him talking for a while without any expectation that I actively participate. He was still going when Mia brought the check and a box.

“Hey, Cheryl, isn’t that your company?” She was nodding towards the TV, where a red “Breaking News” banner splashed across the screen. A reporter was standing outside the building. The sound wasn’t on, but the caption and scrolling ticker were enough.

*Local developer Sean Thomas commits suicide amid rumors of bankruptcy.*

I inhaled sharply, nearly choking on the pizza.

“What the hell?” Brandon said.

“Where did that information come from? That’s insane,” I said. My phone started ringing again. Shit. James.

“Cheryl, are you certain you spoke to no one?”

“Yes –”

“Told no one?” The question came out as a shout.

“James, I spoke to no one, I told no one.”

“This terrible rumor. Where did it come from?”

“I assure you I know nothing about a bankruptcy.”

“There is no bankruptcy! The company is fine.” He was roaring. “Who could have done this? Who else knew? I’m calling Doug. I may need you sooner.” He abruptly hung up. Why had he called me before Doug?

“I heard most of that from here,” Brandon said. “He thinks you’re leaking rumors to the press?”

“Apparently. He’s losing his mind.”

Brandon gathered the leftovers and we headed home. “Wouldn’t information like that have to come from a reputable source?” I asked.

As we turned the corner, Alice was pacing the sidewalk in front of our building.

“I know I’m early. Sorry. I couldn’t wait at home.”

Her makeup was streaked, her hair in a tangled ponytail. She never wore her hair up.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Are you OK?”

Tears filled her eyes as she pressed her lips together and shook her head. She pointed to the building.

“OK, let’s go up,” I said.

I pressed my floor, and Brandon pressed his. “I’ll drop this food off and be by later,” he said. There was a strained silence as Brandon and I looked at each other and Alice stared at the floor. Even after he got off the elevator, she wouldn’t look at me. We walked into the apartment

and she went straight to the couch. Alice was almost always happy or joking. I'd seen her stressed every now and again about something at work or family drama. But I'd never seen her like this – so despondent and sad.

“Do you want something to eat?”

“James,” she said, and let out a sound like a hiccup.

“That’s an odd non-response,” I said.

She hiccupped again and then began to cry. This was another first.

“Alice, what is going on?” I braced myself for news worse than Sean’s death.

“James. We’re...I’m...sleeping together.” She put her face in the couch cushion, wrapped her arms around her head. I took a few moments to process what she’d said. She was sobbing and gasping for air. I’d misunderstood. Surely, I’d misunderstood her.

“You...and James...are sleeping together?” I could barely put the thought together. She wailed into the cushion. “How? When?” I started to ask why but was worried I would spit it out in disgust. I got up to get her some water and the box of Kleenex, sending Brandon a quick text on the way to the kitchen because I didn’t want him walking into the middle of this bombshell.

When I handed her the glass of water, she rolled her head slightly so that one eye was peering at me.

“Are you mad?”

“Mad?” Was she serious? “Why would I be mad? Confused. Surprised. But not mad.”

“I’m confused, too,” she said.

“Will you please look at me? We can’t discuss this if your face is buried.”

She grabbed a tissue and let out a slow exhale. "I don't know where to start." I looked at her and we both said, "At the beginning."

"I know," she said. "OK." She finished the water. "Got anything stronger?"

"All I can offer is vanilla vodka and Diet Coke."

"Just bring the bottle."

Not sure if she was serious, I opted to pour some into a glass. "Start with that."

"God, that is not good straight. Can I have some Coke?"

"You're procrastinating. Get on with it."

"Fine." She took another sip. "It started about three months ago. I'd come in early one day. He'd flown in on a red-eye, taken a quick nap, and used Sean's shower. He didn't know I was there and walked out into the office naked."

"That's professional."

"It was 7:30. No one's ever there that early."

That was true, but James wouldn't know that. "So, what, you saw him naked and instantly decided to have sex?"

"Is that what you think of me? I'm that easy?" She shook her head. "I did think about it though."

I held up a hand. "I do not need the details."

"I made a joke, we laughed awkwardly, and he invited me for coffee."

"Coffee?" James and Sean didn't socialize much with the staff.

“It was like our relationship had instantly changed. I guess seeing someone naked has that effect.” She laughed quietly, and stared off into space as if reliving the moment. “I really did have work I needed to get done, so I asked for a rain check. He showed up at my desk at the end of the day and asked me to get a drink.”

Where had I been that day?

“I had no intentions of sleeping with him. It just happened.”

Three months. How had I not noticed?

“You slept with him that night?”

“Of course not.” Alice looked down. “It was the next night.”

“But why? I mean, why keep it up? He’s your married boss.”

“I know. I feel bad about that, but what we’re doing isn’t real.” She laughed softly. “I mean, it’s real sex, but it’s not a real relationship.”

“That’s bullshit. Just because you don’t expect or want him to leave her doesn’t make what you’re both doing to her any less shitty.” I didn’t know what to think of all this. I was honest when I said I wasn’t mad at her, but I was looking at her in a different light. She was my closest girlfriend, but there must be a side of her I didn’t know. I looked over at her. Her face was buried in the cushions again.

“OK,” I said. “Let’s leave that alone for now. You just hook up whenever he’s in town?”

“Basically.”

“So, that’s why he was here on Thursday?”



Alice was raising the glass to her mouth again, but dropped it before it reached her lips. It bounced off the couch, hit the edge of the coffee table and shattered.

“What?”

Or not. “James is in town. He showed up at the office this morning, just before the police arrived. I checked his travel plans. He changed the flight to get in early.”

“That son of a bitch.”

“You really haven’t heard from him?”

“Not since Thursday. After work.” She was punching the cushion. “When he was apparently here.”

“What did you talk about?”

Her face reddened, but the way it did when she was angry, not embarrassed. “You don’t want to know. That fucker.”

“Was it in any way related to Sean?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!” she said, exasperated. “We weren’t talking *about* anything. We were...you really don’t want to know.”

“Yuck. Phone sex?”

“Well, you wouldn’t leave it alone.”

“Fair enough. Have you tried calling him today?”

“No, I was going to when I left here this afternoon, but at that point I didn’t think he knew about Sean’s death and I didn’t want to be the one to break it to him.”

“If you didn’t know he was here, why did you get so pissed and storm off?”

She sighed. “It was stupid.”

“I already figured as much.”

“I guess you sharing – wanting to share – something so important as Sean’s death with me made me feel guilty about not telling you. And I realized that I was going to have to tell you and fess up about hiding it.”

Brandon had been right. It was totally about her. I was going to put that aside for now.

“Now we’re past that. Have you seen the news? What have you heard?” I didn’t want to rehash everything.

“I saw the news. There’s not any truth to that, is there? A bankruptcy?”

“I don’t think so, but where did it come from? James accused me of planting the story.”

“What?” she asked for the second time, and I told her about my conversations with him. We talked for a while about that, trying to interpret his reaction, but never once did she ask me about what I’d seen that morning at the office.

Three knocks interrupted our conversation, and I looked at the clock. Almost nine o’clock. Alice tensed up next to me.

“It’s just Brandon,” I said. “Come in.”

The door opened just a bit, and he poked his head through. “All is well?”

“We’re good,” I said.

“I think I’m going to go,” Alice said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a thing I need to do.”

I gave her a quick hug and whispered, “Be careful.” I knew she was going to find James.

“Always.”

“Well?” Brandon asked when the door shut. I gave him the short version. “Wow,” he said. “That’s unexpected.”

“I’m thinking about going to bed because I can’t deal with any more shock today and that’s the only way I know to avoid it.”

“But I brought my tools.”

“It’s too late to drill into the wall, but let’s at least open it,” I said.

It took both of us to get the brown paper wrapping off, tearing big chunks until the pieces covered our feet and the photo was finally unveiled. It was even more haunting up close. Even though it was in black and white, the woman’s face was expressive, her gaze piercing. I noticed details of the house I hadn’t before – cracks in the paint, a small hole in one of the windows, a curtain hanging askew. I wondered if the living room was the right place to hang it. Brandon leaned the frame forward.

“There’s a packet taped to the back.” He pulled it off and sat on the couch. I stared at the woman’s face, wondering what she was thinking about.

“Look,” Brandon said. “A personal note from Brookey.”

I walked around and sat next to him. “When did she have time to do hand-written thank-you notes?” I opened it.

*Dearest Cheryl,*

*As I said last night, I cannot begin to express my gratitude for all your help. The event was a smashing success.*

So far, this was exactly what she’d put in her email.

*I am so delighted that you picked a photograph by one of my favorite artists. Your interest was unexpected, but exhilarating. As this project develops, you will see why I want you to appreciate the work as much as I do.*

It was signed *XO, Brooke*.

“Where’s the artist info?” I asked without looking up. When Brandon didn’t answer or hand me anything I turned towards him. “Hello? What are you engrossed in?”

“My invoice. Or a copy of it. I didn’t look at it last night. Usually an outside company runs the sales at an auction for tax purposes, but look.”

The top of the invoice read Hollingsworth Arts, LLC. “Strange,” I said. “Brooke never mentioned a separate LLC.”

“It’s probably nothing. Sorry, here’s the artist information.”

“This is it?” He’d handed me a half page of cardstock.

“There’s nothing else in the packet.”

“All it says is ‘Mike Sylvester’s passion was documenting the forgotten neighborhoods of Chicago.’ No website or any contact information. Just a date for the picture. I feel cheated.”

“That’s what Google is for, right?”

“She used that as her ploy, the motivation for people to purchase pieces at the fundraiser. Buy something and learn about the artist.” I turned the card over in my hands, searching for any anything else that would tell me who Mike Sylvester was. It was so odd.

I stalked around the apartment trying to figure out where to hang it.

“I’ll leave the tools here, and we can figure it out tomorrow,” Brandon said.

Despite my nap, I felt drained.

“Will you be OK?” he asked.

“I’ll be fine. I need a full night of sleep to reset.”

“Lock the door behind me.” Shaking my head, I followed him over to the door. After Sean’s death, I was more keenly aware of the need for safety precautions.

As tired as I was, a hot shower seemed like a good way to ease some tension and help me get to sleep. I turned the faucet almost as hot as it would go and let the room fill with steam before I got in. The water poured over me, and I just stood there, not thinking about anything, focusing on slowly breathing in and out. When the water started to run cool, I turned it off and wrapped myself in a towel.

What was that noise? It sounded like voices. I strained to listen, but wasn’t sure what I was hearing. I quickly dried off, threw on a bathrobe, and flipped the switch for the vent. Was it a TV? Was it my TV?

Tiptoeing over to the bathroom door, I pressed my ear against it, but was too afraid to open it. A quick scan of the room turned up no real weapons that I could use to defend myself. The belt on my robe, the lid of the toilet tank. Nothing useful. I settled on the aerosol hairspray. I cracked the door and listened. It was definitely my TV.

“What are you doing?” The voice came from right outside the door. I screamed and pushed the button on the hairspray.

“Ah! What is that? Bug spray?”

“Dammit, Alice!” I pulled the door open. “What the hell are you doing here? You scared the shit out of me.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I knocked, but when you didn’t answer I just your key from our run the other day. I heard the shower, so made myself at home on the couch.”

“You could have called out to let me know you were here. Seriously, what are you doing? It’s after ten.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I should have texted.” She exhaled. “I have something you’re going to want to see. Get dressed.”

I finished toweling off, and looked around the bathroom. My pajamas weren’t in there. Sighing, I put my clothes back on. This day was never going to end.

When I walked into the living room, she was pacing around. “What was so important that it couldn’t wait until tomorrow?”

“I tried calling James as soon as I left here. His phone kept going straight to voice mail, so I decided to go to his apartment. He wasn’t there either, so I let myself in.”

“You have a key?”

“No.”

I looked at her, but she didn’t offer anything else. “Moving on. You found something?”

“He showed up about five minutes after I got in, and went ballistic. He wasn’t making any sense. Yelling, throwing his arms in the air.” She continued pacing around the living room, mimicking his movements as she told the story.

“What exactly was he saying?”

“He asked me what I was doing there, and what I knew. I said I didn’t know anything and he started to come towards me.” A visible shudder went through her body, and she closed her eyes. She explained that she was afraid he was going to hit her, was coming towards her with a hand raised, but that he abruptly stopped and just stood there, shoulders stooped.

“He told me I needed to go, that it wasn’t safe. When I pressed him for an explanation he said he couldn’t involve me, but that he would call as soon as it was safe.”

Alice fidgeted with the blanket.

“You don’t have any idea what he meant by ‘it wasn’t safe’?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe. His behavior was just so odd, not at all like James. Which got me thinking about things he’s said...you know...after...”

“I get it. I don’t need to know about the sex. Just tell me about the pillow talk.”

“Most of the time I was only half listening, but he would say strange things out of the blue like: Sean and I worked really hard to build this company; One mistake shouldn’t destroy an entire company; I won’t let one person destroy my life’s work.”

“I don’t remember Sean saying anything like that.”

“I never asked him about it, and he never elaborated, but now I wonder if there’s something more to it.”

“Just because of how he was acting?”

“No.” She reached into her bag and pulled out a file folder. “This was on his kitchen table. There’s never anything out at his apartment. It’s neater than a hotel room. I grabbed it because it seemed so out of place.”

That didn’t make much sense to me. Why would she take something if she didn’t know what it was? Because it was simply “out of place?” How well did she know James’s habits at a part-time residence?

She was turning it over in her hands, but didn’t open it or offer it to me. Tired of pulling information from her, I grabbed the folder from her hands.

“Ow. I think you gave me a paper cut.”

“You snuck in here because you thought this was something I wanted to see, so let me see it.”

“Maybe you can make something of it.”

The file was thin. There were maybe twenty pages inside. They were mostly legal documents related to an estate. At the back of the stack was a signed real estate purchase agreement between the estate and Thomas Real Estate Development.

“I can’t picture where that is,” I said.

“Neither could I, so I Googled it on the way over. It’s north of the city, out in the middle of nowhere.”

“Why would we buy land there?”

“I was hoping you would know.”

I went back to the first page, and looked at everything a little more closely. “This doesn’t make sense. These documents are over twenty years old. I don’t ever remember seeing anything associated with a property at that location.”

The estate was for a woman named Rebecca Larson. The administrator of the estate looked to be an attorney, which made me think Larson didn’t have any close heirs.

“What does the Google map show? Is there development at the address?” I asked Alice.

“I didn’t look at the satellite view.” She tapped on her phone. “I can’t tell. There’s a grassy clearing, but there are too many trees for me to see anything else.” I looked at the screen and couldn’t make out anything either.

“Look, I’m exhausted. I was about to get into bed. I don’t want to think about Sean or work or anything else tonight. We can talk about this in the morning.”

She nodded, but was staring off into space.



“What is it?” I asked.

“I just feel creeped out. Did James mean it wasn’t safe for him? For me? Why did he keep using the word ‘safe’?”

“Why don’t you stay here tonight? I’m kinda creeped out, too, and could use the company.”

It had been a while since she’d stayed over for a girls’ night, and now I knew why. She’d been busy with James. We got under the covers and I immediately felt myself drift towards sleep.

“Cheryl?” Alice whispered.

“What?”

“I wanted to tell you about James. I just didn’t know how.”

“It’s OK.”

A couple of minutes passed. “Cheryl?”

“What?” I said, sharper this time.

“Do you think James killed Sean?”

“No. That’s ridiculous. Good night.” I wasn’t sure it *was* ridiculous, but I knew if I told her it was possible her boy toy was a murderer, I would never get any sleep.

“OK. Good night.”

Finally, she was quiet and I fell asleep, ending the day’s nightmare.

## Sunday

### Chapter 6

I was back at work, walking into Sean’s office as if pulled by an invisible force. James was sitting in the corner of the office in the dark. All traces of blood were gone. He’d gotten rid

of all the evidence! He told me it would be Monday before it would be cleaned. Why had he done that? I began to panic. There was no way to help Hamilton, no way to solve Sean's murder.

"How could you do this, Cheryl? How could you let it happen?"

"Me? What did I do?"

It was late. Or maybe early. Moonlight streamed through the window and reflected off something metal.

"Don't play games with me. It's just like with your father."

My heart began to race. What was he talking about? "My father?"

"Dammit, Cheryl. Enough." As he stood, he raised his arm. He was holding a gun. The gun that had been next to Sean's body. I began to scream, but my feet were rooted to the ground. I couldn't move.

"Hey. HEY!"

I gasped, my eyes flying open.

"Are you OK?" Alice asked.

I continued to lay there, hands over my eyes. "Mm-hmm. Bad dream."

"Must have been. I heard you shouting from the living room."

"What time is it?"

"Almost nine. I couldn't sleep. Doug sent out the email about Sean. Services are Tuesday."

"Have you heard from James?" I asked. The sinister James from my dreams came to mind and I felt chilled.

"No, but he's been blowing up your phone." She tossed it to me.

Damn. Three messages. Three more missed calls. Should I listen to them or just call back? The messages were all short, so I called him.

“Cheryl. Thank God. You’re OK. OK. I’ve been trying to reach you all morning. Can you meet with Doug and I this afternoon? One o’clock at the office?”

“Um, sure.”

“Doug doesn’t want to wait until tomorrow. We’ll see you then.”

James knew more than he was letting on. Why did he sound so relieved that I was OK? Was he just paranoid? Either way, why?

“What’d he say?” Alice asked before I’d even hung up.

“He bumped up the meeting.”

“Why?”

“Doug wanted to.”

“What else?”

“Why are you interrogating me?”

“I’m not. I’m just...concerned.”

She wasn’t acting like a no-strings-attached person would. I didn’t want to tell her that his first words were “you’re OK.”

“That was basically it,” I said. Why was I lying? I threw back the covers and finally got out of bed. “What do we do now?”

“Eat breakfast?”

“Works for me.”

While Alice showered, I searched the Internet for anything new about Sean. All I found was the recycled news from yesterday. Every mention of the bankruptcy cited “sources close to the company.” Maybe it was a competitor trying to steal business.

The folder Alice had brought was sitting on the table. I searched Google for Rebecca Larson, but the only information that came up was what I already knew – property records and death. Revising the search, I tried to find an obituary, but had no luck. Sean had planned on getting into storage yesterday. Was he looking for something related to these documents? Did Rebecca Larson have anything to do with Sean’s death?

All of these thoughts bounced around my head and I tried to find some connection between all of it.

A picture of pancakes popped up on iMessage. Brandon didn’t cook much, but he had mastered his grandmother’s buttermilk pancake recipe.

I responded *Enuf 4 3?*

*???*

*Alice stayed over...*

*Think we can manage.*

When we got off the elevator, the smell of syrup and bacon filled the hallway.

“Ladies, welcome to BHOP.” Brandon’s apartment was identical to mine in layout, but that’s where the similarities stopped. He was on the opposite side of the building and got morning sun instead of afternoon. That worked better for him because the afternoon sun would cause a glare on the giant TV that took up one wall of the living room. His built-ins were filled with history books, mine held anything related to art. The kitchen counters were cluttered with

appliances – a coffee maker and grinder, toaster, blender. All I ever had out was the teakettle. One thing we did have in common was a closet floor littered with clothes, neither of us keen on doing laundry.

Today, the appliances were pushed aside and his countertops were covered with various kinds of pancake toppings, from chocolate chips to blueberries. “I wasn’t sure what you might be in the mood for.”

For just a second, I felt a twinge of disappointment that Alice was there, too. He’d gone to all of this trouble for me. I wasn’t sure if I was disappointed for Brandon or myself.

“This is amazing.” I wrapped my arms around him in a hug. We piled our plates with pancakes and piled those with the toppings.

“So, you were busy after I left,” he said.

“More strange stuff.” I gave a brief rundown, leaving out the details of exactly how Alice came to have the documents.

“I was busy, too,” he said. “I did a little digging on Mike Sylvester. He did architectural photography in addition to his artwork, and you won’t believe what I found.”

Nothing was unbelievable at this point. He put his plate of pancakes aside and grabbed the computer. When he turned it around, images of Sean’s home filled the screen.

He’d been so proud of that house. He’d had it build in the 80s, once the company began to experience sustained success. The house was massive, and Sean had spared no expense. Some of the features he included – like heated floors in the bathroom – were unheard of that long ago. Each year, he hosted the company holiday party – with the house decorated from top to bottom, always in a different theme. He loved the house so much he even had photos of it hanging in his office among the pictures of Thomas Real Estate Development buildings. The prints in his office

were from a magazine story done around the time the house was finished and the company was first becoming a familiar name in the industry. Those photos were the same ones that I was now looking at on Brandon's computer.

"Sylvester did the shoot for that story?" I asked. It was not an astonishing connection, but still felt strange. "Did you find anything else?"

"Sylvester committed suicide."

My jaw dropped at that. "What?"

"In 1995. There was a huge outpouring of grief from the art community and the neighborhoods he'd focused on for his personal projects."

"My picture was taken in 1995."

"From what I found, it's from the last series he did. He was working on a book – his photos with the subjects' stories in their own words. He never completed the text for that series."

Brandon clicked to a different window and handed me the computer. Images we'd seen Friday night at the fundraiser flashed on the screen, and when I clicked one it took me to a page with a smaller version of the image surrounded by text. "How many are there?" I asked.

"At least a hundred. I haven't been able to figure out who maintains the site."

Knowing Sylvester took his photos specifically for the story behind the person made it that much more important for me to find out about my picture.

"Wait, what's the guy's name?" Alice asked. She had been looking at the screen over my shoulder. "Why does that sound so familiar?" She scrunched her face up. "I think he might have done some work for our old brochures."

"Were he and Sean friends, or was it just a business relationship?" Brandon asked of no one in particular.

“Brooke’s note. What’d she say? He was one of her favorite artists? Maybe that’s how she got connected to Sean?”

Were these just coincidences? If there was a connection, what was it? Was any of this related to Sean’s death?

“Someone’s vibrating,” Alice said.

“It must be me. I left my phone over there.” I got up and went to the kitchen. “It’s Brooke.” Not sure what to expect, I took a deep breath before answering. “Hello?”

“Cheryl, oh, Cheryl. Are you OK? I just heard the news. I’m devastated.”

“I’m OK, yes. Sort of.”

“You – you found him?”

How would she know that? “Yes.”

“It must have been terrible for you. I’m so sorry.”

Her voice had a surprising tone to it, warmer. Her sniffing sounded real, not just for show. It seemed she sincerely felt bad for me.

“It was,” I said.

“I won’t keep you. I simply wanted to give my heartfelt condolences.” Now she was back to sounding like her usual self. “Any collective business can of course be postponed. I’m sure I’ll see you at the services.”

“Of course.” Was that the purpose of the call? To check in on her donation? She had a signed agreement for the funds. Maybe I was being jaded. When I turned back around, both Alice and Brandon were staring at me.

“Well?” Alice asked.

“Just more weird.”

“Does it seem odd to you that she plans to come to the funeral?” Brandon asked.

“Not for the amount of money I’m estimating they’re giving her,” I said.

“Like how much?” Alice asked. “Why is the number still under wraps?”

“I would guess a hundred thousand.”

“Wow. OK,” Brandon said. “For that kind of money, maybe Brooke should be naming the collective after the company.”

“Did she say how she found out about Sean?” Alice asked. “The news or…”

Or James. “No, she only said she’d just heard.”

Alice sat there not looking at anything, picking at her cuticles.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “You’ve got something on your mind.”

“You’re going to think I was lying before.”

“About what?”

“I’m worried about James. Not because I’m in love with him or something dumb like that. He and Sean were tight, even with the physical distance. He was acting so strange last night.” She folded and unfolded her legs. “I’ve called and texted him this morning with no response.”

“So, what, you think he’s depressed?” Brandon asked.

“He was afraid. If someone killed Sean to ruin the business, James could be next,” she said. “I realize how insane that sounds.”

“Detective Hamilton,” I said. They both looked at me, confused. “Sorry. That was the end of my thought. James wouldn’t let Hamilton back into the office. Documents related to some decades-old deal are in his apartment. Sean wanted to get stuff out of storage yesterday. James is hiding something.”



“I don’t disagree.” Alice picked up the folder. “Is there anything else we can get from this?”

“I’ll be in the building for that meeting. Maybe I can go back up to the office and look through the storage room.”

“No. No way,” Brandon said.

“Why not? You didn’t say ‘no way’ when I told you Hamilton asked me to help him.”

“That was before everything else – the bankruptcy news, Alice finding this folder.”

“But it wasn’t before we suspected Sean was *murdered*. You were fine with it then.”

“I never said I was fine with you going to the office alone.” We were sitting on the couch arguing, and I’d almost forgotten about Alice.

“We could take a trip to the property,” she said.

“That’s a good idea, too. After I go to the office.”

“I’m going to have to side with Brandon on this one,” Alice said. “Is there really any point in going?”

“To look for the rest of this file,” I said, holding the folder up. “These documents came from a Thomas Real Estate Development file. Sean wanted to look in storage. Of course there’s a point in going.”

“But is it safe?” Alice asked.

Brandon had gotten up from the couch and disappeared down the hall.

“Doug has financial concerns. James said all those weird things to you. What if the company is in trouble?” I said.

“I’ll just find another job,” she mumbled.

“That’s easy for you to say. Not everyone can do that.”

Brandon had quietly come back into the room, and I jumped when he said, “Keep it to thirty minutes. Promise me.”

“Deal,” I said, but when I looked at him he wouldn’t meet my gaze. “What about the court records? Can you pull anything up?” I asked him.

“That old? Probably not. I’d have to look at the archived records on microfilm. Unless the estate was open for such a long time that it got converted to electronic filing, but we’re talking *years*.”

“What about an estate for Sylvester?”

“There wasn’t e-filing in ’95, but if it were open for more than five years, maybe.” He logged into the court database and started with the Larson cause number. “Nothing, but let me do a name search.”

Even though I could tell it annoyed him, I watched over his shoulder as he narrowed and sorted the results. “What’s that?” I pointed to a case that had a completely different name.

“It’s criminal.” He clicked the link, and scrolled down, making quiet murmuring sounds.

“Well?” Alice said. “You’re killing us here.”

“I’m not sure. I think it’s post-conviction relief. The estate is an interested party.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I’m trying to read the hearing minutes. I don’t know. The original case is too old to link to. Based on the cause number, the PCR might be related to new evidence.”

“It’s pending now?” Alice asked. She had walked back to the kitchen to get more pancakes.

“Yeah. It’s open, but I can’t tell what the current status is.”

“How is a twenty-year-old estate still in existence?” I asked, and stopped peering over his shoulder.

“Maybe it’s related to her death,” Brandon said. “The original crime, I mean.”

“What about Sylvester?” I asked.

“Nothing’s coming up. I’ll dig tomorrow. I have to be in court, so I can go down to the archives after I’m done.”

“What should my plan be for after the meeting?” I said.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Alice asked.

“No, but how else will we find anything out?”

“Why do *we* have to find anything out?”

“You just said you were worried about James.”

“I know. I am. But that doesn’t mean we should be *this* involved.”

Why *was* I trying to get us involved? Just because Hamilton asked me to be? Because I thought Sean had been murdered and wanted to see justice prevail? Or did I feel guilty that I hadn’t seen it coming? That I didn’t prevent it and now the whole company seemed to be in jeopardy? That sounded about right.

Even when I was a kid I placed an inordinate amount of blame on myself whenever anything went wrong. If the swim team lost, it was because I didn’t push myself hard enough. If no one came to the school musical, it was because I didn’t do a good enough job on the set. My dad died because I didn’t tell him I loved him before he left for shift. It had only gotten worse and more irrational over the years. But it was difficult to change.

“We don’t have to be *this* involved. I’ll just go through storage, and if I don’t find anything, then I’m done.” Even as I said the words, I knew they weren’t true.

## Chapter 7

To give myself a cushion, I left my building at 12:30. It was another perfect afternoon, and I imagined I was walking towards the lakeshore for a lazy day at the beach. The three of us had strategized how I would get up to the office without making it obvious. I had only been to the building conference room a couple of times, and couldn't remember any details of the floor's layout. Assuming the bathrooms were all in a similar location, it was decided that I would excuse myself to the bathroom if James and Doug left the same time I did.

"Why don't I come with you?" Brandon had asked me quietly as I was leaving. "I won't come in. I'll just wait outside while you're in there."

I'd told him no, I'd be fine, but as I walked towards River North I wondered why I had been so quick to turn him down.

Even though it was the middle of the day, the lobby of the building was dark and cavernous. My footsteps echoed around me. The guy sitting at the security desk looked only vaguely familiar, and the feeling must have been mutual because he asked for my ID badge. As I was reaching into my purse I remembered that I'd never looked for it after yesterday morning.

With a bored look, he said, "License, then." He was smacking his gum, which made him appear even younger than he probably was. He was dressed in the normal security guard uniform – white button down with a black blazer, red logo patch on the right jacket pocket – but his jacket was unbuttoned and wrinkled, and if he stood up I wouldn't have been surprised if his shirt was untucked.

“I work at Thomas Real Estate Development. I’m here for a meeting with James Bentley and Doug Fisher. I’m sure they’re already here.” I felt nervous and my sentences were running together.

He whistled. “Wow. That is some crazy shi...stuff. I heard some employee found him. What a shocker on a Saturday morning. You know the guy well?”

I’d never come across anyone on the security staff that was this unprofessional. Was this his normal behavior, or should I attribute it to the very abnormal events that had taken place? I took a closer look at his nametag – Troy – and made a mental note to mention it to Stan.

“Yeah, I did. Late for my meeting.”

During my discussion with Brandon and Alice, I had expressed concern about whoever was running security noticing which at floor the elevator stopped, but I wasn’t too worried about Troy.

When I got off on the fifth floor, I did a quick lap around the outside hallway to remind myself of the bathroom and stairwell locations. The conference room was really a conference center, accordion walls contracting and expanding as needed depending on the size of the event. Only one of the doors was open, down at the end of the hall. As I got closer, I could hear hushed voices, and I strained to hear what they were saying. I still didn’t understand why I was needed.

I walked in and Doug’s back was to me, his fiery red hair sticking out in all directions. James was leaning in so close to him that their heads were nearly touching.

“H-hello?” My stomach was doing flip-flops again.

“Cheryl, right on time. Sit down.” James got up to close the door behind me, but before he pulled it shut he stuck his head out into the hallway and looked both left and right.

“Doug,” I said, and he only nodded in return, his eyes bleary, clothes rumpled. A stack of documents sat in front of him, topped with a dog-eared legal pad. I started to walk to the other side of the table, but James stopped me. “Sit closer. We can’t be too cautious.” His voice was hushed, nearly a whisper. Was this necessary? Or paranoia? Doug simply stared down at his folded hands. “Someone is trying to destroy this company. I don’t know for what purpose. But we have to stop it.”

James was in the middle of us, and I looked past him to Doug. He was now tapping the legal pad. I couldn’t get a read on what he was thinking. I kept quiet, assuming James would reveal why I was there.

“We have discovered – well, Doug has discovered – some disturbing information. We don’t know whom to trust, but Sean had the utmost confidence in you. If he gave anyone any indication of what he was about to do, I think it would have been you. Did he say anything about, well...”

He snapped his fingers quietly in the air. Doug was rubbing his face with his hands.

“James. Enough. She can’t help us if she doesn’t know.”

James whipped around to face Doug. “I told you, we must be careful about who we tell what,” he hissed, partially in anger and partially in an attempt to keep me from hearing.

“You just said Sean had confidence in her.” Doug’s ruddy cheeks got even redder, and I knew he was getting angry.

“But we can’t be –,” James started and Doug exploded.

“You’re being ridiculous! No one in this room killed Sean or knows who did. No one in the *office* killed Sean or knows who did. We have to share information with each other.”

Even though they were talking about me, I had disappeared, and I watched them intently, my stare unnoticed. Before, Doug had occupied his hands tapping his pen, rubbing his face, and now I saw he’d been doing that in an attempt to get them to stop shaking. After his outburst, nothing he did could mask the trembling. James had begun to sweat, beads breaking out along his hairline, and tiny damp circles darkened the back of his shirt.

“Fuck it,” Doug said. “You deserve to know regardless.” He looked past James to me.

“Doug, don’t.”

“You don’t get to call the shots. There’s too much at stake and you aren’t thinking clearly.” Doug pulled the stack of papers closer. “Cheryl, did Sean say anything to you, anything at all, related to insurance policies for the company?”

“This *was* about insurance money?” I said in disbelief.

“Why do you say it like that?” James asked. “What do you know?”

“Nothing,” I said. “When I spoke to Detective Hamilton –”

“You spoke to him? When? I asked you yesterday evening if you’d talked to anyone and you assured me you had not.”

“I just...he had...” I took a deep breath. There was nothing wrong with me talking Hamilton, and I didn’t understand why this upset James so much. “He called me after you and I spoke.” Only a minor fib.

“James. What does it matter? She spoke to a police detective. Do you want to add the Chicago PD to your conspiracy theory?”

Doug and I had worked together on occasion, but I didn’t know him that well, and his almost aggressive attitude was surprising.

“Here’s the deal,” he said, poking at the pile of papers in front of him. “Sean took out a new owner’s policy about four weeks ago. He canceled the other two that covered him.” Doug looked at me as if I was supposed to know what significance that held.

I didn’t, so I said, “The new one isn’t for as much money?”

“If that were the issue, I’d be ecstatic,” James said.

“The policy, like every owner’s policy, has a clause, a very standard clause, a clause that Sean would have been aware of.” At every phrase, Doug stabbed at his legal pad with the pen. He took a deep breath before continuing. “The policy doesn’t pay out if there’s a suicide.”

“But it wasn’t suicide,” I said.

“Of course it wasn’t suicide,” James snapped.

“It’s being treated that way,” Doug said. “We have to face that reality.”

“Why won’t you let Hamilton back in? Let him prove it was murder so the company gets the insurance money?” My question was directed at James, but Doug answered.

“Cheryl,” he said quietly, and I knew he was about to tell me the part James didn’t want me to know. “This company is in significant financial peril.”

“But that’s why we need Hamilton,” I interrupted.



“No, I don’t mean without the insurance money. I mean regardless of the insurance money.”

“I’m not following,” I said.

James brought both fists down onto the table, and it nearly tipped over from the force. He shoved his chair back from the table and began to stalk around the room.

“There is money missing. A lot of money. I haven’t been able to determine where the discrepancy lies – with profits coming in or money going out. The operating accounts are where they should be but the reserves are almost depleted.”

“What do you mean? Sean was stealing money?”

“Sean was not stealing money!” James no longer seemed concerned about people overhearing us.

“Since I don’t know which numbers are off, I don’t know who might be responsible.”

Neither James nor Doug could be that good an actor, and I believed they didn’t know about any of this until Sean’s passing. So, who leaked the bankruptcy rumor to the press?

“Who else would have access to that information?” I asked. Other than Doug asking me if Sean had mentioned anything about the insurance policies – a question that could have easily been asked and answered over the phone – I was still not sure why it was so important for me to attend this meeting.

“The people on my staff, but none of them would do this. At least not by themselves.” That was an odd thing to say. “Did Sean ever meet with anyone in the office on a regular basis?”

“He met with a lot of people on a regular basis. You know that, Doug.”

“I mean, someone that seemed out of place, or someone he hadn’t met with in the past. Had there been any change in his meetings over the last couple of months?”

“Not that I’m aware of. I don’t set his calendar, and I don’t see everyone who walks into his office.” I was talking about Sean as if I might do those things for him again. I squeezed my eyes shut. “I could look at it, if you think it might help.”

“It could. Might jog your subconscious. And there is, ah, one other thing.” Doug began clapping and unclapping his hands. “In the weeks before Sean’s death, there had been some talk in the office that Sean was having an affair.”

“Sean?” I said, looking at James. He was staring at the table. “Talk among whom?” I didn’t spend a lot of time standing around gossiping, but most days I ate lunch in the break room with my colleagues. Why hadn’t I heard anything?

“Just...people.”

Why was he being weird? “What relevance does that have? Like people suspected he was sleeping with someone at work?” That was ironic considering James was the one sleeping with someone at work. He continued staring.

“Well, yes. With...um...don’t take this the wrong way. We don’t believe it, of course.” Doug sighed. “You.”

“Me what?” I wasn’t following.

“That you were –” He stopped to clear his throat. “– having an affair with him.”

That's why I hadn't heard anything. "This is a joke, right?" I wasn't sure if I felt hurt or angry. Why would people think that about me? Sean and I had a totally normal executive/assistant relationship. We didn't spend a lot of time together alone, or behind closed doors.

"I'm sorry," Doug said. "It was just a rumor. I did my best to stop it."

"But who? Who was saying these things?" I felt betrayed. Someone in the office *was* sleeping with an exec, but it wasn't me. When I first started my job, it had been hard for me to be friendly with my co-workers, to build trust, but I took pride in the fact that now everyone knew they could count on me and turned to me for help. "Oh, God. People are going to think I did this." My stomach churned as a different type of panic washed over me.

"No, Cheryl, of course not," Doug said, but whether he was aware of it or not, it came out like a question.

"You're not very convincing." James continued to sit there and say nothing, and I wanted to scream at him. "This is absurd. There's no other word to describe it. Is that why you really asked me here?" Doug quickly looked away, his face getting red again. "Was that insurance stuff a lie? And the missing money?" Things were spinning out of control. I tried to replay the conversation we'd had not five minutes before, but I couldn't think straight. I felt ungrounded.

"No, no, that's all true. Here." Doug shoved the stack of pages at me. "Look, this is all real." He opened his mouth as if to say something more and then abruptly closed it. James was now looking at the ceiling.

“You thought I knew about it.” I looked at both of them but neither would return my gaze. “That’s why you asked me here. You thought I knew,” I repeated softly. “Is there anything else?” I asked, although I didn’t think I’d stick around if the answer were yes.

Doug swallowed hard. “No, that’s all.”

I started to get up, but turned to James. “You never answered my question. Why not let the police do their job?”

“We just want to get a better handle on this before someone starts combing through sensitive business information.”

James was arrogant, but not so arrogant that he would hinder the murder investigation of his friend and business partner. The bankruptcy rumor was damage enough. Did it really matter if the police investigation confirmed the rumor? There had to be some other reason for not cooperating with Hamilton. What were they still hiding?

## Chapter 8

The scheming I’d done with Alice and Brandon before leaving the apartment about how to get from the meeting to the office without James and Doug noticing turned out to be unnecessary. Doug and James were engrossed in a whispered argument by the time I walked out the door. As I waited for the elevator I slowly inhaled and exhaled. Why had Sean canceled all of the other policies? Just how much financial trouble was the company in? I didn’t believe Sean was stealing money, either, but there had to be an explanation for missing funds.

The elevator arrived and I wondered only fleetingly if the security guy downstairs was paying any attention to the movement. It seemed unlikely, but I hit the button for my floor and the twenty-first floor, then pressed the lobby before I got off. The floor was dark and still, so

much so that I wondered if the electricity had gone out. The air felt like it was pressing onto me from above, as if it were a physical presence suspended from the ceiling. A strange odor permeated the air. To say it smelled like death seemed dramatic, but it was an unnatural smell, damp and dank.

Sean's office and the cubes right outside it were blocked off with police caution tape. I kept my head down and went straight to my office to grab the keys to the storage room. Brandon had made me promise that I would be in and out in less than thirty minutes. The storage room was at the south end of the building, and exactly what one would expect from a place meant for holding old documents. Wire shelving with banker's boxes stacked one on top of the other. Dust everywhere, even though the door was closed ninety-nine percent of the time.

Each box housed its own project. They were organized in a haphazard chronological order – by year the project was completed and ready to be leased, instead of start date. There were labels with the project number and development name, but the entire system was of no use to me since by all appearances this project never got off the ground.

I started in the early 90s. The first box I opened was properly labeled, and I recognized the development name as one we still owned. Not wanting to overlook anything, I pulled out specific documents from each file that I knew would identify the seller and the property address. I opened box after box, finding no references to Rebecca Larson or her property address. It was taking longer than I'd expected to go through each box. A cloud of dust was hanging in the air. I was sweaty, grimy, and running out of time, but I was afraid if I went any faster I would miss something.

When I came upon an unlabeled box between 1993 and 1994, I was certain I'd found what I was looking for. The system was useful after all. It was on a top shelf, so I walked back

through the rows until I found the step stool. My eyes and nose were starting to itch from all the dust. I climbed onto the stool, put one hand on the box and grabbed the shelf with the other. I pulled with force, expecting the box to be just as heavy as the others I'd been slinging around. But, it flew off shelf like it was empty, and I lost my balance. The step stool shot out from under me, and even though I let go of the box and attempted to steady myself on the edge of shelf, I tumbled onto the floor.

Even after the stool stopped rolling, the clatter continued to echo. I sat where I'd landed, assessing whether I was injured and looking at all of the loose papers around me. Why hadn't they been in the normal three-ring binder? After determining that I wasn't hurt, I began collecting the pages. It would be impossible to figure out the order they had been in before sailing through the air. A few edges were visible from underneath the shelves, and I had to get flat on my stomach to reach all of them. One page was impossibly stuck underneath the plastic wall trim, and I was afraid it was going to rip. After some gentle tugging it finally came loose, and I crawled back over to the rest of the pile.

A shrill ringing broke through the thick silence. My phone. "God dammit." At least the pages stayed closer together this time. The sound continued to bounce off the walls and wire shelves as I dug through my bag looking for my phone.

"Hello?" I said, trying not to sound frantic.

When there was no immediate response I pulled the phone away from my ear to see who it was. Shit. James.

"Where are you?" he finally said. "You sound like you're in a tunnel."

"Uh, I'm in a bathroom." The bathroom? What a stupid thing to say! Pressing the phone to my ear with my shoulder, I started gathering the pages together again.

“Oh, well, it’s not pressing,” he said, his discomfort coming through the phone.

“I mean, I’m just washing my hands.” Even though it was a lie, I felt the need to clarify that I hadn’t answered a call from my boss while sitting on the toilet. “What do you want now?”

He hesitated before responding. “I didn’t want to mention anything in front of Doug. The rumor about you and Sean. It’s terrible. I’d only recently heard about it. I never believed it.” He paused for a second, and then sighed. “I suspect you know about, well, you know.” I assumed he was hinting about Alice, but since he hadn’t asked me anything, I stayed silent. “Please,” he continued, “don’t say anything.”

Sean was dead, and James was still worried about keeping his affair with Alice a secret. But he didn’t seem to be bothered by his employees thinking *Sean* had been doing the same thing. When had he found out? And how? For the first time since Doug had told me about this rumor, I wondered whether Sean had known before he died. Was that part of why he’d asked me to come in on Saturday?

It was definitely time to get out of there. I hadn’t found much, but I put the thin stack of pages into my bag and began to fold up the flaps of the banker’s box. Something was wrong. I looked more closely at the top. The dust. There were streaks in it, like trails from fingertips. The other boxes in the same vicinity were all coated in a heavy layer of undisturbed dust. None of the others I’d looked at were like this. Was it possible I’d done it myself when I lost my balance? No, I’d pulled on the handle and immediately let go to grab the shelf. Not sure if it was significant, I took a picture of the top before I put the box back up on the shelf.

I walked over to the hanging racks that held all of the project drawings in cardboard tubes. I didn’t expect to find anything, and wasn’t surprised when there were no unlabeled tubes in the 1993-1994 section.

It had been about a half hour since I left the meeting. Brandon would be getting anxious, but since I was here I wanted to check a couple of other things. Nothing Doug or James had said gave me the impression that either of them had been up here looking for documents. I had no idea where the insurance information was kept, but there were only a few possibilities. The first two turned up empty. The only other place they could be was the filing cabinet in Sean's office. I stood about five feet outside the door. Weren't the canceled policies irrelevant? Was it that important to review them?

Maybe all of it was irrelevant – the old policies, the new policies. Maybe none of it had anything to do with Sean's death, and it was just a coincidence. I was trying hard to convince myself that I didn't need to walk into that office, but I knew I had to. Coincidence or not, the new policy existed, and my job and the jobs and lives of my friends and colleagues were at risk. If I could find something to help, then I should.

Even though I'd never had to get into that filing cabinet, its key was on my key ring. I started at the top, and worked my way through two complete drawers before finding what I needed in the third.

“Son of a bitch,” I said.

There was a hanging file folder labeled “Insurance Policies.” And it was empty. What did this mean? The company literally kept almost every piece of paper that came through the door, despite my repeated attempts to convince Sean to move to digital storage. I sat back on my heels.

The pictures of Sean's house were on the wall across from me. The glass of the center frame was spider webbed, like someone had punched it. I got up to look at it more closely. There was something dark in between the tiny cracks. Blood? Even though I had looked at the pictures too many times to count, I had never been close to them. In the bottom corner of each was a



signature – Sylvester’s signature – but the one that was broken also had a short inscription. *I always knew you’d make it.*

“Don’t move.”

I froze, my heart thumping so hard it was pounding in my ears, muffling normal sound. The voice was familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it.

“Oh, it’s you. What are you doing up here?”

Turning, I slowly blew out the breath I’d been holding. It was Troy, the security guard, and I was afraid I’d underestimated him. I hadn’t bothered to turn on the light in Sean’s office, and Troy’s face was covered in shadows, his expression masked. For a terrifying moment as he stood there motionless, blocking the door, I feared he was Sean’s killer.

Then the moment passed and he seemed to mistake my look of panic for sadness because he said, “Can be hard to let go, can’t it?” I simply nodded. “Needed to see for yourself? I get that. I really do, but you’re going to have to come with me. We got strict orders from Stan not to let anyone, I mean an-y-one, up here. Now, I won’t tell him about this, but you gotta come with me right now.”

I sniffed and rubbed at an imaginary tear in the corner of my eye. “Of course. I’m sorry,” I said, looking at me feet.

“It’s OK. But really, it sure is creepy up here.”

I was afraid he would ask me questions about Sean or what I’d been doing in there, so I continued looking down and sniffing once we got in the elevator.

“My mom died when I was real young. Nothing as dramatic as all that.” Troy waved his hand in the direction of the office. “But it was unexpected, and I remember running through the

funeral home trying to find her body, my dad chasing me, because I didn't believe him. I had to see her for myself."

Not sure what to make of that heartbreaking information, I said, "I'm really sorry to hear that. That must have been terribly hard."

"Something like that, it really changes a person."

I knew that too well. When we reached the lobby, he awkwardly patted me on the shoulder and said, "You take care now."

As I left the building, it hit me that Troy had interrupted me before I'd had a chance to look at Sean's calendar. I walked slowly towards home. Just because James wasn't willing to involve Hamilton didn't mean I couldn't. This time I was prepared for the voice mail, and left a short message. He called me back not five minutes later.

"Cheryl, thanks for calling. Are you at home? Can I come by?"

"No, I'm on my way. I'm just leaving the office."

"Oh, then you're not too far from the station. Do you have time to stop by?"

"Um, sure." For some reason, this unexpected face-to-face visit on his turf made me uneasy, but it was only a couple of blocks out of the way. At the next intersection, I turned away from the lake. The sidewalks were crowded; the noise of bumper-to-bumper traffic surrounded me and drowned out my thoughts. People were sitting outside at a bar, the Cubs game on in the background. I wanted to sit down, too, disappear for a few hours.

"Watch out," a sharp voice said, and it took a moment to register that the warning was meant for me. I'd stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. I began moving again.

The police department was in an unassuming building, and I nearly walked right past it. I had never been inside a Chicago precinct. None of the doors were marked, so I walked towards

the one that most resembled a public entrance. The area I walked into was deserted, and smelled like burnt coffee. The fluorescent lighting reflected off the painted concrete walls, and it took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. There was an odd mix of artwork on the walls – impressionist paintings, charcoal drawings, watercolor sunsets – hung haphazardly at random places around the room.

I wasn't sure what I'd expected, not necessarily a buzz of activity, but more than just one lone officer sitting at a desk. It wasn't even a reception desk – more like a school desk with the chair attached. He was on the other side of the room, and as I made my way over he glanced up at me, but didn't otherwise acknowledge my presence. The crossword puzzle in front of him was mostly blank.

“Hi, I'm, uh, looking for Detective Hamilton.”

“Name.” I told him. “He expecting you?”

“Yes.”

He swiveled his chair around and picked up the handset on a small table behind him. “Gotta Cheryl Simpson up here.” A brief pause. “Mmm-hmm.” I'd hate to see this guy in an interrogation room. “Be right up,” he said in my general direction.

There were two folding chairs against the wall, but since they hadn't been offered, I decided to stand and try to figure out the artwork. Hamilton came out a side door about a minute later. “Cheryl, good to see you.” I followed him as he led me through a maze of hallways, the burnt coffee smell mixing in with microwave popcorn, until we came to an empty room not much bigger than a closet, labeled “Interview 003.” He gestured for me to walk in ahead of him, and I noticed that he looked more put together than he had at my apartment, hair neatly combed, tie straight. His blue eyes were fixed on me and butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

“What do you have for me?”

I started with James’ first phone call during dinner the night before, and ended with the security guard finding me staring at the shattered glass.

“That’s all potentially useful,” he said, nodding to himself as he took down notes. “Anything else?”

There *was* something else – the file I had in my bag. While I had told him about what Alice found in James’ apartment, and the little information the Google search had turned up, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him the real reason I’d gone back to the office. It wasn’t that I thought the information from the old file was irrelevant. It was probably more relevant than any of the insurance stuff, but something told me I should look through it before I handed over twenty-year-old original documents. I was fully aware that I was acting just like James and Doug.

Hamilton didn’t press me for anything else, and I knew it was time to leave. Instead, I stopped at the door and turned back around. He was leaning over his notebook. I took a deep breath and risked asking a question. “The bankruptcy information. Is there any way to find out where it came from?”

“Unless we can tie it directly to the death – as motivation – a reporter won’t give up the source.”

That seemed like bullshit, but I’d dropped out of school before constitutional law. I’d first heard the report on TV, but I began to wonder which source had reported it first.

Hamilton walked me out, thanking me for the information. He didn’t provide me with his thoughts this time, and I wondered if he was seeing connections I wasn’t.

## Chapter 9

When I got back to the apartment, Alice nearly grabbed the doorknob out of my hand as I was opening it. Brandon was standing awkwardly by the kitchen counter, and I suspected he'd been pacing the apartment. Alice grabbed my arm and pulled me in. "Where have you been? What happened?"

"Just give her a minute to get inside the apartment," Brandon said, but I'd barely sat down before he said, "Spare no detail."

As I told them about the afternoon, they kept interrupting each other and me. "Who is this security guard?" Alice asked when I got to the part about Troy finding me in Sean's office.

"The one from the front desk. If you can't listen, at least wait to ask questions until she's finished," Brandon said, but then asked me how Troy got all the way to Sean's office without me hearing him. When I was finally done, Alice said, "We were getting worried."

"I'm sorry. I figured as much, but I wanted to go through as much as possible with the time I had. All I found is the file, though, and there's not much there."

We moved the coffee table to the side of the living room so we could all sit on the floor. "Divide and conquer," Brandon said as he split up the stack. "Let's organize as best we can. Start chronologically and then by type of document if that seems to make sense."

Things were in greater disarray than I'd first thought, with each of us periodically asking if anyone had seen page three of a six-page letter and so on, such that we weren't really able to review what we were sorting. Because there wasn't a lot to go through, we were done in thirty minutes. After everything was shuffled and reorganized, Brandon split the documents again, and we started to carefully read through them.

Nothing in my stack sparked any interest until I came across the homeowner's policy for the Larson house. "More insurance."

"What'd you find?" Brandon asked.

As I showed it to him, Alice said, "Why would that be in there?"

"Seems out of place," I agreed, and read through the document, focusing on the details specific to this property and skimming the boilerplate language. "I don't know a lot about homeowner's policies, but it seems standard. There's an umbrella policy for \$250,000.00, but that doesn't seem outrageous. There are no specific items identified for additional coverage like jewelry."

"Are there any addendums or special coverage? Like flood insurance?" Alice asked.

"That would make sense, but there's nothing else listed," I said. "I don't know why it's here. Maybe one of you has something that can shed light on it."

We finished our review and were no closer to any answers. The policy was the only thing out of the ordinary, but none of the other documents referenced it. Why would the seller have to provide proof of insurance? The rest of the file was made up of earlier drafts of the purchase agreement, correspondence with counsel, deeds.

"These documents span a five-year period," Alice said. "Why such a long time for a project that never even got off the ground?"

I flipped through the pages to identify any major gaps in time. "Wait a second," I said as I pulled a letter from the attorney out of the pile. I turned to the back of stack and looked for another letter from his office. Once I found it, I pulled out the first draft of the purchase agreement. "Where's that file you took from James's?" Alice handed it to me and I pulled out the signed purchase agreement, placing all four documents next to each other on the floor. "Look."

Alice and Brandon studied the pages but it was taking them too long to pick up on what I'd seen and I didn't have the patience to wait. "She died in the middle of all this. In the earlier documents, Rebecca Larson is the party involved. Later, it's her estate."

They both began to nod, although none of us knew whether it signified anything of importance.

"Let's go look at the property. It's getting late, and we don't know what we're going to be getting into. Matt said we could borrow his car," Brandon said.

I had noticed that in most friend circles, there was only ever one person at a time who kept a car in the city, and unspoken etiquette dictated that you limited how often you requested to borrow said car. Matt was generally agreeable, and typically only asked for a six-pack in return.

The drive to the property, just outside Northbrook, took less time than we anticipated. When we started out, the GPS told us part of the route was unverified and to proceed with caution. Even the navigator believed we were being reckless. As we turned down the lane we expected would lead us to the house, our route disappeared from the screen. "Entering unverified area."

"Well, shit," Brandon said. "I wasn't expecting that to happen when we were this close. There must be nothing back here." He eased the car a little further down the narrow road that was barely wider than one lane. It was paved, but without any lane markings, the edge of the road barely discernible from the dirt shoulder.

Alice and I were watching out our respective windows for any sign of a driveway. I felt the car slow even more, and then come to a stop.

"Dead end," Brandon said.

The road just ended at the edge of the woods. No signs, just a small drop off, about ten feet of wild grass, and then dense trees.

“We must have missed something,” I said. “How are we going to get out of here?”

“Very carefully.” Brandon put his right arm on my headrest and turned his head so he could look out the back window. “Keep looking for any type of clearing. I think we passed a spot just a ways back that might allow enough room to turn around.”

We’d been on this road for at least a couple of miles. Backing out that far would be a test of skill.

“Stop!” Alice shouted from the backseat.

Brandon slammed on the breaks and we all whipped forward. “Dammit.”

“Sorry. Look right there. There’s sort of a clearing.”

I turned in the direction she was pointing. There did appear to be a path through the trees, but whether that was the drive we were looking for was unclear. It didn’t meet the edge of the road.

“Let’s check it out,” she said.

Brandon parked the car in the middle of the road, and shrugged when I looked at him. We got out slowly, and I wondered why I hadn’t worn tennis shoes or brought any bug spray. The buzzing insects were the only distinct sound. No birds chirped. No wind rustled the leaves. We hadn’t passed another car or any type of building since before turning onto this road.

I stepped off the pavement and immediately saw that there was path. A thick tree, the trunk obscured by soft green moss and the tall grasses, blocked its entrance. One by one we heaved ourselves over top of it, Brandon spotting Alice and me first.

“This doesn’t look like a driveway, though,” Alice said. “It’s like a walking path.”



There was no continuation of the road's pavement. Ahead of us, the woods were cut by a well-worn dirt path with surprisingly little overgrowth considering what we'd just climbed through. We walked in silence, the ground absorbing our footsteps. The trees outside the path were dense, and we were surrounded by a premature dusk. Ahead of us, the darkness continued.

"Maybe the path takes a sharp turn," I said, thinking aloud because the silence was becoming unnerving.

"What?" Brandon asked.

"It's just so dark. If this path is going to open up onto Larson's property, there should be some light up ahead." I'd no sooner finished speaking when the path stopped, another unexpected dead end. "What the hell?"

When Brandon and I stopped walking, I noticed Alice was no longer right next to us. She was about twenty feet back. "Alice?"

She was staring into the woods on her right. "Here's another path."

"Look, this is getting out of hand," Brandon said. "We don't need to get lost out here. No one would ever find us."

"No, I can see a clearing." Alice was already climbing through the growth. For someone who didn't want to be involved, she was now leading the charge. Brandon and I had to run to catch up to her. As I pushed through the bushes, I bent down branches so that it was obvious which way we had come, a skill I'd learned in Girl Scouts but had never until that moment used in real life.

The light was getting brighter, the new path wider than the one we'd come in on. We came to the edge of the clearing and stopped. On the drive up, we'd discussed what we expected

to find. Each of us had a different idea, but none of them were close to what was now in front of us.

The clearing was easily a half-acre of space, but it was empty except for the remains of a structure that had been destroyed by fire. The wood still appeared ashy, and the air around us was different than what we'd just walked through, acrid instead of earthy. "Do you think this is how Rebecca Larson died?" I asked. I couldn't imagine a more horrific way to go.

"Why is it still like this?" Alice asked. "That purchase agreement was signed. If we bought the property, why did it just sit like this?"

"Why did they want to purchase it in the first place?" Brandon asked. "We could barely find it and we were looking for it. There is literally nothing around here."

"The purchase couldn't go through without a development plan," I said. Why hadn't I thought of that earlier? "The financing statements are missing. The project description would be in those."

I'd seen all I needed to and was ready to go back to the car, but both Brandon and Alice started walking around the perimeter of the collapsed house. "Maybe there's an actual driveway we missed," Brandon said.

I trailed behind them, looking at the destruction. The rubble was made up of varying shades of black, gray, and white – so the yellow, as dull as it was, caught my eye. "Look, here," I said, standing where I was. Something about the property felt sacred, and I didn't want to disturb anything. Brandon and Alice emerged from the other side of the house.

"It looks like crime scene tape," Alice said.

“Could just be caution tape. There might have been neighbors around at the time, or hunters frequenting the area.” Brandon moved in close and reach out his arm as if he were going to grab the yellow.

“Don’t touch it,” I said, the urgency in my voice causing him to pause. “I mean, we don’t know how stable that is.”

He brought his arm back. “There may be an old drive that leads off towards the west.”

“Let’s just go. Who cares if there is or isn’t,” I said. “We have to leave the way we came, and it’s getting late.”

Alice and I started walking back, but Brandon stopped. “Something about this seems vaguely familiar. Maybe it just reminds me of a scene from a movie, or something.” He continued to stand there until Alice said, “I’ll hot wire the car.” I looked at her with a raised eyebrow and she shrugged.

On the drive back to the city, we discussed different theories about the fire, why Thomas Real Estate Development was ever interested in the property, and why the place was still in that state all these years later. No idea seemed any better or worse than another, but not one could answer all of our questions. We did, however, come up with more concrete things to search for.

“We might be able to glean something from the deed transfers,” Brandon said. “I’ll see what I can find after I go through the court records.”

“I’ll see if I can find any newspaper articles or any old story clips about the fire,” I said. Alice was sitting quietly, fingernail between her front teeth, staring out the window.

“I think I should try to talk to James,” she said quietly.

“Alice, I think that’s a bad idea,” I said. “You’re subjecting yourself to unnecessary risk.”

“I just have a feeling.” And I had a feeling her motives were personal. “He probably won’t even agree to see me.”

“That’s part of why I think it’s a bad idea. I know you. You’ll break into his apartment again, and then who knows how much trouble you’ll get into.”

“Hold on a second – you broke into his apartment?” Brandon asked.

“No, she’s exaggerating. I didn’t break in. You make it sound so –”

“Illegal?” he said.

“Sinister,” she said. “But that works, too. I didn’t break anything.”

“Breaking isn’t actually required. It’s any unauthorized entry,” Brandon said.

Alice was getting agitated, chewing more and more frantically on her nails.

“Leaving semantics aside,” I said, “he nearly flipped out on you before. No matter what I say, you’ll go there, so I’ll just say this. Be careful and let me know where you are at all times.”

We were still sort of arguing about it – pointlessly because she was going to do what she was going to do – as we walked into the building.

We entered the lobby and I immediately knew it was her. Cassie was slouched down in one of the chairs, the top of her head just above the back of it, her hair greasy. She didn’t have to turn around for me to know her face would be a mess – fresh scratches, scabs, scars. When I saw her, I stopped, but Brandon and Alice kept walking, their conversation echoing slightly in the lobby. I wanted to follow them to the elevator, to tell Jake not to let anyone up to my apartment.

But Brandon said, “Cheryl?” and Cassie turned. She looked worse than I’d expected because her face was also blotchy and red from crying. The reprimand I’d intended to give her fled my mind. She didn’t say anything but ran over and threw her arms around me in a hug so

tight and genuine that I involuntarily squeezed her back. The last time we'd hugged like this was when I left for law school.

"Cassie, what it is? It is Mom?" An icy fear grew in the center of my heart as I went through the possible reasons my sister had shown up at my apartment 250 miles from her home, unannounced and crying.

She shook her head. "Can we go upstairs?"

Brandon and Alice said hello to her but she barely acknowledged them, giving only a slight nod of her head. Brandon reached to press the button for his floor, but I shook my head. Alice raised her eyebrows and I shook it again. Cassie's appearance didn't change what we'd discovered at the property. We still had work to do.

The ride up was silent except for Cassie's sniffing. When the elevator opened, she got off first and then stopped abruptly because she'd never been to this apartment. How had she gotten here? She had nothing with her but a small purse.

"To your left," I said, sort of pushing her because I'd nearly ran into her. We walked single file. My door had barely shut when she announced, "I'm pregnant." She hadn't taken her eyes off the floor. Had I not watched her lips form those words, I wouldn't have believed she'd spoken them.

My heart sank. Of all the scenarios that had gone through my mind as I tried to prepare how I might respond to her, nothing remotely like that had crossed my mind.

Alice broke the silence first. "What?"

"Cassie, go to my bedroom and wait for me." I pointed down the hall. "You two sit on the couch. I need some time to process this." Everyone shuffled to their places and I locked myself in

the bathroom. Was Cassie telling the truth? I felt guilty for wondering that, but it would not be out of character for her to lie and use this as an excuse to leave Indiana.

She'd come all the way up here to see me, but I was wary of her intentions and motivations. I wanted to be supportive. No, that wasn't completely true. I'd be supportive if she made the decision I thought she needed to make. Did that make me a terrible person? I leaned into the mirror, focusing on the physical likenesses that Cassie and I shared – eyes, lips, a dimple in the left cheek when we belly-laughed. These days, that's where the similarities ended. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door.

Brandon and Alice were still on the couch, heads together, whispering.

"I need some time with Cassie," I said when they looked up. "We can move forward with what we discussed, and I'll touch base tonight." I turned to Alice. "This doesn't change what I said. I want to know where you are at all times."

"Yes, Boss."

"You need anything?" Brandon asked.

"A time machine." He ran his hand down my arm, and I felt a slight tingle. I shook the thoughts from my head. I was tired, stressed, emotional. Clearly not thinking straight. "I'll call you later," I said.

I walked back to my bedroom and knocked softly as I opened the door. I half expected Cassie to be walking around the room going through my stuff, but she was curled up on the bed, looking small. "You awake?" I asked.

"Yeah."

I sat down on the opposite side of the bed. She was facing me, but didn't look up or say anything else. "So let's talk about this," I said.

"I don't know where to start."

"How about at the beginning," I said and she finished the sentence with me. Alice and I did this now, and I'd forgotten – or blocked out – that I'd started it with Cassie.

She sort of laughed. "Of course that's what you'd tell me," she said, and I had an overwhelming urge to cry. I swallowed hard a couple of times, but before I could speak, she said, "I won't start at the actual beginning because I think you know how that all works." Her attempt to lighten the mood was a typical Cassie response, and in that moment it didn't feel like years had passed since we'd had a conversation like this. Maybe our family could be repaired.

"It was consensual, if you're wondering."

I was. Cassie had put herself in some dangerous situations in the past, had gone to the ER once that I knew of, and I wouldn't have surprised me if she said she'd been raped. I didn't understand why she wanted to live in a world where she had to give such a clarification.

"Is he still in the picture?" I asked. She made a sound like a snort. "What?"

"Don't be naïve." She finally looked up at me for the first time since I'd sat down, and stared at me with a piercing gaze.

"How is that not a valid question? You said it was consensual."

"Consensual, not...romantic." She nearly spit the word out as she continued to stare at me, and I caught on to what she was trying to say without speaking.

"You're not. Please tell me you're not. Not again."

She rolled away from me. "I shouldn't have come," she mumbled.

About a year after Dad's death she'd been picked up on a solicitation charge the next county over. She'd had the sense to know no one in our small town would let her get away with that. It was clear she wasn't doing it for the money. She had the trust account. It didn't take a shrink to figure out the void she was trying to fill, and I wondered if getting pregnant was an extension of the same.

"I'm not judging," I said. "You're putting yourself at risk. I worry about you."

"You don't even think about me." She wasn't entirely wrong, but when I did think about her, I worried.

"You didn't come all this way for us to fight," I said. "You must want my help or advice, so let's start over. When did you find out?"

"Two weeks ago."

I was going to have to lead her until she felt comfortable enough to go on. "How far along are you?"

"Eight [ten?] weeks."

I willed myself not to react. Eight weeks of drugs and who knows what else. "Eight weeks?"

"I was feeling sick. Not drug sick, but different. I threw up a few times for what seemed like no reason. I thought about it, and I wasn't sure when I'd last seen Aunt Betty, so I took a test."



When we were kids, before we knew what puberty was, I'd overheard my mom talking about Aunt Flo. I didn't know my mom's aunts, and so I took her statement literally. Cassie and I couldn't understand why Mom always talked about her, but we never got to meet Aunt Flo. Since she never came to visit, we decided she must not be very nice, like our Aunt Betty. By the time we were old enough to figure out what Mom had been talking about, our misunderstanding became a hilarious inside joke and we always referred to our periods as "Aunt Betty."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"Yes, I'm not stupid."

"I didn't mean it like that. I wasn't sure who you would see."

"Oh, sorry. I couldn't bring myself to see Dr. Herman, so I went to Planned Parenthood. I didn't want to risk Mom finding out." Dr. Herman had been our family doctor – and over half of the town's – forever. It wasn't that he or his staff would call Mom, but you just never knew who you'd see while you were sitting in the waiting room.

"So, Mom doesn't know?" That didn't surprise me, but I had to figure out what I would say when she inevitably discovered Cassie was gone, and called me freaking out.

"No, I can't...not yet." Cassie was still on her side, but had turned back to look at me. I reached out and squeezed her arm. When she didn't say anything for a few minutes, I asked, "How did you get here?"

"Megabus."

"No, I mean, how did you leave Indiana?"

“I told you Davidson would let me leave. I told her I was dealing with a medical emergency, and you were the only blood relative who could help.”

“Cassie.”

“She won’t find out, and even if she does, it’s basically true. I can’t help it if she jumped to conclusions.” Cassie had always been clever. It was one of the many reasons watching her downward spiral had been so hard.

“How long can you stay?”

“A week. I have to call her twice a day and she’s monitoring me to make sure I stay within a certain distance of your building. As if she has any idea what this city’s like.”

As if Cassie did.

“How did you get to Indianapolis to catch the bus?”

“Heath drove me.”

I was fairly certain Heath was her dealer. We’d gone to high school together and he was always a bit of a bad boy. Most of the girls had had a crush on him at some point throughout school. Then he stopped showing up when I was senior and started getting picked up for stupid shit.

“How did you get *here*? The Megabus stops in the West Loop.”

“I may not be a big city girl like you, but I do know how to hail a cab.” I wasn’t sure that she did know how, but if she wasn’t telling the truth, I didn’t want to know what the truth was. I lay down next to her on the bed, staring up at the dusty ceiling fan slowly spinning.

“I don’t mean to be insensitive when I ask this, but – ”

“Am I going to have an abortion?”

“No, well, sort of. Do you know what you’re going to do?”

“That’s why I’m here. I can’t make this decision alone. I don’t know what to do, and I’m scared. I don’t think I can do this.”

She couldn’t do it. Not in her current state. But I didn’t want to sound like Mom, so I asked, “What do you want to do?”

She put her hands over her face and talked through them. “I know this sounds crazy, but I think I want to keep it.”

It was crazy, and selfish and shortsighted, but most of her decisions were. I worked to keep my anger in check. If she felt like I was attacking her, she’d never listen to me. She didn’t even have a job, except for screwing strangers for money, which didn’t lend itself well to pregnancy or caring for an infant. My best chance at not blowing up at her was to change the subject.

“Are you hungry? You need to eat.”

“You think that’s a bad idea.”

“I didn’t say that. You came here so I could help you. You’ve had a long day. I’ll heat up some leftover pizza and we can talk about it later.” I expected her to become angry and accusatory, but she agreed to eat.

While I moved around the kitchen, Cassie flipped through channels, switching from one to the next so quickly that there was no way she even knew what she was looking at.

“What’s that thing on your wall?”

Brandon hung the photo while I was meeting with James. I hadn't had a chance to tell him where I thought I wanted to hang it. The spot he'd picked in the hallway wasn't one I would have chosen, but it was working. I was afraid having it in such a central location would make the space feel depressing, but instead it invited contemplation. Cassie didn't seem to have the same appreciation for it as I did.

"I got it at a fundraiser the other night."

"It's...weird. Kinda cool, but definitely not you."

Considering it was hanging on my wall, in my apartment, I wanted to say yes, in fact, it was me, and how would she know what was or wasn't me anyway? Instead I just put the pizza in the oven and thought about whether I could drink a beer without her noticing. Her comment on the photo was the closest we got to discussing anything about my life all night.

We didn't talk about hers anymore, either. By the time I came to the couch with the pizza, she'd started watching *Pretty in Pink* on \_\_\_\_\_, a movie we'd both seen a hundred times despite agreeing it was our least favorite John Hughes film.

"Do you think you'll talk to Mom soon?"

"Shh, I love this part."

I waited until the scene was over. "Cassie, she's going to call me."

"Wait, this is so funny."

And so it went until it became clear we weren't going to discuss anything more tonight. She was asleep on the couch before the movie was over. I'd planned on letting her have the bed, but when I nudged her she didn't stir.

Why had she really come? She'd been here for almost six hours and we hadn't discussed anything of substance. Why had she shown up late on a Sunday afternoon? It hadn't crossed her mind that I would have to go to work on Monday morning, so she hadn't bothered to ask me if she was interrupting my schedule. She had no idea what I'd been dealing with the last two days. Angry that my sister had once again intruded upon my life, I fell into a fitful sleep.

## Monday

### Chapter 10

When I opened my eyes, the sunlight streaming through the blinds was still soft. It was only 6:30, and I felt wide-awake. Not well rested, but I'd never get back to sleep. Between Sean and Cassie, my brain was already going a mile a minute, and even if I tried to get a few more minutes of shut-eye, sleep would elude me. I sensed Cassie in bed next to me, and I had a hazy recollection of her getting into bed sometime in the middle of the night, like she'd done when we were kids and she'd awoken from a bad dream.

She didn't move when I got up. I hadn't done any of my research tasks last night, and needed to get to work. After I showered, I checked in on Cassie. She was still in the same position. I wrote a quick note telling her to help herself to anything in the fridge, change into some clean clothes, and that I hoped I could get back around lunch – it wasn't a lie – and then packed up my laptop. There was a bakery close to Brandon's office where I could work while waiting for him.

We'd not talked again last night, so I tried to call him on the walk, hoping to catch him before court. No answer, so I left a message. "Just checking in. Everything's relatively OK here. I'm going to post up at Magnolia and search for articles. Call me when you're out of court."

I was surprised that I hadn't heard from Alice. I was certain she'd gone to James's whether he invited her or not. She wouldn't be up this early, so I texted her. *U didn't keep ur promise. R u OK? Call me.*

The streets were still quiet at 7:30. Despite being the third largest city in the U.S., I often felt Chicago's Midwestern roots. In the early mornings I could wander the streets mostly undisturbed, getting lost in the city itself. I was stopped at an intersection when I noticed the cover of the Chicago Tribune. Who knows how many stands I'd already walked by. I fished around in my wallet for the some quarters. With every clink of a coin, my dread grew.

.... [LOTS TO ADD HERE – THE REST OF MONDAY]

## Tuesday

The services took place downtown, but the cemetery was way out to the west. The room was packed with a line out the door, but it was hard to tell if people were there out of respect or curiosity. The graveside service was open only to family and close friends. James insisted that I attend, and I dreaded the long ride with him. Alice told me he'd forbidden her to go—she hadn't worked closely enough with Sean and it would be suspicious if she went. That was obviously bullshit, so why didn't he want her there?

Brandon and Alice both wanted to sneak along, but for different reasons. Any time Alice is told what she can or can't do, she wants nothing more than to do just that. Brandon thought I

needed protection. We had a minor, hushed argument about it, but by the time the services began, it seemed like we were all in agreement that they would stay behind.

Only Sean's daughter, Angela, and James were planning to speak. As the pastor began his opening remarks, I looked around the room, watching people's faces. A few were already tearing up, but most looked somber.

The entire town had shown up at my dad's funeral. I'd sat in the front row, doing much the same as I was now. Everyone was crying. Even Pastor Luke was choked up. But I couldn't shed a single tear. Like Angela now, I'd been the one to speak. Maybe it was the nerves or still-present shock, or a combination of both, but a numbness had filled my body and not once did I cry. Not once did my voice crack or my throat constrict so that no words could come out. I was a robot. Afterwards, people told me how beautiful my words had been, but I could tell they were concerned about me. They stared into my eyes just a beat too long, lingered in the hug a few seconds beyond what felt normal.

I wasn't even listening to Sean's daughter, but tears started spilling over. Angela looked like a mess. Eyes puffy, tears streaming, nose running like a toddler's. Which was worse? The emotion red and raw, right at the surface? Or buried, dark and festering? They were equally terrible.

I blew my nose, trying to be discreet about my own emotional outpour. Brandon's hand was on my knee. I looked over at him and he gave a slight squeeze. Beyond him, I saw Brooke, standing at the side of the room, alone. She seemed to be staring right at me, but she made no acknowledgement. She was dressed in a black pantsuit with a deep red scarf around her neck, and her hair was pulled back into a perfect bun, not a single strand of hair out of place. Even at a funeral, she looked completely put together.

Brandon nudged me. I was still staring at Brooke, convinced now that she was merely looking off into space somewhere beyond me, although as I started to turn away, it seemed she gave me a slight, sad smile.

Angela finished her remarks and James took her place at the front of the room. I focused on his demeanor and how he was speaking more so than what he was saying. His tears seemed real, his voice choking involuntarily. This was the first time he appeared sad instead of afraid. I watched Alice out of the corner of my eye. She didn't look away from him the entire time. He didn't glance in our direction once – it was hard to say if that was intentional – but there was no way the heat of her stare went unnoticed.

When it was over, the three of us filtered out with everyone else, Alice, me, then Brandon. It was slow going, and Brandon murmured into the back of my head. "I really think we should follow you. No one would even know we were there."

I shook my head. "We already decided this. No." Neither of them was happy about it, but they left me behind, Alice looking through the crowd for James. Not convinced they were going to honor our agreement, I watched them out a second-story window until they got in a cab and took off down the block.

I expected it would be another twenty minutes before James was ready to leave, so I made a stop at the bathroom to check my face. I could deal with splotchy, but wanted to wipe away any mascara streaks. There was a small lounge area in the bathroom before the stalls, and the door had already shut behind me by the time I heard someone in there sobbing. At the sound of my shoes on the floor, the sobs reduced to hiccups, and it seemed like the person was working



hard to get things under control. I turned and walked back out. That person's privacy was more important than my makeup.

I stood in the lobby area watching people walk out. It seemed too cliché that Sean's murderer would be here, but I scrutinized every face that went by regardless. Had someone here started the rumor about the bankruptcy? Was that person also the murderer?

The crowd was finally starting to dissipate, and I saw Brooke come out of the bathroom. What was she still doing here? I'd been too busy watching everyone come out of the main room that I hadn't noticed anyone go in or out of the bathroom. Had she been the one in there crying? I was still focused intently on her face when she started to walk towards me.

"Cheryl, would you like a ride?"

Confused, I said, "Thanks, but I'm going to the cemetery."

"Yes, so am I. I wouldn't mind the company."

"Oh, then, um, sure." Why exactly was she going? Alice couldn't go, but Brooke could? James had noticed us talking and was staring, mouth slightly agape. He rubbed a hand over his eyes and shook himself as if throwing off sleep.

There wasn't going to be a procession, so we walked out to the parking lot to leave. When she stopped by a Toyota Camry, I tried to hide my surprise. I would have bet money that Brooke drove a Lexus or BMW. Or had a driver.

"My dad," she said as we got in.

"I'm sorry?"

She laughed. "He refused to drive anything but a Toyota. To this day, I have no idea why. I never had the opportunity to ask him."

Brooke's hands were properly on the wheel at the ten and two positions, her eyes looking straight ahead, focused on driving. Did she want me to ask her to elaborate? We weren't friends. I wasn't sure I even cared about the answer.

"You seemed very emotional in there," she said.

Not sure how to take that, I felt myself become defensive. Before I could respond, she said, "It was difficult for me, too, but for more personal reasons." She paused for a beat. "Like you."

I began to panic. Had she heard the rumors about Sean, too? When I looked at her this time, she was looking back at me, eyes shiny with tears. "What was it for you? Angela's words?"

"I-I'm not sure what you're getting at." This conversation had taken an unexpected turn.

"I apologize. I'm being cryptic for no real reason. My dad died when I was very young, too."

The way she said *too* told me she wasn't comparing herself to Sean's kids.

"How did you know?"

"Can't you just tell sometimes?"

Losing a parent at a young age creates a void that never goes away. It becomes less prominent but the hole created in your heart and soul is a part of who you become as you get older. It's the lens through which you view life; the filter through which you build relationships; the unseen barrier that serves as a protective measure that people sense but can never quite

identify. So, yes, sometimes you *can* just tell, but I didn't believe that Brooke could know this about me. Our interactions were surface-level only, and to put it bluntly, she wasn't kind enough to sense something like that in other people.

Before I could respond, Brooke began shaking her head. "No, I'm not that intuitive. I couldn't 'just tell' anything about you. You're a bit closed off. But you're smart, and I couldn't figure out what you were doing in an admin position. Sean told me."

Instantly, I was pissed off at Sean. It had taken me a long time to tell him about what had happened, and I felt betrayed even though I'd never told him it was a secret. And it wasn't, but I didn't share that part of my life with many people. When I applied for the job, I'd vaguely referred to a change in family circumstances and personal reasons as an explanation for why I was seeking an administrative job. I hoped he would assume I'd left school for financial reasons and give me a chance.

When I finally told him, he'd taken both my hands in his and said, "Oh, Cheryl, I am so, so sorry." Then he said, in a terrible attempt to lighten the mood, "I really thought you'd flunked out of law school."

"Then why the hell did you hire me?"

He'd let go of my hands and looked sheepishly down at the table. "I wanted an admin that didn't have much ambition." Before I could protest, he'd gone on. "But you are ambitious, and you've been one of the greatest assets to this company because of it. I'm sorry that I ever thought that."

I hadn't been sure how to take any of that, and it wasn't until much later that I realized he'd made me forget that we'd started out the conversation talking about my dad.

"I never sensed it from you, though," Brook was saying. I wasn't certain how to take that. "I think that's part of the reason I took to you so quickly and entrusted you with such important pieces of the Collective. I've worked tremendously hard over the years to combat the perceptions people have when they learn both your parents are dead."

"I'm sorry?"

"I skipped over that, didn't I? My mom died two years after my dad. My grandparents were too old to raise me, so my aunt sent me to a boarding school in London where she was living at the time with her – I think – third husband.

Much of the mystery surrounding Brooke was disappearing, and along with it the theory that she was Sean's long-lost daughter.

"I'm really sorry to hear that." I was reminded of my awkward conversation with Troy, also about parental death, also in a confined space, and also with me responding in the exact same way. "I can't imagine losing two parents." Many days it felt as if I had lost both parents, but I didn't think my current relationship with my mom was a fair comparison to make to Brooke.

She shrugged. "I dealt. Like you did. My life turned out OK." She didn't make the same observation about mine. I wasn't sure where to take the conversation from there, but luckily the GPS notified us that our destination was ahead. I still hadn't figured out what she was doing at a family only ceremony.