

Stronger than the Rockrose

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Chapter 1

“Four bucks?” said the kid trying to mug me. “That’s it?” His hood shaded his eyes from the streetlight, but his voice said he was only sixteen or seventeen.

It couldn’t have been much later than nine, but the late autumn night was dark and dense, consuming everything it touched. Walking home after working my first shift at Geranium Garden Supply, I turned left down Chestnut Street and this kid appeared out of nowhere demanding that I give him all of my cash. His ability to be a brat seemed to be his only weapon.

“Four bucks?” he repeated and snatched the money from my hand.

“That’s all I have right now.” I showed him the empty hemp wallet. “I don’t get paid for another four days,” I said as if pleading my case to the electric company. Why was I explaining myself to this punk?

He just stood there, staring at me.

We are responsible for one another, I remembered my dad saying once.

“There might be a Burrito Bob’s frequent diner card in here,” I said, my cheeks growing warm as I fumbled through the bare billfold. “I think I’m only one stamp away from a free burrito. Are you hungry?”

The kid chuckled at me. Fucking chuckled.

“You fool,” he said and he ran off with the money into the dark.

It’s strange to think that, at the time, I was sure that getting robbed by that asshole was going to be the shittiest part of my week.

I arrived home about twenty minutes later to discover that I had forgotten to turn the coffee maker off eight hours earlier.

“Glorious,” I said out loud to my beagle Mole (like the sauce), who looked up at me, tail wagging. “I know, I know—you’re hungry, right, boy?”

His tail wagged harder, pounding against the hobbit-sized refrigerator, which reminded me of how much I hate it... and the puke green walls protected by the “No Painting” rule and the oven that burns everything and the microwave that can only make Easy Mac lukewarm even after it’s been in there for 2, 5, 10 minutes and the creaking wood floors that the landlord painted gray in a failed attempt to hide the mold. And now I was four dollars further from being able to fix any of it.

I filled Mole’s bowl and noticed the answering machine blinking.

“Mabe, it’s your mother. I know you’re probably at work, but I just wanted to see if you’d like to get dinner with your sister and me tomorrow night. Let me know—I’m sure Claire would love to see you.”

Of course Claire would love to see me. I’d love to see her, too. But who I would not love to see is Claire’s deadbeat husband, Greg. Claire works full time at the bakery—and what does Greg do? He plays his drums in the garage and drinks Pabst Blue Ribbon like its water. Claire moved to the other side of town with this buffoon and now, Mom and I rarely got to see her.

“He looked for work yesterday,” I remembered Claire telling me when we talked on the phone last week.

“So he gets a gold star when he accidentally stumbles upon the Classifieds while searching for the comics?” I asked. “He hasn’t held a job in the two years you’ve been together.”

“Mabe, there are a lot of things you don’t know,” Claire said, sounding defeated. “Greg’s options for work are pretty limited with his back injury. It can put him in a lot of pain.”

“Ah, right—the mysterious back injury that is severe enough to keep him out of work all this time, yet sporadic enough to allow him play the drums for hours a day.” I could hear my voice getting louder. “I just don’t see how you’re so blinded by him. He’s a parasite, Claire...” I knew was going too far, but I was on a roll.

“Mabe, stop.”

“I’ll stop when you answer me this, Claire: When’s the last time he gave you flowers? Bought groceries? Or better yet, when’s the last time he paid a bill?”

“Mabe...”

“I just don’t understand.”

“You’re not always going to understand everything,” she said. “Like I told you, there are a lot of things that you don’t know.”

Mole barked to let me know that he was ready to go out. Once outside, he sniffed around the perimeter of the one-bedroom bungalow, looking for the perfect place to piss as I strolled through the garden on the east side of the house—this shithole’s saving grace. The first frost of the season would be coming soon and I had tried to plant accordingly. I walked among the Marilyn Chrysanthemums lining the path, their white petals displaying a reddish cast. Nearby, the pink star-shaped flowers of the October Daphne popped against its gray leaves. The silvery blades of Russian Sage standing tall, keeping watch. And in between them all, lies the rockrose.

I remember building a wooden playhouse with Dad in the backyard. I must have been about six or so. It’s better to learn from doing, he said as he tossed the instructions aside when

we first began. After having to take everything apart and start over three times, he finally decided to flip through the paper manual.

“Daddy,” I said to him as he hammered in the last nail. “I want my house to have a garden, just like our house.”

He looked at me and smiled, ivory tips peeping beneath his salt-and-pepper beard. His emerald eyes shone like two beacons along the shoreline. He must have been exhausted, but he didn’t let it show.

“Go pick a plant from the garden, Mabey baby,” he said as he pulled a pair of gardening scissors from his carpenter pants.

I ran across the small lawn and was soon standing over a small bush I didn’t recognize. Barely a foot tall, the plant had only one flower, just an inch or two wide, but its petals were the most vivid shade of pink.

“I’ve never seen this one before.”

“First bloom of the season. It’s called the rockrose. Want to know why?”

I nodded eagerly.

“It likes stony soil and when it blooms, it looks like a wild rose.” He squatted next to the plant and I copied him. “The flower only blooms for a day,” he said, grabbing a couple of the side shoots and cutting them at an angle. “But the plant is very tolerant, very tough.”

We both stood and walked back to the playhouse.

“The rockrose can handle almost anything nature throws at it.”

I was silent, soaking it all in. Even at six, I wanted to learn all I could about the garden.

“It’s a true survivor,” Dad said, “known to outlast drought and frost.” He dropped to his knees, dug a small hole in the ground with his finger, and placed the cuttings into the hole. The

hula girl tattooed on his forearm danced as he gently patted the surrounding soil. “Few are stronger than the rockrose.”

It’s been thirteen years since Dad died. It was his third heart attack. I was only 10 at the time. Claire was 17. She and Mom barely ever speak of him. It’s like they’d rather just pretend he was never here at all. Maybe it’s easier for them that way, but I don’t understand it. Sometimes their silence makes it seem like they don’t even miss him, but I know that miss him enough for all three of us.

Chapter 2

I met my mother and Claire the next night at Frank’s pizzeria. I was thrilled to see the two of them pull up in Mom’s navy Mini Cooper with no sign of Greg.

“Mabe!” Claire squealed as she jumped out of the car and squeezed me tight. “It’s so good to see you! Oh and look at your hair—you cut it all off!” My golden curls, now just past my shoulders, had been close to my waist the last time she had seen me. “It looks great, makes your eyes look even greener.”

“Thanks,” I said, smiling. Claire’s blonde locks were longer than I remembered. It was clear she had lost weight and her long black dress made her appear even thinner. The bags under her eyes showed boldly against her fair skin. She looked like she had been working for years without a break.

“Where’s Greg?” I asked.

“At home,” Claire said. “But he said to say hello.”

“Allowed to come out to dinner all by yourself now?”

“Something like that.”

“Hey sweetie,” Mom said as she finally got out of the car. Her blonde bob showed sprouts of the same spirals Claire and I had, but her curls framed a face that had been painted on. It was surprising she could keep her eyes open under the weight of all that mascara on her lashes. Her figure slim and toned, especially for her age, and it was evident that she was well aware that fact. You might think she was wearing the lowest cut top she could find, but would only mean that you’d never seen her wardrobe.

“Sorry, I was on the phone with Nick,” she said.

“Who’s Nick?” I asked.

“Mom’s flavor of the week,” Claire answered. “She’s been on the phone with him the whole way over here.”

“Mom, that’s so rude. Claire just got to town.”

“Well, it’s great to see you, too, Mable Lee,” my mother said.

“Sorry, Mom.” I hugged her neck. “Let’s go get a table.”

Initially, I had considered telling Mom and Claire about the previous night’s mugging. But once in the cheesy atmosphere that is Frank’s—black and white tiled floor, red leather booths, Sinatra in the background and fake ferns everywhere—Mom ordered their cheapest bottle of red wine and quickly began discussing her favorite topic: herself.

“Girls, I have some news,” she announced, sitting across from us. “Nick has invited me to travel out west with him in his RV. And I said yes.”

“I thought he was a flavor of the week,” Claire said.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me, Mom,” I said.

“Mabe, you know I hate when you use that kind of language,” Mom said. Typical. “And Claire, those were your words, not mine. It’s just that you girls are adults now and have lives of your own, and I need to get one, too. I’m not getting any younger.”

“Having some guy by your side doesn’t mean you have a life, Mom,” I said.

“Well, thank you, Mabel Lee,” Mom snapped. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

But I knew she wouldn’t.

“Didn’t you meet this guy on the Internet?” Claire said. “How long have you known him?”

“Well, we were e-mailing for a few weeks, and we’ve been out maybe three times, so all in all, I’d say it’s been about a month,” she said. And I thought my sister’s relationship was a joke.

“You’ve only been out with him three times?” Claire asked. “Seriously?” I tried to ignore the fact that my mother was now batting her eyelashes at Frank, the owner who was making his rounds.

“He’s a very intelligent Army officer,” Mom continued.

“I’m pretty sure that’s an oxymoron,” I said as Frank noticed Mom and began to make his way to our table, his overwhelming scent of Old Spice reaching us before he did.

“Hello, ladies. I’m Frank, the owner here at Frank’s Pizzeria. And I must say that I’m so flattered to have such gorgeous customers,” Frank said, his eyes shifting quite obviously between Mom’s eyes and her breasts. “You three ladies must be sisters.”

Claire and I both rolled our eyes.

“Frank: the owner of Frank’s,” I said. “Clever.” I couldn’t help myself.

“Oh, you are too sweet,” Mom said as she kicked my shin underneath the table. “You have such a lovely little place here!”

“Actually,” Claire said as she looked around, “we ordered a bottle of wine a few minutes ago and our server is nowhere in sight.”

“My apologies, that bottle will be on the house,” said Frank, his pencil-thin mustache curling as he smiled. “I will be right back with that. But first, would you ladies care to hear our specials this evening?”

“No,” Claire and I said in unison.

“Oh, yes!” Mom said as she set her elbow on the table and her chin in the palm of her hand. She leaned forward and her impossibly low cut top slipped lower. “What are your specials?”

As my mother and Frank came on to each other like a couple of horn dogs, I nudged Claire and looked towards the door. She nodded eagerly and we filed out of our side of the booth to go smoke a cigarette. Mom and Frank didn’t seem to notice.

“Unbelievable!” I said as I stuck an unlit cigarette in my mouth and then handed another to Claire. “Can’t we go out in public once without Mom throwing herself at every swinging dick she sees? She doesn’t even realize she’s embarrassing herself.”

We lit our cigarettes, walked around the side of the building and sat down on a wooden bench near the employee entrance.

“That Frank creep seems like the biggest embarrassment in there to me,” Claire said.

“Wasn’t Mom was in the middle of talking about traveling with another man?” I continued. “It’s like she just needs all the attention she can find.”

“She’s just lonely, I guess,” Claire said. “And you heard her—she thinks she’s running out of time.”

“Yeah, running out of time to find out who she is,” I said sharply. “She tries to seem confident, but she doesn’t see that she comes off as insecure instead. I don’t remember her being like that when we were younger, when Dad was alive...”

“Mabe...” Claire hated when I brought Dad up, especially when it had to do with Mom, and she knew exactly where I was going with this.

“What? I know you and Mom can’t stand to talk about him, which I’ve never really understood, and I’ve sort of grown used to over the years, but that’s beside the point.” I caught myself, and tried to prevent this speech from turning into a ramble. “Think about it—when we were growing up, she never wore as much make-up or dressed how she does, but she’s always been beautiful...”

“Mabe...” Claire tried to interrupt but I wouldn’t let her.

“Maybe she’s just wasting her time with all of these dicks to make her feel good about herself because she hasn’t been able to do it on her own since Dad died.”

“Mabe!”

“What?”

“There’s something I have to tell you... about Dad.”

Claire had never volunteered any information about Dad to me. Hell, I couldn’t even pry anything out of her. I remember telling her before the homecoming dance how I wished Dad was there when all the other girls were getting their photos taken with their fathers.

“I’m sorry he’s not, but Mom and I are,” Claire had said flatly.

Then the three of us smiled for the camera and that was that.

The first Father's Day without Dad, I told Claire all the ways I would celebrate if Dad had still been here: first, I'd make him his favorite breakfast—buttermilk waffles with fresh blueberries picked from the yard and then we'd spend all morning in the garden... but it soon became clear to me that Claire didn't want hear any of it.

The next Father's Day – and every one after, Claire left the house before I woke up and didn't come home until I was asleep. I guess Mom knew where she was or at least that she was alright, because she never asked me anything about it.

I eventually learned to stop bringing him up at all. There were times when I felt like Dad's memory was living on in me and me alone. But there on the smoking bench outside of Frank's pizzeria, my big sister was actually offering to talk to me about Dad.

“What? What is it?” I asked.

“I don't really know how to say it, Mabe.” Her eyes swelled.

“Just spit it out!”

“Mom never wanted to tell you because you and Dad were always so close,” Claire said. “And you were so young when he died. We wanted you to just remember the good things. I was older – Mom knew she wouldn't be able to hide it from me so she never tried...”

“Hide what, Claire?”

“There you girls are!” Mom's shrill voice cracked the silence as she appeared next to the bench. Dammit. “The wine is here—and it's a much better bottle than the one I ordered. That Frank is just something else. What are you two doing out here?”

“Just getting some fresh air,” Claire said quickly as she put her cigarette out and stood up. I could tell she was grateful for the interruption. I remained seated and watched as my mom and sister headed towards the front door. I didn't know what they had been hiding for me all this

time, but already I couldn't help but look at them differently. They were in on this together. And they had left me out. I wanted to stand and shout after both of them. I wanted to demand that they tell me the secret they shared. I wanted to, but I didn't. I said nothing and followed them back inside. But Claire's voice continued to loop through my head: *We wanted you to just remember the good things.*

Chapter 3

Mom left the pizzeria in her mini cooper with Frank's phone number freshly added to the contact list in her cell phone, and Claire and I walked back to my place. Claire was supposed to stay with Mom, but she made up some bullshit about how we needed "sister time," and Mom was too busy thinking up the voicemail she was going to leave Frank later to really mind.

"Mole!" Claire squeaked as the pup met us at the front door. "Such a sweet boy!" She reached down to pet him, and he immediately rolled over, exposing his belly, waiting for a good scratch. "Is he always this much of a slut? Hell, I didn't even have to buy him dinner first."

We both laughed. I took my sister's overnight bag to my bedroom and returned with the joint I had rolled earlier that day. I sparked it, took a couple of drags, and handed it to my sister as we both sat down on the faded peach paisley couch that was once in our childhood home.

"Mabe," Claire said as she inhaled, "about earlier..." She held her breath for a few seconds and then began coughing uncontrollably, her long blond waves bouncing.

"Woah," she said as she began to catch her breath. "It's been a while since I've done this, probably since before I met Greg. But listen, about what I said earlier..."

“Claire, we don’t have to do this,” I interrupted. It was the only thing I could think to say, and I hoped that it was true. Claire passed me the joint and I took another hit, blowing smoke rings as I exhaled.

“But we do. I know you—I’m sure you’ve been thinking about it all evening, letting your mind run wild with the possibilities...” She was right. Since getting up from the bench at Frank’s, I had considered what felt like hundreds of potential secrets. Maybe Dad was a con artist and he had swindled some lawyer out of tons of money, and we had actually been on the run when he was alive. Or maybe he had made some bad investments and had forced us into bankruptcy. Or maybe he was the leader of some underground movement somewhere and there was a chance he was still alive and in hiding. But I just kept hearing Claire’s voice: *We wanted you to just remember the good things.* I tried to convince myself that I didn’t really want to know.

“Am I right?” my sister asked.

“No.” I took another hit and set the joint in the ashtray on the wooden coffee table Dad built so long ago. “I haven’t really given it much thought.”

My sister rolled her eyes. “Liar,” she said.

No, Claire, I wanted to say, you and Mom are the liars.

“Fuck, just tell me.”

“First, you have to pinky promise that you won’t hate me for what I’m about to say.”

“What are we? Twelve?”

“Just do it.”

I extended my smallest finger towards her. “Pinky promise.”

As soon as we interlocked pinkies, Claire spit it out: “He was cheating on her, Mabe.” She said it fast, without hesitation, like she just wanted to get the words out of her as quickly as she could before she changed her mind about saying them.

I froze.

Claire placed her hand on my knee.

“He had been for a few months before he died,” she continued. “Mom knew, but then the heart attack happened. She never had a chance to say anything to him about it.”

No. No, no, no. It was impossible. No, he couldn’t have, wouldn’t have. My pulse was pounding, pounding in my core. My dad was not a cheater. I felt my cheeks warm, and I knew they were turning pink. I leaned forward and placed my face in the palms of my hands and tried to breath deeply. My sister moved her hand from my knee to my back and began to rub lightly in figure eights, the way Dad used to do when we were upset as kids. I closed my eyes and pretended that it was his hand instead of Claire’s. I didn’t want it to stop but finally, I leaned back, looked at my sister and said the only thing I could, the only thing I knew was true: “I don’t believe you.”

“I’m sorry, Mabe. I really am so, so sorry. But it happened. All the facts are there.”

“Facts?” She was talking about this like it was some sort of criminal investigation, a mystery that needed solving. And I guess, in a way, it was. “What facts?”

“Do you really want me to go into all of it?” she asked.

“Do you really think you have a choice at this point?” I picked up the joint, relit it, and inhaled as deeply as I could. “Start from the beginning,” I said as the smoke flowed from my mouth, enveloping us both.

“Ok, but you have to let me get another hit first,” Claire said, which pulled a small smirk from each of us. I handed her the joint. She took a few puffs and then set it back down.

“From what I remember, it all kind of started as neighborhood gossip,” she began. “Ms. Rodney from down the street—you remember her, right? She had the blue house on the corner and always sat on her porch in that hideous housecoat—anyway, Ms. Rodney claimed that she saw Dad driving around town in a red pick-up. Told everyone it looked brand new, like it had just been driven off the lot.”

“Dad never had a truck,” I said, trying to make sense of it. “But being seen driving a truck that wasn’t his makes him look more like a thief than a cheater, don’t you think? I mean, how do you know that she wasn’t mistaken, just seeing things? I bet it wasn’t even him...”

“She said there were dried flowers on the dashboard.”

“What?”

“That’s what she said, Mabe. Dried flowers.”

I remembered the first time Mom found dried flowers on her dashboard. It was a few days after Grammy Jean died so I couldn’t have been older than eight. Mom was having a hard time with it—she hadn’t left the house in days. Dad had been trying to convince her that she needed to be outside. Nature does the soul good, he had said. And after dinner one evening, Mom finally agreed to go down to the river for a walk so we piled into the minivan.

“What the hell are those, Todd?” Mom asked, pointing to a dried bouquet of powdery blue flowers lying on the dashboard. Claire and I sat silently in the back seat.

“They’re nigella blossoms,” Dad said as he started the car, the hula girl’s hips swaying with the turn of the key. “The common name for the plant is love-in-a-mist. I just wanted you to have a reminder that... well, that there is still love in a mist.”

“But they’re dead,” Mom said flatly as she buckled her seatbelt and looked out her window. Dead: the word hung in the air, lingering... until Dad shot it down.

“But don’t you see?” Dad said to her. “They’re not dead. They’re living in preservation. There will be no more growth, but their beauty will last.” I wouldn’t realize until years later that Dad was talking about more than just the flowers.

Mom turned to look at Dad and he smiled as he gently stroked her cheek. Mom reached up, put her hand on top of his, and held it. “Thank you,” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Dad kissed her and then turned towards us in the back seat. “Claire bear, Mabey baby, are you girls ready to go to the river and catch some critters?”

“Yes!” Claire and I squealed in unison. He backed the minivan out of the driveway and we were off. Those nigella blossoms stayed on Mom’s dashboard for months. She refused to change them out until the very last petal fell. And when it did, Dad snuck into the minivan and replaced them, every few weeks, until he died.

“Think about it,” Claire said. “You know that those dried flowers suggest more than Ms. Rodney could have known.”

“And you know that Ms. Rodney is insane,” I said. “I mean, she had to have been using binoculars to see something like that.”

“There’s more,” Claire said, shaking her head. “There were others.”

“Others?”

“When Ms. Rodney saw Dad driving, she told everyone in the neighborhood—everyone but Mom,” she said as she began to crack the knuckle of her left thumb. “They had been gossiping about her for weeks—the same ladies that she went to PTA meetings with, the ladies that helped with the carpool, the ladies she thought were her friends—and she had no idea.”

“And then one Saturday,” she continued, twisting and tugging on her thumb, “Mom and I went to scope out a few yard sales up the block, but you wanted to stay home and help Dad in the garden as usual. God, Mabe, I remember this all so clearly. We approached the Holloway’s front yard, and there was a circle of women huddled together, gabbing—Ms. Rodney in the center.”

Claire moved on to her index finger, manipulating its joints in the same manner. “At first, all I could make out were broken phrases,” she said, “‘such a shame’ and ‘those poor girls.’ But Mom and I got closer and we could hear what was being said: ‘He’s driving around town in some other woman’s car and his wife has no idea.’” They didn’t notice us approaching the circle until Mom said, ‘Whose wife has no idea?’

Claire bent her middle finger to and fro in each direction, popping in four different ways, as she went on, “Those women all turned to look at us and I swear, it was like slow motion—eyes bugged, mouths gapped. ‘Whose wife has no idea?’ Mom asked again. And old Ms. Rodney, still wearing that damn housecoat, was the only one that answered.”

Claire clutched her ring finger with her right hand, but instead of jerking it like she had all the others, she just held it, fingers curled over her wedding band. “All she said was ‘I’m sorry, dear.’ But Mom was strong—she didn’t break. She refused to let herself break in front of them. She just turned around without saying a word and walked away.”

With her eyes fixed on me, Claire put both of her hands beneath her thighs. “But I stood there for a few seconds,” she said, “before I followed after Mom and I stared at those women. Every single one of them, I looked them straight in the eyes and I looked at Ms. Rodney last. And I hated her so much. I hated all of them. I hated them for knowing Dad betrayed Mom and I hated them for betraying Mom, too.”

I puffed on the joint and then handed it to Claire. She freed her hands to take a hit.

“So it was all just gossip, hearsay?” I asked, unconvinced. “Mom didn’t even know if it was true.”

“It didn’t matter.” Claire set the joint down. “Everyone was talking like it was. She had to at least consider it. But that’s not all, Mabe.”

“Jesus...”

“He was seen kissing another woman one night by Backyard Burger on Spruce Street.”

“Seen by who? Old Ms. Rodney? Or was it some other member of her bitch posse?”

“By Aunt Sue,” Claire said.

Aunt Sue wasn’t really our aunt. She was Mom’s best friend. I knew she would never tell Mom something that hurtful unless she was absolutely positive about what she saw. Claire knew it, too. She stared at me, waiting for a response.

“Well, what did she look like?” I finally asked.

“Really?” Claire said. “That’s your follow up question? What did she look like?”

“I mean, if it was just a kiss on the cheek,” I said, “it could have been a family member or something... someone on Dad’s side of the family, you know?”

“Aunt Sue told Mom that the woman’s hair was so black, it looked blue. Neither of them had any idea who it was.”

“Shit,” I said to myself out loud. “Maybe it was just a close female friend that Mom didn’t know about it...”

“Mabe, do you hear yourself? A close female friend his wife doesn’t know about,” she repeated, making quotation marks in the air with her fingers. “I’m pretty sure that’s an affair.”

“I think it’s really only an affair if…” I stopped myself when Claire just shook her head slowly and looked at the floor.

“Aunt Sue followed them to the Dogwood Inn,” she said as she popped her left pinky. “So Mom checked his credit card statement and found that he had paid for a room there a few times a week for over a month.”

I couldn’t accept what Claire was telling me. I tried to be reasonable, to think of some logical explanation, but Claire and I stared at each other, each with a set of Dad’s emerald eyes, and all I could think of was Mom. Of course, I knew she was heartbroken after Dad’s heart attack, but could he have actually broken her heart before he died?

“And she never confronted him?” I asked.

“She never got the chance,” Claire said. “He had the heart attack a few days later.”

“A few days?” I stood abruptly and began pacing. “Why didn’t she say anything to him immediately?” My voice grew louder. “What was she waiting for? Wouldn’t she want him to know that she knew? Didn’t she want to hear what he had to say about it? Didn’t she want to know the truth about her marriage?”

“Maybe not,” my sister said, stopping me in my tracks. “Maybe she didn’t want to know the truth, to have to accept it, because she wanted to believe that they were happy, that she was making him happy. Maybe she was afraid of admitting that her marriage was a failure…” As Claire continued on, I thought of her undersized diamond, the finger that she couldn’t bring herself to crack. “Maybe she thought that if she just kept her head down, things could work themselves out. Or maybe that he’d come around if she gave it enough time…”

“But how are you supposed to fix something without facing it?”

“I should ask you the same thing,” she said, knowing she had hit the bull’s eye. And I knew she was right. How was I supposed to learn about Dad, to understand why Mom and Claire never talk about him, if I refused to believe that he could do anything unspeakable? Just like Aunt Sue, Claire wouldn’t tell me something so hurtful unless she was sure. And just like Mom, I wasn’t sure if I was able to accept it. I heard what was being said and I didn’t want to listen. Besides, it was mostly based on rumor—except for the hotel room. Rumors don’t have receipts on record.

Chapter 4

When I arrived at Geranium Garden Supply for my shift the next evening, Gale, the owner, was the only person there.

“Unfortunately, you’ll be closing by yourself tonight,” she said, her short grey feathers of hair framing her face. “I have to go to a city council meeting. Can you believe they want to cut down those ginkgo trees in McMahon Park to make space another tennis court?” She put her hands on her hips as she shook her head from side to side. “Trading living fossils for more concrete and fences? Not on my watch! It’s a park, not a country club, for crying out loud. Anywho, I know it’s only your second shift, but I think you can handle it.”

“I’m sure I can.”

Gale smiled, pushing the black plastic frame of her glasses from the tip of her nose to the bridge. “Now, I’ve made you a list of the closing duties,” she said, “but don’t worry about trying to do the money at the end of the night. I can take care of that in the morning.”

She handed me a piece of paper and I quickly read over it: stock shelves, sweep store and greenhouse, water plants, take out trash. Easy enough.

“One more thing,” Gale said, slinging her patchwork purse over her shoulder. “The weather forecast said the first frost of the season should be any day now so be sure to check the thermostat in the greenhouse before you leave, should be between...”

“55 and 65°F?”

She looked me square in the eyes. Just as I was beginning to regret interrupting my new boss, she clapped her hands together.

“Already so knowledgeable,” she said. “Love it!”

“I learned everything I know from my dad.”

“Well then, it seems that your dad did right by you,” Gale said, heading out the door. “My phone number is posted by the register. Don’t hesitate to call!”

After a few customer-free hours of stacking terracotta inside the store, I went into the attached greenhouse to water the plants and sweep the soil-covered concrete. Inside, the air was moist, but cooler than it should have been.

The thermostat read 50°F. Five degrees cooler, we probably would have lost some plants already. I turned temperature up to 60°F and went to water the flora.

First to be watered are the herbs, displayed on long and narrow wooden tables in the middle of the space—sweet basil and Thai basil, French tarragon, English thyme, and six varieties of mint. Next are the perennials, lining the right wall—evening primroses and daylilies, lily-of-the-valleys, forget-me-nots and black-eyed Susans. Then, the annuals along the left wall—marigolds and goldilocks, fuchsias, periwinkles, and polka dot plants. Last, along the back wall, the shrubs—burning bushes and smoketrees, mockoranges, sandcherries, and rockroses...

I set the watering can down and stared at the rockrose—its petals a lighter shade of pink than what grows in my garden at home. Cool to the touch, it seemed to be the only variety that had been affected by the temperature drop. I began to inspect the plant, and it looked as if it knew I was questioning its strength. Its petals slightly crumbled, cowering. The yellow column in the center of them, the pistil and stamen that once stood tall, slouched, hanging its head in shame.

My mind raced from the withered rockrose to the dried flowers on the dashboard of the red pick-up, the woman with jet-black hair, the paper trail from the Dogwood Inn. Sure, when everything was compiled together, it looked suspicious, incriminating even. But when I looked at each event individually—who was that woman? Was the red truck hers? And what was Dad doing at the Dogwood Inn? Did that woman even have anything to do with it? Too many of the dots still needed connecting.

“Please be strong enough to outlast this frost,” I said to the rockrose. Then I poured a small amount of water over the plant—give it too much and its roots may rot—and I went back into the store.

Ten minutes to close, the bell on the front door jingled, telling me someone had entered the store. I stopped sweeping and went to the front to greet the customer. Turning the corner, I saw a small olive-skinned woman wearing a dark blue uniform with powder blue trim, like something a cafeteria worker would wear, or maybe a custodian.

“Welcome to Geranium. How may I help you?”

“Hello there, I know you close any minute,” said the woman, slightly out of breath. How nice of her to notice, and come in anyway. “If you could just tell me where the all-purpose fertilizer is, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“It’s in the back right-hand corner of the store,” I said as pointed in that direction. “Here, follow me.”

“Oh, thank you so much,” the woman said as we walked down the décor aisle, past the garden gnomes and glass globes. “Are you a new employee? I’ve never seen you here before.”

“Second day on the job,” I said. We turned the corner, the shelves lined with coiled hoses and sprinkler systems, and headed towards the back wall. “Here’s the fertilizer. All-purpose in on the bottom.”

“Wonderful.” She grabbed the bag from the shelf. “Thank you so much for your help. Now I’ve got to head into work, have to be there in twenty minutes.”

“Bummer,” I said as I followed her back to the front of the store. “Where do you work?”

“I’m a housekeeper at the Dogwood Inn.”

My feet slowed as my teeth sank into my bottom lip. I looked at the woman walking ahead of me and realized that her black bun looked blue beneath the florescent lights.

“That’s interesting,” I said. “How long have you worked there?”

“God, I guess its been almost fourteen years.”

I continued to follow her in silence. Was it her? It was...no, it couldn’t be. Just coincidence, like everything else. I was sure the Dogwood Inn had dozens of housekeepers. I bet half of them had hair that dark. But how many of them had worked there for that long? Probably a few, right?

The woman set the bag of fertilizer down on the counter and I tried to memorize her face as I began to ring her up. If it was her, she looked years younger than she must have been, her skin smooth like an avocado. Even in her oversized uniform, she was a classic beauty – high

cheekbones, full lips, narrow face. She smiled at me sweetly, and I wanted to slap that smile right off of her thin face.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, that will be all.”

“Are you paying with cash or with a card?”

“My card, if that’s alright.”

I took the woman’s card and slid it through the machine. Don’t do it, I told myself. Don’t look at her name. Just let her walk out of the store and forget about her.

But who was I kidding?

I looked down at her card. My heart raced, everything blurred. Focus, focus, focus. My vision cleared enough so that I could make out her name: Nadia Novak.

I had seen the name before.

Dad and I were planting tulip bulbs one day after school, maybe a month before he died. We had just finished digging the holes and were beginning to drop the bulbs in one by one when the unmistakable tune of the ice cream truck echoed through the neighborhood.

“Dad, can I?” I asked, though I knew the answer.

He grinned. Ice cream was a weakness we shared.

“Of course, Mabey baby. I’ve got a few bucks in my wallet. I think it’s on the kitchen table. Get a Klondike bar for me and get yourself whatever you want—but hurry!”

I jumped to my feet, knees still covered in dirt, and sprinted into the kitchen. Dad’s wallet was right where he said it would be. I opened it and began fumbling through the billfold. As I searched for a few singles, I came across a business card folded in half. I don’t know what made me read it—the natural curiosity of a kid, I suppose—but for a moment, I forgot about the ice

cream truck. On one side, the card read Dogwood Inn with the hotel's information underneath, and on the other side:

*Thank you for being the wonderful man that you are.
XOXO, Nadia*

"It's turning down our street!" I heard Dad shout through the open kitchen door.

I shoved the business card back into the wallet, grabbed a couple dollars, and didn't think of the name again until now.

I handed the credit card back to Nadia without a word.

"Thanks again," she said as she picked up the bag of fertilizer and headed towards the door. "Have a great night."

I nodded and followed her to the front door, replacing the open sign with the closed sign after she left. I looked past the glass and watched as Nadia scurried across the parking lot with no idea that she was being watched, much less who was watching her. She approached a red pick-up that looked too old to run and tossed the bag of fertilizer into the bed of the truck.

Everything started spinning.

I grabbed the door handle to keep my balance and closed my eyes. Breath, I told myself. Just breath. Inhale, exhale. Repeat. I opened my eyes, and watched Nadia drive off into the distance. I turned around and leaned against the glass door—my body, heavy like lead, sank down to the ground. I had been wrong in defending Dad. For the first time since his death and the second time in my life, I felt my heart break. A shrill buzzing and bright white spots filled the air around me. I pulled my knees to my chest, wrapped my arms around them tightly, and rocked myself, knowing now that Claire had told me was true.

A brisk pace in brisk air, I walked home that night in half the time. I couldn't have slowed down even if I had wanted to. I just needed to keep moving, moving, moving. And maybe if I moved fast enough, I could outrun it all. If the kid who tried to mug me a few nights before had tried to stop me tonight, I would have flown right past him. If he had tried to follow me, I think I would have stopped only to tell him to fuck off—and suddenly part of me wished that he would, just so I could scream it at someone, at anyone. But when I turned down Chestnut Street, I didn't run into the kid. I didn't run into anyone. I walked along the empty streets to the beat of my head pounding. I was completely alone.

The front door creaked as I opened it. The lingering scent of the incense I had burned before work poured out onto the porch. I took one step inside the dark house and there sat Mole, right by my feet, waiting for me. Happy as ever that I had again returned home, oblivious to the mindfuck I had just experienced. I plugged in the Christmas lights lining my living room, illuminating an oriental tapestry hanging on one wall and a poster of Janis Joplin on the other, and I rubbed Mole's black and brown spotted back. He took it as signal for him to roll over so I could rub his white belly, too. As I did, his foot began to shake uncontrollably, like a single hand applauding with its invisible other. He was oblivious, but he was satisfied. And for a brief moment, I was grateful to Mom and Claire for having allowed me to live in my own blissful naivety for as long as they did. But now, that was no longer an option.

I headed towards kitchen, stopping to look at a family portrait hanging on the wall, framed by braided birch twigs sprinkled with glitter. It was one of the only pictures of Dad that I had, taken on his last 4th of July. With fireworks in the air above, Dad stood behind Mom, his arms wrapped around her chest. She was watching the explosions in the sky, and Dad was

kissing her cheek. Claire and I stood on either side, looking up at our parents, each with a wide grin. I took the picture off the wall and ran my fingers over the frame, small silvery flecks sparkling as they fell to the floor.

Mole barked, reminding me that I was about to feed him. I took the picture with me to the kitchen and set it on the counter face down. After he wolfed down his dinner, I took Mole outside for his nightly piss and I called Claire.

“Hey, Mabe,” she answered the phone. “What’s up?”

“I saw her, Claire. I met her.” I opened my mouth and the words flew out of me like a murder of crows after gunshot. “The woman with jet-black hair. I saw her, face-to-face. I sold her all-purpose fertilizer! I even showed her where it was!”

“Wait, Mabe, slow down. You sold who fertilizer?”

“The woman with jet-black hair!” Didn’t she hear what I just said?

“Lots of women have dark hair,” she said, sounding like I must have yesterday.

“Claire, you’re not listening! She works at the Dogwood Inn. She has worked there the whole time. almost fourteen years, she said. And still drives the red pick-up, too. It was her.”

Silence. I looked down at the pale blossoms of the Marilyn chrysanthemum, clustered together so tightly I could barely tell one from the other.

“Did you hear me? Claire?”

“Are you sure?”

“Without a doubt. Her name is Nadia.” I walked past the October Daphne, its cool scalloped leaves laying low along the ground, a succulent trying not to make a big deal of itself. Mole emerged from the darker side of the yard as I continued, “When I saw the name on her

credit card, I remembered a note I found in Dad's wallet, right before he died. It was signed Nadia."

Claire was quiet on the other end of the line.

I caressed the stalk of the Russian sage, its frail flowers falling at the slightest touch. "I read the name and I just knew. It was her. She was real. It was all real. Too real. I watched her leave in that red pick-up and I... I lost my shit, Claire."

I pulled a cigarette out of the front pocket of my flannel, lit it, and inhaled deeply.

"What did the note say?" Claire asked.

"Thank you for being the wonderful man that you are. XOXO, Nadia."

"And you just remembered it? All of the sudden?"

"Like a fucking jack-in-the-box."

"You didn't tell her who you are, did you?"

"No," I said, suddenly wishing that I had.

"Good," Claire said. "It's for the best. We all just need to move on."

"Move on?" I asked coldly. "Are you forgetting that just found out about all of this yesterday?" I took another drag and exhaled, watching the smoke smoothly spiral through the night air until it scattered and vanished.

"I know, Mabe," my sister said, her tone shifting. "And I'm so sorry. I know it's hard. Every morning for weeks after Dad was gone, I would wake up hoping it was just a nightmare. But then I would go downstairs to find Mom sitting by herself at the kitchen table, her eyes swollen, silently reading the paper, sipping black coffee out of that same stupid Our First Christmas mug that she always used—you know the one, with candy cane stripes and picture of Mom and Dad on it?"

I remembered the mug perfectly. Claire and I always made fun of the old picture, saying Mom and Dad looked like cartoon characters—Mom’s blonde Afro making her head look comically oversized and Dad’s furry black eyebrows and mustache resembling a trio of caterpillars moseying across his face. Every morning, Mom used to drink out of that mug, coffee in the winter and green tea with honey in the summer. But I don’t remember seeing it after Dad died.

“What happened to that mug?” I asked and then took another drag.

“I threw it against the sidewalk in front of Ms. Rodney’s house.” Hold the phone. Was this Claire talking? As far as I knew, my sister had never broken anything in her life – not a bone, not a heart, and certainly not a personalized memorabilia mug.

“Poetic,” I said. “Was Ms. Rodney watching? Please tell me she was watching.”

“Of course she was—she was always watching,” my sister said as she relived the most (and quite possibly, the only) vengeful act of her life. “I knew she was looking at me from her front porch, wearing that awful housecoat, and I did it anyway. I threw the mug against the concrete with all of my teenaged might. It shattered—red and white ceramic chunks of shooting into the air. And then I stared at her, wishing my eyes would shoot out lasers to vaporize her into nothing more than the pile of dust that she was.”

Damn, sister.

“Did Mom ever say anything about mug?” I asked, intrigued by maniacal force my sister had seemed to gain over night. “Did Ms. Rodney ever say anything to Mom?”

“They didn’t even make eye contact after the yard sale at the Holloway’s—always admired Mom’s poise in dealing with that hag. And after the mug vanished from the cupboard, Mom never spoke about it—or anything having to do with Dad, really—again.”

“I guess the thing I’m having the hardest time with,” I said as it became clearer to me, “is the fact that Dad isn’t here to answer our questions, to explain himself—if he even could.” I snapped my fingers twice in Mole’s direction, telling him it was time to go inside.

“I know, Mabe, but there nothing we can do.”

“Maybe there is.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Dad may not be here to answer our questions,” I said. “But Nadia is.”

“And what makes you think she’d talk about any of it?”

“What makes you so sure that she won’t?”

Chapter 5

I called Mom the next day to see if she wanted to grab some dinner. It was Claire’s idea. She said I needed to talk to Mom, to tell her everything that I now know. She refused to do it herself, claiming that she had played middleman long enough. I guess I see her point. But then Mom suggested that we go to Frank’s again.

“They just do such a good job there,” she said as I immediately began to regret taking my sister’s advice.

When I arrived at Frank’s, Mom was sitting in the same booth as last time. There was a bottle of wine and two glasses on the table—one for Mom, already filled to the rim, and one for me, empty and waiting. Frank had already found his way to her table and I could smell Old Spice from six paces away. As I approached the table, the two were laughing forcefully at something that probably wasn’t even remotely funny. Mom leaned forward as she laughed, displaying her overly dramatic enthusiasm, and Frank leaned forward, looking down her shirt.

“Hi Mom,” I said. Her eyes widened as she turned towards me, a look of surprise, as if she had forgotten that I was coming. I cut Frank with a sharp don’t-think-I-didn’t-just-see-what-you-were-doing glare. As he straightened his posture a bit, the light hit his greasy forehead, and it shined brightly beneath his slicked-back hair plugs.

“Hello, sweetie,” Mom said after a moment, scooting out of the booth and rising to hug me. “You remember Frank.”

“Right, Frank, owner of Frank’s. How could I forget?” I extended my hand towards him. He made the mistake of agreeing to shake it. A handshake should show your confidence, I remembered Dad saying. I gripped Frank’s hand so firmly, that—and maybe it was just wishful thinking—but I swear I heard his bones crack.

“Great to see you again,” Frank said as he tried not to wince. “Your pizza will be out soon. Please feel free to let me know if there is anything you need.”

“Oh, we will,” Mom said, giving Frank an exaggerated wink with her mouth open. I could have thrown up right there on the Parmesan shaker. He winked back at her, shifted his eyes towards me to see if I had noticed (I did, you motherfucker), and then scurried off.

“Did you and your sister have a nice time the other night?” Mom asked after watching Frank take refuge in the kitchen, completely out of sight.

“Greatest night of my life,” I said and then watched my words fly right over her head. “She told me everything.”

“Everything about what, dear?” she asked as she filled my wine glass.

“About Dad.”

Mom set the bottle down on the table and shifted in the booth, the faux red leather squeaking beneath her. She hastily batted her eyelashes, as if what I had said was just a spec of dust that she could blink out. Then she picked up her glass of wine and began to swirl it.

“I know about Ms. Rodney,” I said, “and the red truck and the dark-haired woman and the Dogwood Inn. Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

Mom stopped swirling the wine and swallowed half her glass in a single gulp.

“Dad cheated on you, on us,” I said to her. “I had just as much of a right to know as you, as Claire.”

“I wanted to tell you, Mabe,” she said, her lips already stained purple. “Some days more than others, but I always wanted you to know the truth.”

“Some days more than others? I did the math, Mom.” I heard my voice moving faster, growing louder. “Dad has been dead for thirteen years. That means you’ve had almost five thousand day’s worth of chances to tell me. So why didn’t you ever talk to me about it, about him? For thirteen fucking years! What—you were too busy trying to replace Dad with any old cock that points in your direction?” I regretted the callous words as soon as they escaped my lips.

Mom’s face hardened, growing red as her nostrils flared. The vein down the middle of her forehead began to pulse—slow at first, barely making itself known. The slender bulge slid from her left eyebrow up to the cowlick on her hairline. It was soon bold and raised, pounding against the underside of her flesh.

“Because talking about it is what killed him, goddammit!” she screamed.

Then everything went quiet. I looked around and realized that almost every single person in the restaurant was staring at us. Even Frankie boy was peeking his head through the window of the kitchen door. And the ones who weren’t staring were surely listening. I wished for a

moment that I was just one of the spectators, chomping on cheese crust and slurping spaghetti noodles.

I leaned in and asked in a low voice, “What did you just say?”

“I don’t want to talk about this here, Mabel Lee.” She laid her hands flat on the table as if to steady herself.

“Too bad, Mom. You had almost a decade and a half to pick the time and place.”

Fingers laced and knuckles white, Mom whispered, “I said that talking about it is what killed him.”

“What do you mean, Mom?”

She finished the wine in her glass, poured another and topped my glass off even though I had yet to take a sip.

“I confronted your father...about the affair...the day he died,” she said, her voice shaking. A sudden coldness hit my core as my stomach jerked into a knot – I was frozen in tangles. Mom paused, waiting for a reaction, but I couldn’t give her one.

“I never told your sister, I never told the doctors, I never told anyone,” she continued. “But I know that I’m the reason...I’m the reason he had the heart attack.”

I felt a tightness in my face as my eyebrows arched and my lips parted. I wanted to crawl into a hole, to dig through these black and white tiles and curl up beneath the ground.

I thought about that day, the day Dad died. I remembered sitting in between Mom and Claire in the waiting room, each of us silently holding each other’s hands.

Claire was at soccer practice when it happened. The neighborhood mom in charge of carpool that day had dropped her off at the hospital, still in her uniform, muddy cleats, blonde curls braided. I had been playing with Hobbes, the boy next door. We were mixing a magic

potion of mud and Azalea blossoms when Mom came out of our house screaming, “Mabe, we have to take Daddy to the hospital!” Dad came slowly staggering out the front door behind her, clutching his chest—so feeble that I almost didn’t recognize him. Forgetting my shoes on Hobbes’ porch, I jumped over the fence and raced to Dad. The hula girl on his forearm lay motionless. Mom on one side and I on the other, we ushered him to the minivan where he lost consciousness.

I was staring down at my bare feet when the doctor came out. Mom rose, but when he removed his cap and said that he was sorry, she collapsed on the floor. It was almost as if Dad was her backbone and with his passing, she could no longer stand on her own. Confused, I looked to my sister to clarify and she put it in the simplest of terms, “Daddy is dead.” Still holding my hand, she pulled me with her down to Mom’s side. The three of us huddled together on cold tile and held each other for what felt like hours. I remember Mom saying over and over, “I’m so sorry, girls. I’m so, so sorry.”

I had relived the scene countless times. I always thought she was apologizing for our loss, like the doctor had, like the neighbors did for months after when they brought us pound cakes and casseroles. It had never occurred to me that she was apologizing because she thought it was her fault.

I didn’t want to hear any more, but Mom took another long sip of wine and kept talking.

“If I had never said anything, if I had just kept my mouth shut, he might still be here.” Her eyes fill with tears as she was forced to uncover what she had tried so hard to bury, but instead of falling down her cheeks, the tears just sat there, still in her eyes. “Mabe, I’d give anything to have him back. I’d live with the cheating if only I could have him back.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but a frigid lump blocked my voice. I picked up my glass of wine, tilted my head back, and poured the liquid down my throat, its warmth melting the mass. I tried again: “What did he say?”

“What?”

“Dad...when you confronted him,” my voice trembled. “What did he say?”

“He didn’t say anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“I...I never gave him a chance to say anything. I just...exploded. I started screaming at him. I was so angry, I couldn’t see straight—I can’t even remember what I said.”

“Bullshit,” I said as calmly as I could and took another sip of wine.

“Excuse me?”

“That’s bullshit, Mom. You remember what you said. You just don’t want to.”

Mom closed her eyes. Without the softness of their hue, her face looked worn with wrinkles that I had never noticed before. She nodded her head and said slowly, “I told him that I was humiliated, heartbroken. I said not to deny it, that I knew it was true and I said that I...I told him that... I hated him.”

I touched my fingertips to my lips, but said nothing—my voice powerless.

“Right after I said it,” Mom continued, eyes still shut, hands now flat on the table again, “he let out the most horrible sound... like moaning and wailing at the same time... then he couldn’t catch his breath and began to pant. He couldn’t say anything. He grabbed the back of the sofa with one hand like he would have fallen over if it hadn’t been there...and he clutched his chest with the other...”

“Stop.”

Mom opened her eyes. “That’s why I never told you about the affair,” she said, her voice barely a whisper, “and why I refused to talk about him after he was gone...because my talking about it is what killed him.”

I reached across the table and held my mother’s clammy hands.

“You don’t know that for sure.” It was all I could think to say.

“He’s gone, Mabe. There are a lot of things that we’ll never know for sure.”

This was it. I had to tell Mom about Nadia, about how certain I was that it was her. I filled both of our wine glasses to the rim, emptying the bottle, before I dropped the bomb.

“Mom, I saw her, the woman Aunt Sue told you about. She came into Geranium last night.”

My mother looked at me in disbelief. I could tell she didn’t know where to begin.

“She said she’s worked at the Dogwood Inn for almost fourteen years,” I continued. “She was driving a red pick-up – so old, it looked like it could break down any minute. And her name is Nadia.”

Mom’s eyes widened. “How did you know that was her name? I never told Claire that.”

“Wait, you mean that you already knew her name?”

“Your pizza, ladies,” Frank interrupted.

“Thanks, Frank,” Mom said but she refused to make eye contact with him and instead, just stared at the pie.

“She said thanks,” I said coldly. Frank left the table and never returned.

“You already knew her name?” I asked again.

“I found a few notes in your Dad’s wallet,” she said. “There were about five of them in all – each one short and sweet, all signed Nadia.” She began to cut into the pizza.

“I found one of the notes, too,” I said, strangely excited that this was something that only Mom and I shared. “I had forgotten about it until I saw her, until I saw her name on her credit card.”

“What did she look like?” Mom asked as she placed a slice on my plate.

“Like a troll,” I lied.

Mom smirked as she cut a slice for herself. “Did she know who you are?”

“No,” I said, but then I realized that I couldn’t actually be sure. “I mean, I don’t think so. I didn’t tell her at least.... not yet, anyway.” I took a bite of pizza in an attempt to shut myself up—no chance in hell Mom would like what I was about to say.

“Mabe...” she said in the same tone she used when I failed that algebra exam in school, the same tone she used when she saw me smoking.

“You said yourself that there are a lot of things that we’ll never know for sure, Mom... but what if we could find them out?”

“Mable Lee, don’t even think about it.”

“It’s obviously too late for that,” I said.

Mom looked up at the ceiling before she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“I’ve spent thirteen years trying to put this behind me,” she said as she opened them again.

“Maybe if I had that long to work through it, I’d be able to put it behind me, too,” I said. “I’m going to talk to her. I have to.”

“I know I can’t stop you,” she said, “but I don’t want to hear anything about it.”

Chapter 6

“I’m leaving Greg,” Claire said.

We sat in her car outside of the Dogwood Inn, a two-story brick building with exterior entrances along open walkways. It had been almost an hour since we pulled into the parking lot. Besides the red pick-up a couple of spaces over, no sign of Nadia yet.

“Seriously?” I asked with probably a bit too much glee.

“I haven’t told him yet,” she said, staring out the windshield. “But I’ve been thinking about what you said, you know, facing things to fix them. I’m going to give him an ultimatum: he has to at least attempt to look for work every day or I’m gone.”

“But what about his back injury?”

Claire turned and looked at me, her sad smile saying she knew that the injury wasn’t the real problem. I wondered if she had just realized it or if she had known all along.

“Maybe he’ll actually do it, though,” I said. Wait a second – was I really trying to defend Greg? Who am I? “Maybe he can find a job, maybe he just needs the motivation.”

“At this point, I don’t think he can even spell motivation.”

I pulled two cigarettes out of my purse and handed one to Claire. As she cracked the windows, I lit up, handed her the lighter, and she did the same.

“So what’s our game plan again?” she asked.

“No clue,” I said. “I’ve kind of just been making it up as we go along. But I know Nadia is here. The truck is still right over there.”

“Are we just going to bum-rush her?” she asked, adjusting the radio only to find that most of the stations were fuzzy.

“I don’t know. I haven’t exactly gotten that far...”

“Mabe! Is that her?” Claire pulled the cigarette from her mouth and used it to point towards a tiny figure. She was pushing a cart, overflowing with dirty white linens. It had a shelf underneath stacked with folded towels and bed sheets. The figure’s hair was pulled back in a tight bun, the same way it was when she came into Geranium, but even from this distance, its black hue shined blue. She pushed the cart into a room on the second floor and closed the door behind her.

I took a long drag and exhaled slowly. “It’s her,” I said, opening the car door.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting answers,” I said, one foot still in the car, the other already out on the pavement.

“You coming? Or do you want me to just tell you about it when I get back?”

“Shut up,” Claire said, opening her door, too.

Outside, the air was crisp. Claire and I scurried across the leaf-littered pavement, the reds and oranges and browns crunching beneath our feet.

I climbed the stairs two at a time, stopping half way up to take another drag. When I reached the top, I waited for Claire who was a few steps behind me.

“Did you see which room she went in?” she asked, out of breath.

“No, but I know we’re close,” I said, leaning over the balcony, surveying the property of the Dogwood Inn. Below us, the pool was covered with a black plastic tarp for the off-season. Fallen leaves piled on top of it. Past the pool, I saw Claire’s old Volvo and, a few spots away, the red pick-up that started this whole charade. “Let’s just wait here. She has to come back out at some point.”

“How long does it take to clean a hotel room?” Claire asked.

“How the hell should I know?”

Then I saw her come out of the room, pushing the linen cart into the next.

“She just went into the next room,” I said. “217.”

“Let’s get this over with,” Claire said as we walked down the hall.

210...211...212...213...214...215. February 15th, the day after Valentine’s Day, the birthday that Dad and I shared. I wondered what Dad would say about what Claire and I were doing. Would he encourage us to seek out the answers, to try to figure it out for ourselves, like the Dad I remembered? Or would he tell us it wasn’t any of our business, like the Dad that had been hidden from me, the Dad with secrets?

...216...217.

I raised my hand in a fist to knock on the painted wood, but Claire grabbed my wrist.

“Mabe...wait,” she said, her green eyes wide, her blonde curls frizzy from the fall breeze.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’ve never been so sure about anything.”

With a single nod, she let go of my wrist and her hand fell back to her side.

I knocked.

The door squeaked open and Nadia’s head peeked out from behind it. “I’m sorry, just cleaning up in here. I’ll be done soon. Do you need to get something out of your room in the mean time?”

Claire and I stood there like idiots—looking at Nadia, then at each other, then back at Nadia while Nadia’s eyes shifted, too—looking at me, then at Claire, then back at me.

“Wait a second,” she said, opening the door wider with one hand, holding a stack of freshly folded towels with the other. She was wearing another oversized uniform, this one light

blue instead of dark. With her dark features and olive tone, she reminded me of the Virgin Mary.
What a joke.

“Aren’t you the nice girl that helped me at Geranium the other night?” she asked.

“I...I am.”

“What are you doing here? This isn’t your room, is it?”

“We have a few questions for you,” Claire said.

“And who are you?”

“I’m the nice girl’s big sister.”

“I don’t understand,” Nadia said, her large brown eyes narrowing. “Why are you here?”

What do you girls want from me?”

“We want to know if you knew our Dad,” Claire said.

“Who is your dad?”

“You mean, who *was* our dad,” Claire said. “He died thirteen years ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Nadia said, her voice honeyed.

“His name was Todd McKlee. Did you know him?”

Nadia closed her eyes, clutched the stack of folded towels against her chest, and nodded.

“May we come in?” Claire asked. “We have a few questions.”

“I...I suppose so,” Nadia said. “But I only have about ten more minutes before I need to get started on the next room.” She set the towels down on the bed and began rubbing at her temple.

Claire and I walked into the hotel room and sat on the bed, the stack of towels between us. Nadia shut the door and then leaned against the cheaply made dresser. Facing us but staring

at the burgundy carpet, she stroked the base of her neck, her butterscotch skin growing flush. Finally, she looked up at us.

“You both have his eyes,” she said.

“We know.”

“Your father was a great man.”

“Was he?” I was thinking it, but Claire had the balls to say it out loud. “Let’s start from the beginning—where did you get that red pick-up?”

“I...well, you see...it came from...” Nadia fumbled through possible explanations before she said, “Your father.”

“And why would he buy you a new car?”

“He didn’t buy it. He helped me with the down payment,” she said, her voice trailing off at the end.

“Oh, excuse me,” I said, regaining some of my vigor. “Why would he help you with the down payment?”

“Because I needed help. Like I said, he was a great man.” She placed her hands against the dresser on either side of her and began tapping her press-on nails against the finish—tap, tap, tap. As I became more and more impatient, Nadia became more and more obnoxious. I tried to think of what to say next, but all I could hear was that tapping.

“Look, Nadia” Claire began.

Tap, tap, tap.

“This is awkward for all of us...”

Tap, tap, tap.

“My sister and I only came here to ask you one thing...”

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap...

“For the love of God, will you quit tapping your fucking nails?!” I screamed.

My sister and Nadia both looked at me, wide-eyed.

“Sorry,” Nadia said meekly as she folded her arms in front of her chest. “Nervous habit.”

“What I was going to say was,” Claire continued, “Nadia, did you know that our dad had a wife and two daughters at home when he was spending the night with you here at the hotel?”

“What?” Nadia said, spreading her fingers out like a fan against her chest. “Todd never stayed here with me. I asked him to, but he never did. You girls have the wrong idea.”

“The wrong idea?” Claire said, her chin held high. “You just told us you asked him to stay with you.”

“You don’t understand...” Nadia began, trying to plead her case.

“No, you don’t understand,” I snapped. “We know he paid for a room here more than once. Credit card statements don’t lie.”

“But the room wasn’t meant for us,” Nadia said, hanging her head. “It was just for me.”

“You don’t really expect us to buy that, do you?” I asked, my lips curling.

“Seriously, that’s a horrible excuse,” Claire said. “It doesn’t even make any sense.”

“It would make sense if...” Nadia swallowed a few times before trying to speak again. “It would make sense if you knew that I couldn’t go home.” Her knees knocked together as her feet shuffled back and forth in front of her. “And your father did. He knew that.”

“How did he know?” Claire asked.

“Why couldn’t you go home?” I wondered out loud at the same time.

“I couldn’t go home…” Nadia said with a trembling chin. Looking down at her hands, she began picking at the press-on nails. “I couldn’t go home because my husband’s drinking had become worse… and he had started to… to get violent…”

I cupped one hand to my mouth and placed the other hand on top of Claire’s, giving it a slight squeeze. She squeezed back and didn’t let go.

“Your dad and my husband were roommates at Ohio State,” Nadia continued. “Did he ever mention Steve from freshman year? Steve Novak?”

Claire and I silently shook our heads from side to side.

“No? I didn’t think so,” Nadia with persuasive confidence. “Todd said he kept his distance from Steve after graduation because of his drinking—said he’d seen Steve do the same things to the girls he dated back then—of course, I didn’t know any of that until later.”

Nadia rose from the ledge of the dresser and began pacing around the small hotel room.

“But we ran into Todd at the grocery store when we first moved here, less than a year before he died. He noticed some bruising on my arm, but waited until Steve had gone to the bathroom to ask me about it. Your dad was very quick, very clever.”

Nadia stopped in front of the dresser once again, this time with her back to us. She looked at herself in the mirror hanging on the wall. I caught her eye through the reflection and stared.

“He wouldn’t accept any of my excuses,” she said. “He saw right through my lies—told me that he knew what Steve was capable of, why they didn’t stay in touch.”

“He… he was helping you.” I wasn’t sure if I was asking Nadia or if I just needed to hear myself say it out loud.

“More than I could have ever dreamed,” she said as she turned to face us again. “He helped me with the car so I could escape, with the hotel room so I could hide out, with the

separation papers and a restraining order so I start could over.” She sat down across from us on the other bed, placed one hand on my knee, the other on Claire’s, and said, “He saved my life.”

“But why keep it a secret?” I asked. “Why hide it if he was helping?”

“Because she didn’t want anyone to know,” Claire said. “You told him that you didn’t want anyone else to know, didn’t you?” As she placed her hand on top of Nadia’s, her sleeve slid back an inch or two, revealing purple marks around her wrist.

“Claire, your wrist!” I shouted.

She quickly pulled her sleeve down to cover the bruises.

“Did Greg do that to you?” I asked as I stood. “That scum, that slimy piece of shit...”

“Oh, honey...” Nadia said as she gently touched Claire’s shoulder.

“He thinks he can put his hands on my sister like that?” I continued. “I’m going to chop his dick off!”

“Oh, my,” Nadia said, looking up at me.

“Mabe, calm down,” Claire said.

“Calm down? How about you start getting pissed off for a change? How long has he been doing this to you? How long have you been putting up with it?”

“Too long,” she said. “I said that I was leaving him, Mabe. It’s over. Drop it.” Claire shot a quick glance towards Nadia and then looked back at me.

“I just...I had no idea.” I slowly sat back down next to my sister.

“That’s because I didn’t want anyone to know,” Claire said and she took Nadia’s small hands into her own. “I’m sorry for what your husband did to you. I really am—but that doesn’t get you off the hook. We know that you and our dad kissed.”

Fucking A. So caught up in connecting Nadia to all of the other clues, I'd forgotten about why she was a clue in the first place: *He was seen kissing another woman.*

"Aunt Sue saw you," I chimed in. "At Backyard Burger."

Nadia rose silently and grabbed the stack of folded towels from the bed. She disappeared into the bathroom and put them away. When she came back into the room, she said, "I had filed the restraining order earlier that day. I was in a bad place. Your dad was comforting me."

"With his lips?" I asked. "How often did he do that?"

Nadia grabbed a spray bottle from her cart. "It was only a handful of times," she said as she sprayed the top of the dresser and wiped it down. "When I told him I felt worn and worthless, he would kiss me and tell me that I was beautiful, that any man would be lucky to have me."

"Did you have feelings for him?" I asked.

"He took better care of me than my husband ever did," Nadia said as she removed the sheets from the bed she had been sitting on. "How could I not?"

"Did he have feelings for you?" Claire asked as she stood and motioned for me to do the same so we could strip the other bed. "Is that why he put dried flowers on the dashboard of your car, like he used to do for our mom?"

"The flowers were like the kiss, nothing more than a kind gesture," Nadia said as she grabbed two sets of folded sheets from the bottom of the cart and handed one to me. "I wanted them to mean so much more than they did, but Todd never cared for me the way I cared for him."

"How can you be so sure?" Claire asked, changing the pillowcases.

"You asked him to stay with you," I remembered. "He turned you down."

“Not exactly,” Nadia said while she made the bed. “He agreed to stay with me, then his phone rang. Todd ignored the call, but then told me he was sorry if I had the wrong impression and he left in a rush.” She arranged the pillows on the beds. “That was the last time we spoke. I read his obituary in the paper the next week.”

Nadia walked to the door, held it open, and said, “Now excuse me, but I really must get back to work.”

I walked outside and began to make my way down the breezeway, but looked back to see Claire still standing there, facing Nadia.

“You weren’t the only one who had the wrong impression,” my sister said.

Nadia smiled half-heartedly, nodded, and shut the door.

We walked down the stairs in silence, passed the pool and headed towards the Volvo. Claire got in the car and started it, but I stood outside for a moment, breathing in the cool air, looking at the red truck, then back at the Dogwood Inn. Why didn’t Dad just tell Mom the truth about Nadia? Surely she’d understand the situation. Or maybe he didn’t just keep it a secret because Nadia had asked him to. Maybe he kept it a secret because he knew that if Nadia got the wrong impression, then Mom would, too. But was it the wrong impression? Maybe he knew he wouldn’t be able to explain himself.

“That wasn’t what I expected,” Claire said as I joined her in the car.

“Me either,” I said. “He really was with another woman.”

“But he wasn’t,” Claire said, backing the car out of the parking spot. “He never actually slept with her.”

“He agreed to it, though.” I stared out the window. “Part of him must have wanted to and that makes him just as guilty.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Claire argued. “All this time, all these years, I thought he had been with this woman, choosing her over Mom. But he didn’t—he had stayed faithful.”

“Faithful?” I looked to Claire, but she kept her eyes on the road. “Faithful would be telling Mom about Nadia as soon as he ran into her. Faithful would be sharing secrets with your wife, not hiding them from her.”

“Mabe, marriage is a challenge. It’s complicated...”

“Don’t start with that babble, Claire.” I lit a cigarette and rolled the window down about an inch. “Marriage is blinding—nothing more, nothing less. You either can’t see that you take your loved one for granted, like Dad, like Greg, or you just lose sight of your own self-worth, like Mom, like you. Everyone just ends up blinded.”

I took a drag and exhaled, pleased with myself.

But then Claire said, “It all must look so clear to you from the sidelines.”

The sun was setting when we pulled into my driveway.

“So, do you want to tell Mom or should I?” Claire said as I unbuckled my seatbelt. “I think we should do it together.”

Tell Mom? Oh my God, Mom. I pressed my palm to my heart.

“Mabe?” Claire said. “Mabe, what is it?”

“When Mom and I went to dinner last night, she told me something.”

“What? What is it?”

“I know she told you that she never confronted Dad,” I said, “but she did, Claire. She did. Before the heart attack, like *right* before.”

“No...” Claire placed her hand on my leg and pressed in with the pads of her fingers.

“She told him that she knew about the affair and that she...she hated him. And that’s when it happened.”

Her fingers now digging into my thigh, Claire’s breathing became labored. “But that means she must think that she provoked it, she must think...”

“She thinks that she killed him.”

“But it wasn’t really an affair!” Claire shouted. She released her grip. Her lips began to quiver and I realized that her entire body was trembling.

“Wasn’t it?” I said, taking her jittery hands in mine. “Either way, we can’t tell her.”

Claire said nothing.

“Mom didn’t even want us to track Nadia down,” I tried to reason. “She said she knew she couldn’t stop us, but she didn’t want to hear anything about it.”

“So we just let her go on thinking that he had sex with another woman?”

“Think about it,” I said. “If we tell her and she still considers it an affair, then it makes no difference. But if she doesn’t see it as an actual affair, if it was more innocent than she thought...”

“She’d feel even more guilt for provoking it than she must now,” Claire said, her hands beginning to steady.

“Exactly.”

Claire gazed into the distance. Then she jerked her head, blinked a few times and said, “You’re right. She’s already been through enough.”

I stuck out my smallest finger and said “Pinky promise?”

“Pinky promise.” Our fingers interlocked.

“I love you, Claire,” I said as I got out of the car. “And call me if you need anything – an ear, a shoulder, a place to stay for a bit.”

“You know I will, Mabey Baby. I love you, too.”

I went into the house to grab a sweater and then took Mole back outside. As soon as I opened the door, he sprinted ahead of me.

The autumn air had grown cooler through the week and as I strolled through the garden, I could tell that some of the plants weren’t going to make it. The stems of the Marilyn chrysanthemums looked exhausted, its blossoms few and far between. The October Daphne knew that November was close, its once plump leaves now withering. Behind them, the flowers of the Russian Sage had turned from purple to brown. But even with all of that loss of life happening above it, the rockrose continued to do its job, filling the holes of the garden. I followed the vine throughout the flowerbeds, looking for any sign of weakness, unsure if it would survive the season change. But then I saw it—my eyes rested upon a single blossom, hidden beneath its own leaves. I bent down, gently pushing the foliage and my doubts aside, to see the pink petals of the lone flower revealing themselves proudly. If there was any plant in the garden that would outlast the season’s first frost, it was the rockrose.