



THE FIRST SHOT

LIV
CONSTANTINE

A PREQUEL TO
THE LAST MRS. PARRISH

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CHAPTER ONE

At three a.m., Lana Crump quietly got out of bed, fully dressed, and slid the suitcase she'd packed earlier that night out from under it. The sound of soft breathing filled the room, and she tiptoed to the crib for a last look at her son, who was sleeping peacefully. She exited the room without a sound. As her feet carried her down the steps and away from the house she'd grown up in, she felt lighter and lighter, thoughts of a better future somewhere far away from this dead-end town filling her head and giving her new purpose.

She'd debated briefly whether or not to leave a note but decided against it. They knew why she had to leave—that she'd never be allowed to raise her son no matter what she did. Taking a final look around, she whispered a quiet goodbye and closed the door behind her.

She'd planned her escape carefully, thinking through every contingency. In her backpack was the emergency cash her mother had kept hidden in the back of the pantry in an old flour canister. A thousand dollars wouldn't get her far, but it was enough for now. She'd already purchased a prepaid cell phone, and she'd be sure to get rid of her real one, sending the police scurrying in the wrong direction. Lastly, she'd packed her copies of *Anna Karenina* and *Persuasion*. She wished she didn't have to leave all of her other books, but there was no other option. Now all she needed to do was hitch a ride to Lexington, Nebraska, where phase two of her plan could begin.

It was close to four a.m. when she reached the bus station and bought a ticket to Little Rock. She hated to squander the \$75, but it was the only way. At six fifteen, she handed the driver her ticket and found a seat in the back. She sat down and tucked her phone between the seat cushions, then got

back up. As the bus began to fill, she squeezed to the side of an oncoming passenger and snuck off. When they tracked her phone they'd be looking for her in the opposite direction—that would buy her some time. Step one, complete. The sun was coming up as she reached the truck stop and went inside in search of her real ride.

One hour and two cups of coffee later, she was in the passenger seat of an eighteen-wheeler with a trucker named Mac. He was going to Cheyenne but was willing to go a little out of his way to drop her off in Lexington, where she told him she was going to visit her sick aunt. She'd chosen him carefully, after staking out the truck stop all morning to try to get a read on who would be the safest. He had on a wedding band, the first good sign. She'd heard him on the phone talking sweetly to his wife and then his daughter. But the thing that clinched it for her was when he bowed his head before eating to say a silent prayer. It wasn't like she believed all religious people were good, but she had a feeling she'd be safe with Mac.

“How long you planning on staying in Lexington?” he asked as they pulled out.

Lana tried to make herself look sad. “My aunt's pretty sick, so I'll stay as long she needs me.”

“Awful kind of you. Young folks today are usually all about themselves. It's refreshing to see a young woman like you put someone else's needs first.”

Lana tried her best not to roll her eyes. Was this do-gooder going to talk the whole way? There was no way she could endure close to five hours of this. She feigned a yawn. “I haven't gotten any sleep since my uncle called to tell me she'd taken a turn for the worse. Would you mind if I just rested for a bit?”

“Of course, of course.” He reached behind the seat and pulled a

blanket out, handing it to her. “Here you go, try and sleep.”

She mumbled a thanks and closed her eyes. Not that she’d really sleep. No matter how nice he seemed, Lana didn’t really know him, and she wasn’t about to wake up locked in some basement. But as long as she kept her eyes closed, he’d keep his mouth closed. Her old pal Martin Cummings had booked her a room at the Astro Motel for \$55 a night—she’d be there behind a locked door soon enough. She had the money for at least a month, but he’d also promised to help her get a job at a local restaurant once they’d squared away her new identity.

Martin hadn’t been too thrilled to hear from Lana at first—after all, she was the only one from Blue Springs, Missouri, who knew what he’d done and where’d he gone. Two years ago, she’d been his alibi. He’d been hanging out with the wrong crowd and happened to be in the car with them when they robbed a convenience store in a neighboring town, fatally injuring the clerk. Martin hadn’t known what was going to go down, but he’d already had his share of trouble with the law and had begged Lana to cover for him. Just like with her, the cards had always been stacked against Martin, and she was happy to cut him a break. So Lana had been his alibi and told the police he’d been with her that night. Soon after he’d moved away and started a new life. Now he was an integral part of *her* plan to escape. He was working in Eustis, Nebraska, in the vital records department. Thanks to him, she’d have an entirely new identity in no time.

CHAPTER TWO

Lana gave Mac her sweetest smile as she opened the door and stepped down from the truck. “Thanks again for the ride.”

“You’re welcome. Good luck, missy.”

She’d had him drop her off at a strip mall a few blocks from the Astro. Despite his aboveboard behavior during the five-hour trip, she didn’t need him to know where she was staying. She’d learned the hard way that just because a guy looked like a good person on the outside, it didn’t mean that was true on the inside. She pulled the collar of her wool coat up against the biting wind and walked as quickly as she could toward the motel. When she reached her room and opened the door, her nose wrinkled in distaste. It smelled like an ashtray. Throwing her suitcase on the bed, she strode over to the nightstand and yanked the phone from it.

She tapped her foot while it rang.

“Front desk,” the old geezer who’d checked her in answered.

“Yes, this is room one oh three. I asked for nonsmoking, but this room reeks.”

“All our rooms are nonsmoking. I’m sorry the last guest broke the rules. Afraid we’re all booked up, but I can have housekeeping bring in some air fresheners.”

Just what she needed, some chemicals to go along with the stale smoke. “Never mind.” She hung up and went over to the window, opening it

and letting the freezing air in. She'd leave it open while she went back out, and maybe by the time she returned from meeting with Martin, it wouldn't be so bad.

She texted him and walked down the street to the Dunkin' Donuts to wait. After ordering a cappuccino, she took a seat at a booth by the window and looked out at the dreary landscape. Nothing much to see—just like her own hometown. She couldn't wait to get out to the West Coast and finally begin to live a *real* life. The life she was meant for. Catching her reflection in the window, she smoothed a stray hair from her forehead. Lana knew she looked good: her hair was longer than when she'd last seen Martin three years ago, and she'd since learned to apply makeup expertly.

Still, she hadn't expected Martin to be transformed himself. She barely recognized him when he walked in the door. Gone was the skinny, pimply kid, and in his place was a good-looking guy, buff and healthy. It took a minute for his eyes to rest on her, and when they did, his eyebrows rose in surprise.

“Lana? You look amazing.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “You don't look too shabby yourself.”

He slid into the seat across from her. “Glad you made it. I heard about your trouble. My sister told me that the cops are looking for you, you know. You skipped out on bail?”

She felt her stomach clench. “You didn't tell her I was coming here, did you?”

He threw a hand up. “Course not. I owe you one, and I pay my debts. I don't blame you anyhow. That creep had it coming. But just sayin'...you might want to get farther away than one state.”

She blew out a breath. “That’s the long-term plan. I just need to lay low first, figure out exactly what’s next.”

He pulled out an envelope from his jacket pocket, looked around, then lowered his voice.

“I got you a copy of the birth certificate of a girl who went missing two years ago. Amber Patterson. Same age as you, similar features.”

“What happened to her?”

He shrugged. “No one knows. She lived in Eustis. If you think Blue Springs is small, well, let’s just say there’s like five hundred people there. Everyone knows everyone. One day she was walking home from school, and she never made it.”

Lana thought for a moment. “Maybe she just ran away.”

Martin shook his head. “The police don’t think so. No trouble at home or at school. Plus she and her mom were real close.” He handed her a photocopy of a newspaper article. “Here, you can see for yourself.”

Lana swallowed hard. “Are you sure she’s...gone for good? I don’t need to be using her ID only to have her show up again someday.”

Martin shook his head. “Nah. She was likely abducted. Dead somewhere. You can use her birth certificate to get a driver’s license when you finally get settled wherever. I’ve got a buddy who owns a restaurant here; he owes me a favor and he’s willing to hire you. He’ll do it under the table if you’re willing to work for tips. I told him your name was Amber, but you should make up a different last name—people around here may recognize Patterson.” He gestured toward the envelope.

She nodded and put the envelope in her purse. “You said her mother’s still around?”

“Yeah, she works at H & J Grocery.”

Lana filed that information away. “So, when can I start at your friend’s restaurant?”

He handed her another piece of paper with a name and phone number. “He’s expecting your call. You can work out the details.” Martin stood. “So this squares us, right?”

She nodded. “Yep. Thanks for all the help.”

He winked. “Sure thing, Amber.”

Lana read over the article again and examined the picture of the missing girl. She went to Facebook on her burner phone, signed in using the fake profile she had created, and did a search for her. Sure enough, there was her page, full of comments from friends and well-wishers, bemoaning her disappearance. Lana clicked on the photos and methodically studied them one by one. Over the next several hours, she read through all the past posts and messages on the page. By the time she was finished, she knew exactly what her next move was. It was dusk when she left, the wind whipping against her face even harder now that the sun had gone down. She hustled back to her motel room, which felt like a refrigerator because of the open window. Slamming it shut, she sat down on the bed, feeling cold and lonely. She saw her son’s face in her mind and wondered if his father and horrible grandmother had already taken him away. Shaking the thought from her head, she picked up her phone and called the number Martin had left with her. A male voice answered.

“Hello?”

“Hello, this is Amber. My friend Martin gave me your number. I hear you’re hiring?”

CHAPTER THREE

Lana had been working at Charley's Pub for a month now, and everyone knew her as Amber Peters. She wouldn't use Amber's real last name until after she moved farther away, once she had enough money for a real fresh start. She worked as many shifts as Fred, the owner, would give her, and had already saved up over a thousand dollars. Tips were good, and Amber made sure to show a little extra cleavage to her single male customers. Her best shifts were on Sundays, when they came to watch sports with their buddies. She figured a couple more months and she'd be ready to put down a deposit on an apartment somewhere. Somewhere far away from Eustis, far away from Blue Springs. She was snapped out of her daydream when Tanya, the bartender, called her over.

"Hey," Amber said. She smiled at her and took a seat at the bar. Tanya opened a cold Michelob Ultra and handed it to her. "What a night. Bachelor parties are the worst. A bunch of drunk idiots helping the groom make his last stand." She shook her head.

Amber took a long swallow and leaned back in the bar stool. "Thanks, I needed that. They were a little over-the-top, but—thanks to your generous pouring—good tippers."

Amber had gotten friendly with Tanya right away. It was always best to make friends with the bartender, if you wanted your drink orders prioritized. Keeping the customers' glasses full made them happy and more likely to leave a good tip. The bonus was that Tanya was a lot of fun and had introduced Amber around, helping her create a bit of a social life. Over the past few weeks they had begun to hang out together most nights after work

and had bonded one night when Tanya told Amber her story of heartbreak, concerning a jerk who'd lured her here from Colorado only to start stealing her tip money for drugs. She'd finally kicked the bum out of her apartment a week ago.

Amber kept Tanya company while she took care of closing up, and then the two of them headed out together to grab a drink at Mister's, a popular bar a few blocks away. It was crowded and noisy, and Amber had a headache, but she wanted to take care of something tonight, so she'd forced herself to go along. They managed to grab two seats just as a couple got up to leave.

"Phew. That was lucky," Tanya said.

After they'd gotten their beers, Amber swiveled toward Tanya.

"So what'd you decide?"

"Hate to break it to you, but I'm gonna go back to Colorado. I hate it here. Only reason I came was because of Mitch, and look how that turned out. I just need to save up enough for the trip. The son of a bitch took all my money when he left." Her mouth tightened into an angry line.

"I think you're making the right decision, Tanya."

Tanya nodded. "I think so too. My friend Greta told me she can get me a job at this ultra-cool place in Crested Butte. She offered to let me stay with her for a while too."

"Wow, you're so lucky to have a job and a place to stay before you even get there. And in such a great town. So much better than this stupid hicksville." Amber cast her eyes down at the floor, looking sad.

"Hey, what if you came with me?"

Amber didn't want to appear too eager. "Oh, no. I couldn't. I mean, who knows if I could get a job? And where would I live? I wouldn't want to burden you."

"What if I call Greta tomorrow and see if there's another opening?" Tanya took a sip from her beer. "She's so loaded she doesn't need to work but takes a shift on Saturday nights just because the staff has so much fun together. She can bring in over five hundred in *one* night. I bet she could get you hired, and I think she'd be fine with you flopping at her house for a while."

Amber seized her opportunity. "That would be great, if you're really sure you don't mind."

Tanya raised her bottle to Amber's. "To Colorado."

Even if she didn't stay there, it was another step farther away from Missouri. There was just one more thing she needed to do before they left this town behind. She'd take care of that tomorrow.

* * *

Edith Patterson lived in a split-level on a block littered with children's plastic toys and broken-down bikes. Since arriving in the area, Amber had been doing all her food shopping at H & J, styling her hair just like the real Amber, and choosing clothes similar to the ones she'd seen on her Facebook page every time she went in. She always chose Edith's lane at the grocery store and made small talk as she checked out, making it clear that she was new in town and all alone. Twice she'd pretended to have to put items back because she didn't have enough cash to pay for them, and yesterday, she'd finally gotten the clueless woman to take pity on her and invite her over for dinner.

Amber rang the doorbell and waited. Opening the screen, she

knocked on the paint-chipped door, getting more impatient by the minute. Finally, Edith appeared, and welcomed her in.

“Thank you so much for having me over. It’s, like, so kind of you,” she gushed. Amber handed her a three-dollar plant she’d picked up at the hardware store.

Edith gave her a hug. “Thank you, sweetheart. It’s my pleasure. Come on in.”

Amber followed her into the living room, taking in the threadbare sofa and mismatched chairs. Edith had put out some cheese and crackers on the coffee table and motioned for Amber to take a seat. On the walls were framed pictures of the missing Amber, from grade school up until high school. No graduation picture though. It was morbid, like a shrine. The rest of the house was all gray and drab. Maybe the real Amber *had* run away from this dump.

“How about something to drink? Lemonade? Iced tea?”

“Iced tea is great, thanks.”

Edith came back with the drinks and sat across from her, staring at her a long moment before speaking. “Forgive me for saying so, honey, but you remind me so much of my daughter.”

Amber’s eyes went back to the wall of fame, then she looked down. “That’s nice of you to say, but...she’s so pretty. I wish I was half as beautiful as her.” Truthfully, the girl was average looking at best. “Is she away at college?” Amber asked.

Edith’s eyes filled. “I forgot. Not being from here, you wouldn’t know.” She sighed heavily. “She went missing over two years ago. I still don’t know what happened. The police have found nothing.” She choked

back a sob and took a moment to compose herself.

Amber feigned shock. “That’s awful. I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

Edith took a deep breath and stood. “Let’s go have some dinner.”

They went into the small kitchen, and when Edith pulled out the meatloaf, Amber wanted to gag—how many times had her own mother made the dish because she could stuff it with bread crumbs and make the ground meat go a little farther? She helped Edith put everything on the table: creamed corn, lumpy mashed potatoes, and some sliced white bread. The meatloaf had that disgusting hardened ketchup layer on top, just like her mom’s. The rest was a veritable smorgasbord of carbs. They made small talk while Amber did her best to get half a plate down. She managed to bring the topic back to Amber right before dessert.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but what is Amber like?” she said, purposely using the present tense even though it was likely Amber was long gone.

Edith looked up at the ceiling, and when she looked back at Amber her eyes shone with pride. “She was a wonderful girl, so thoughtful and kind. Always a smile on her face. She just lit up a room when she came in.”

“Wow. I wish I could have met her.”

“Me too, honey. Everyone loved her. She was the sweetest, most considerate girl in the world.”

Give me a break, Amber thought. Why did people insist on turning lost loved ones into saints?

“She sounds amazing. Did she have a lot of hobbies?”

“Oh, plenty. She loved basketball, and she was on the debate team.

President of the French Club too. Amber was always an honor student. Her room is full of trophies. Would you like to see?"

Bingo. "Oh, I would love to."

As they walked up the five steps to the next level, Edith continued talking. "The school was going to send members of the French Club to France, but of course that never happened...well, here it is," Edith said, turning right when they reached the landing.

Amber walked in and scanned the small, well-kept room. On one of the baby-blue walls hung a grouping of Amber's awards and school photographs, all in white wooden frames. Two large posters of Taylor Swift were tacked up side by side on another wall, and a low bookcase sat on the floor beneath them. The bed had a canopy of white lace and a frilly blue and white bedspread. No books anywhere. Amber couldn't understand how anyone could live in a house without books.

She needed some time alone in the room to find what she'd come for. She stalled, commenting on pictures and trinkets, until finally the doorbell rang.

"You look around. I'll be right back," Edith said.

Amber rushed over to the dresser, opening drawers and rifling through. Nothing. She opened up the jewelry box and saw that the top tray lifted out. She pulled it up. *Yes!* She grabbed the passport and put the velvet-covered tray back. A sapphire ring caught her eye, and she grabbed that too. It wasn't like the real Amber needed it anymore.

Just as she was getting ready to walk out of the room, Edith returned.

"Strangest thing. Someone sent me flowers! No card. Can't imagine who."

“Hmm,” Amber said. “Maybe you have a secret admirer.” It had been so worth the forty bucks she’d spent to order them for a prompt arrival at seven thirty. And it was kind of a good deed, anyway. She was sure there was no one sending frumpy Edith flowers these days.

CHAPTER FOUR

Poor Tanya, Amber thought. She was nice enough, pretty in a country sort of way, and she had her fair share of smarts. She was, however, completely bereft of vision. Her ambition extended only as far as a bartending job in a rich ski town where her income would be marginally better than it was here in Lexington. Amber had higher aims, but she had to take what she could get for now. Tanya wanted to leave Nebraska next week, which meant Amber needed to have every detail of her plan in place to hit the ground running once she got to Colorado.

When she opened her laptop, Amber once again thanked God for Google. The search engine was her entrée into the private world of anyone and any place she wished to explore. Before Amber had agreed to accompany Tanya to Crested Butte, she'd spent hours googling the place, a small and rustically charming ski town in southwest Colorado. When Tanya had asked if she could bring Amber along, her friend had said it was no problem and that they could stay with her until they got settled. At first Amber wished Tanya's friend lived someplace bigger and more well-known, like Aspen or Vail. But Colorado would just be a pit stop on her way to the Golden State, where she would find fame and fortune, anyway. And as she'd read about this tiny ski town nestled in the Rocky Mountains, she'd come across something that had made her change her mind.

Of course, skiers from all over the world crowded these Colorado towns in the winter. The surprising thing to Amber was that the population swelled in the summer too, when Texans and Oklahomans arrived to spend June, July, and August in their second homes, surrounded by this playground of epic trails, alpine hiking, fishing, whitewater rafting, and idyllic summer

weather. Amber wasn't really interested in the recreational activities. No, she was interested in something else, and Amber zeroed in on the headline of an article in *Town & Country: Wealthy Texans enjoy their sumptuous summer homes in beautiful Colorado*. Maybe California could wait. Amber might just find her fame and fortune in the Rocky Mountains.

From there, Amber had been methodical in her research. First, she'd needed to find out just who those vacation-home owners from Texas were. Tax assessment and property records kindly provided her with names, and from there Google, Wikipedia, and YouTube did the rest. She was looking for a man with a sizable net worth. That part was easy. There were lots of them, some of them even young and good-looking to boot. What winnowed down the field, however, was that he had to be single. There was the thirty-five-year-old tech whiz kid who'd made billions in a few short years. Single and attractive, but unfortunately for Amber, also gay. Another unattached multimillionaire looked promising until Amber got to the part about the six kids under ten in his custody. She'd finally struck gold when she found Jake Crawford, a no-longer-married Dallas oil billionaire who owned a 625-acre Colorado ranch on Ohio Creek, where he spent the summers. Perfect.

Amber rose from the table and poured herself another hot chocolate. No matter how thick her socks were or how many layers she put on, she just couldn't get warm. The temperature outside was eighteen degrees, and it felt like the wind was coming in right through the walls. She shook her head when she remembered it would be even colder in Crested Butte. She sat down again, holding the cup between her hands for warmth as she continued to look at Jake's photograph. He was old. Sixty-five. Silver hair, but at least he *had* hair, Amber thought. His face was weathered looking, like he'd been out in the sun and wind his whole life, and his tall body looked a little meaty, but he probably wasn't as active as he used to be.

When she went to YouTube and searched "Jake Crawford interview," several hits appeared. She clicked on the oldest one, from 1995. He would

have been forty then, and already, he was one of the richest oilmen in Texas. Taking a sip of her hot chocolate, she sat back, thrilled and fascinated by what she'd found. A forty-minute video followed Jake from his home to his office and home again, documenting his daily life and asking him questions along the way, even filming segments with his wife and daughter. It was as if heaven had smiled down upon Amber and said, "*Here you go, girlfriend. Here's all the info you'll need.*" She licked her lips in anticipation.

The Crawford house near Dallas looked like a Southern palace, with lots of white columns and a large wing on either side. It sat on one hundred thousand acres of Texas scrub and was surrounded by cattle herds and scores of ugly oil rigs. The YouTube video opened with Jake and his wife coming out of the house and walking to a tall pole where together, they raised the American flag. Amber bet they had pillows on every chair and sofa embroidered with the words *God Bless America*. Then Jake introduced his wife to the camera, and Amber laughed when she heard him say her name. Marylou Ann. Of course, what else would it be? She froze the screen and magnified it to get a better look at the wife. Slender and tanned, Marylou Ann wore a pink sleeveless V-neck dress and white sandals. She looked tallish but still slight standing next to Jake, who, Amber had read, stood well over six feet. Her face was pretty, but it was hard to tell what might be under all the heavy eye makeup and painted lips. What Amber couldn't take her eyes off of was the hair—bright fiery red, lots of it, and teased to dizzying heights. Still, she was the picture of Texan charm, and Amber had been disgusted when she'd seen a photo with Marylou Ann holding a huge elk rack. Amber knew plenty of people back home who hunted, but she still thought it was barbaric.

They were both smart, though, Amber realized, as she listened to the interview clips. It would be very stupid to underestimate this man—a rough-around-the-edges college dropout with a sharp mind and keen intelligence. He'd already built a multimillion-dollar empire by the age of forty, and his

wife had been right there with him. Amber wasn't deceived by the woman's silly name, her overly made-up face or beguiling smile. She'd not only been smart like her husband but had been devoted to him as well. It was obvious to Amber as she watched them at home with their young daughter, Daisy, that they not only adored each other but did everything together, from fly fishing to hunting to horseback riding. It looked like a match made in heaven.

Unfortunately for Jake, Marylou Ann had died of a heart attack ten years ago. *Served her right*, Amber thought. Think of how scared that poor elk must have been. Not that Amber really cared about wild animals, but still, that didn't make it right to shoot them.

So poor Jake had become a widower on his fifty-fifth birthday, but he wasn't single for long. A year later he remarried, but he chose unwisely—a thirtysomething gold digger who, according to local gossip blogs, preferred the company of other men to her husband Jake's. That marriage had lasted only three years, and Jake's divorce had cost him twenty million dollars—a mere drop in his vast bucket—and left him alone. As far as Amber could tell, he'd been single for the last six years.

Next Amber navigated to the links with Daisy's name. Jake's daughter, now thirty-three years old and married, worked for her father's company—probably some cushy job where she sat in a pretty office and did nothing all day. Her husband, Mason Briscoe, was a lawyer, and they had two adorable kids. She zoomed in on a picture of the couple at a high-society charity event. Daisy hadn't inherited her mother's red hair; she was a platinum blonde with high cheekbones and a perfect-looking face. Plastic surgery, for sure. Didn't all the rich girls have it? She had a killer body, too—no doubt thanks to her personal trainer. Her husband was good-looking in a bland, lawyerly sort of way.

Before calling it a night, Amber clicked on a *Gunnison Country Times* interview with Crawford from last summer. Halfway down the page

she found what she was she was hoping for—a photograph of him at the W Café, his favorite breakfast haunt.

Amber closed her laptop and smiled as she finished the last of the now-cold cocoa. She picked up her pen and began writing a shopping list. Red hair dye was at the very top.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was still dark outside when Tanya's headlights came shining through the window of Amber's motel room. She walked out into the frigid air, almost slipping on the icy sidewalk.

"Hey." Tanya was standing next to the Toyota hatchback with one arm leaning on the top of the open driver's-side door. "The back's unlocked. You can put your suitcase in there."

"Okay," Amber said, taking careful steps to the rear of the car.

She frowned. The vehicle was jam-packed with Tanya's stuff and barely had room for Amber's case. Shivering as she rearranged things, she finally created a small niche, shut the door, and hurried to get inside. The blast of warm air from the heater felt great, and she placed her hands, already numb with cold, against the vents.

"It's freezing out there. Man, I hate the cold," she said.

Tanya said nothing, staring at her. "Your hair. It's red."

Amber moved one hand reflexively to her head. "You like it?"

"Yeah, totally, it's just so...different. Why'd you dye it red?"

"I don't know. Just wanted a change, I guess," she said. "Can we get going?"

"Yeah, sure." Tanya backed out of the space and turned onto the road.

Tanya glanced briefly at her, then back at the road. “I’m sorry about the early departure, but we have an eight-or-nine-hour drive, and we want to get to Monarch Pass while it’s still light. I don’t want to drive over that mountain in the dark. Especially not in the winter.”

“Right. I get it.” Amber had looked up their route and had even watched videos people had taken as they drove over Monarch. But Amber soon discovered that no video could’ve prepared her for the journey. They ascended higher and higher over the snow-covered mountains, but thankfully the two-lane road was clear, with just a few ice patches here and there. And they were on the inside lane, thank God. Amber thought her stomach might drop out of her when she glanced across to the outside lane—the sheer drop-offs down the side were terrifying. When they reached the summit, Tanya pulled into the parking lot of the Monarch Crest Gift Shop. “We can grab lunch here. They have great ice cream too,” she said, opening her door.

As they walked inside, Amber said, “So now we’re actually standing on top of the US Continental Divide. Elevation over eleven thousand feet. That’s so cool,” Amber said.

“Oh yeah, my eleventh-grade geography teacher bored me to death with all that Continental Divide crap. Who cares?”

She gazed sideways at Tanya’s profile. It was unbelievable to Amber that the girl could be so devoid of curiosity and imagination. How could you live in a place all your life and be so apathetic about its significance and history? It really irritated her. Didn’t Tanya know that knowledge was power?

They sat at a table to eat their hot dogs, and Amber got up to stroll around the store while Tanya finished her ice cream cone. Immediately the dizziness hit her, and she felt like she might faint. Suddenly covered in perspiration, she sat back down, tamping down the nausea rising in her throat,

her head lowered.

“The altitude,” Tanya said in a bored voice. “Makes you light-headed. It’ll take time, but you’ll get used to it once you’ve been here awhile. You need to drink lots of water or your head will feel like it’s going to explode.”

Amber swallowed and sat very still, waiting for the dizziness to pass.

“Okay, only seventy miles to go,” Tanya said once they got back in the car.

Within the hour they hit Gunnison, a rustic western-looking town, the home of Western Colorado University and barely thirty minutes outside of Crested Butte. When they reached their final destination, Amber was enchanted. As they drove along Elk Avenue, the main drag, at the posted fifteen miles an hour, she felt like she’d entered a movie set: quaint, charming, historic, picturesque, old-fashioned. Tanya pulled into a parking space in front of a two-story wood building, its second floor an open deck where Amber imagined patrons sat outside eating and drinking in the summertime.

“This is where I’ll be working,” Tanya said, pointing to the place.

Amber looked at the sign: “The Eldo, a Pub,” and underneath that, “A Sunny Place for Shady People.” She laughed. It sounded perfect for her.

“You start in three days, right?” But Amber already knew—she was a great listener with an excellent memory.

“Yeah. I’m excited. My friend Greta said the tips are really good. And like I said, you could probably waitress there, too.”

Yada, yada, yada, Amber thought to herself. Her interview at the W Café was next week, and she needed to get that job.

Tanya took off again, made a few turns, and stopped in front of a purple house with green trim and a red door. It looked like it was right out of a storybook.

“This is Greta’s house.”

Amber looked at Tanya in surprise. “As in she owns it?”

“Yup. She’s a trusty.”

“A what?”

“A trust fund kid. There are lots of them here. They ski and party and live on Mommy and Daddy’s money.”

The hot rush of anger felt like it would consume Amber. She hated the unfairness of it all. Why did *they* deserve rich parents when hers were second-rate losers with zero ambition?

“Come on,” Tanya said, getting out of the car, and Amber followed.

They strode up the short sidewalk, walking past a three-foot wall of snow on each side of the path, and by the time they got to the front porch, Amber felt winded. She definitely wasn’t used to this thin air. Before Tanya had time to knock, the door was opened by one of the most gorgeous girls Amber had ever seen. Tall and slender, Greta had straw-colored hair that hung past her shoulders in glossy waves. Her face was almost too perfect, her big brown eyes fringed with thick black lashes, her full lips beautifully shaped. The envy gnawed at Amber’s insides like a rat chewing through concrete.

“Welcome. Come on in!” Her smile was wide and genuine. *Of course*, Amber thought. What did she have to be stingy about? Her life was a fairy tale. Well, pretty soon Amber’s would be a fairy tale too. And her payoff would make the purple house of Little Miss Perfect look like a hovel.

CHAPTER SIX

Amber decided they had picked the worst possible month to move to Crested Butte. It snowed almost every day that February, and even though the sun was always shining, daytime temperatures remained in the single digits. At night the thermometer dropped below zero. The sidewalks were flanked on both sides with five- and six-foot walls of packed snow. Amber had never been so cold or out of breath in her life. The standard uniform in town was a down jacket and wool hat that was never removed, even indoors.

Upon their arrival Amber had gone for a job interview at the W Café, but there'd been no openings at the time. Now it was April, and Amber had finally gotten a call from the restaurant to let her know they were hiring. She'd have to quit her job at Django's, a hip restaurant and bar where she'd been working for the last two months, but she was more than okay with that. It had gotten tiresome, this town full of millennials who thought themselves so progressive and enlightened.

Greta, however, had turned out to be pretty all right. She'd told them they were welcome to stay however long they liked and had even turned her small den into a bedroom for Amber. She'd introduced her and Tanya to her friends and taken them around CB, or the Butte, as locals called it. Greta had been generous too, treating them to dinners out and refusing to accept money for rent or groceries. And why shouldn't she? It was her parents' money she was spending.

But now Amber was moving to a private room in someone's Gunnison home. It was the cheapest thing she could find and required no lease. Without a car there was no way she could continue to live at Greta's

and work a job twenty-seven miles away. The free bus that ran between CB and Gunny—it seemed like no one had enough energy to use entire proper nouns—wouldn't get her to the restaurant until seven thirty a.m., too late for her early shift. Amber wasn't thrilled about having to leave Greta's, even though it was all in pursuit of the proverbial brass ring. She'd miss the great house, all the freebies, and the amazing vibe of the town. She'd also miss the gorgeous clothes Greta often let her borrow—as she packed her things the night before leaving, Amber had grabbed a white cashmere sweater, a pair of black fur-lined boots, and long gray silk pants from Greta's closet. The girl had so much, she'd never miss them.

When Greta insisted on driving her to Gunnison in the morning, Amber felt a momentary twinge of guilt for stealing her clothes, but she quickly brushed it away.

“Thanks for the ride, Greta. And thanks for letting me stay with you all this time. You've been really great,” Amber said once they were on the road. She loved the new-car smell and supple leather seats of Greta's Range Rover.

“I still don't understand why you're leaving the job at Django's. I thought you loved it there!”

Amber looked over at this privileged goddess, so at ease behind the wheel of her brand-new \$90,000 ride. Was she really clueless enough to believe that anyone *loved* waitressing? Waiting on a bunch of entitled little snots who believed you had nothing better to do than run back and forth to the kitchen on their every whim? Amber smiled through gritted teeth. “I did like it, but I'm a morning person, and the late nights were getting to me. The W is just a better fit, I think.”

“Hmm,” was all Greta said.

They stuck to small talk for the rest of the drive until they were

parked in front of Amber's new abode. She stood for a moment looking at the house, a plain one-story building with a chain-link fence around it. A green and white glider, its paint chipping, sat on the concrete front porch, and an old blue Honda was parked in the driveway. Amber couldn't help but compare it to the upmarket home she'd been living in the past few months.

"Well," Greta said, after they unloaded Amber's things, "good luck and stay in touch, okay?"

"Sure," Amber said, though she knew it was an empty invitation. "Thanks again," she added, and waved as Greta pulled away.

Amber opened the gate, reached into her pocket for the key she'd been given last week, and walked to the rear of the house, where there was a private entrance to her room. The air was frigid and a light snow was falling, even in the second week of April. Amber wondered if spring would ever come to this frozen mountain town. Unlocking the door, she stepped inside and was struck by how small and gloomy the room was with its dark wood floor, walls the color of brown mustard, and one tiny window with a roll-up window shade. She sighed and reminded herself that this was only temporary.

Before unpacking, Amber picked up her phone and dialed Craig Morton's number. He answered on the second ring.

"Hello, Craig? This is Amber Patterson. A friend of mine gave me your name and number, and said maybe you could help me."

"Yeah? What can I do for you?"

"I heard you're a river guide, and I was wondering if you would give me fly-fishing lessons and teach me how to tie flies? I'd pay for the lessons, of course," she quickly added.

"You done any fishing with lures?"

“Nope, I’m a complete novice,” Amber said, glancing at the book in her lap, *The Orvis Guide to Beginning Fly Fishing*. “Could I buy you a drink and see if we can work something out?”

“Sure, why not,” he said.

“Great. Are you free tomorrow night?”

“Yeah. Any time after five thirty.”

“Okay. Let’s meet at six. You name the place. I’m new in town.”

That took care of the first thing on her list. Tomorrow night when she met Craig, she’d also ask him if he belonged to the Gunnison Sportsmen’s Association Gun Club or had a friend who was a member. She needed someone to take her there as their guest so she could use the shooting range and learn how to handle a firearm. She had first thought about joining herself, but anything to do with guns would most likely involve a background check, and that was out of the question.

At the sound of a door slamming and loud footsteps, Amber looked up at the ceiling. Her landlady. The footsteps grew louder, and then the barking started. Amber hadn’t known anything about a dog. *Great!* She put her earbuds in, turned on her music, and flopped onto the bed, telling herself that when they met, Jake Crawford should get down on his hands and knees and thank her for the all crap she was willing to go through for him.

Moving her head against the pillow, Amber closed her eyes and smiled to herself when she remembered Craig’s asking her if she’d done any fishing with lures. *Not yet*, she thought, *but when I’m finished training, I’m going to lure in one hell of a catch.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Amber let the hot water wash over her for a long time, feeling the warmth seep into her bones. Finally turning off the faucet, she stepped out of the shower and wrapped the terry-cloth robe around her body. As she wiped the mirror in the steam-filled room, she studied her reflection. Even though it had been five months, there were still times that the dyed red hair took her by surprise. At long last June had arrived, and with it, warm temperatures. She'd worked faithfully with Craig the last two months and practiced her fly tying every day after work, getting down a few basic techniques. She could now easily get material to stay where she wanted it, whip-finish it all off, and tie a fly that would catch fish without falling apart. She just needed to keep honing her skill.

Craig had also hooked her up with a buddy who had taken her to the shooting range every week, teaching her how to handle a rifle and ammunition. They'd both been surprised at how proficient she'd become in such a short time, and it had turned into the activity Amber most looked forward to each week. She'd lift the rifle to her shoulder, keep her finger off the trigger until her sights were on the target, and pretend it was an outline of the hateful Mrs. Lockwood or Matthew, her weasel of a son. As she aimed, she'd remember how Matthew used her that summer, leaving her pregnant and abandoned when he went back to his girlfriend, the one his rich mother approved of. It wasn't long before every shot was a kill.

The steady stream of summer arrivals had begun to trickle in, and Amber was working six and seven days a week, volunteering to fill in for anyone who wanted time off. She had no intention of missing Jake when he finally turned up for his first breakfast. As she took orders and carried trays

of food to tables, Amber kept one eye on the door, watching and waiting for him to walk in.

This morning, she dried her hair and finished dressing. Maybe today would be the day, she thought as she walked the four blocks to the W, humming to herself along the way. The first half hour of the morning was a little slow, but by seven thirty the restaurant was full and Amber was hustling. When she saw two men walk in and sit at the last open table, she quickly filled two water glasses and took them over. "Good morning." She smiled. "Can I get you some coffee or tea?"

"Two coffees, miss. And there'll actually be three of us, so can you bring another water, please?" the one with salt-and-pepper hair said.

"Will do," she said sweetly, and returned with the water and two steaming mugs of coffee. "Would you like to order now or wait until your friend arrives?"

"We'll...here he is now." He looked past her as both men rose from their chairs, and when Amber turned around to look, she almost dropped her tray. Jake Crawford in the flesh. She felt her face flush with excitement. He was even taller in person than she'd imagined, suntanned and hearty looking, projecting a warm energy across the room.

"Hey, buddy. Good to see you. What time did you get in last night?" There were hellos and handshakes all around as the three men sat down.

"Can I get you a coffee, sir?" Amber gave Jake her most beguiling smile.

"Sure thing. Black and extra strong, young lady," he said, removing his wide-brimmed hat and placing it on the empty chair next to him. When he ran his fingers through the thick white hair, Amber saw that he wore a large silver and turquoise ring on his right hand.

He barely looked at me, Amber silently mused in disappointment as she poured the coffee and returned to the table with it. “Here you go. Nice and strong.” She waited a beat, not moving until he took a sip and nodded approval. “Are you gentlemen ready to order or shall I come back in a little bit?”

“I think we’re ready now,” the salt-and-pepper dude said, and Amber held her pad and pen poised at the ready while she continued to smile.

Jake spoke first. “I’m gonna have the eight-ounce flat iron steak with two eggs over easy, home fries, and gimme two of them homemade biscuits. With gravy.” His voice was smooth and deep, and Amber decided she loved the gentle lilt of his Texas accent. It didn’t grate against her ears the way women’s did.

“And you can go ahead and memorize that order, cuz it’s what old Jake here gets every day, right, pal?” the third man at the table said, and they all laughed as Jake nodded.

Amber took the other orders, her heart finally beating at a normal rate, and made sure she kept a close eye on their table as she served other customers. The minute she saw a half-full water glass or an empty coffee cup, she was there in a flash with refills. When she brought their food to the table and began to set the dishes down as the three men talked, Jake was telling them about his arrival: “Yeah, I got a late start out of Dallas, which worked out fine, because by the time I took off, the storm had passed and it was smooth flying.” She’d heard there was a portion of the Gunnison airport reserved for private jets and wondered how big his was.

Jake and his friends lingered after they’d finished their breakfast, talking and drinking coffee. Occasionally she’d hear loud guffaws from them, and as she worked her other tables, she picked up a few more strands of conversation here and there. She heard Jake tell them that his daughter,

Daisy, was in Europe with her family and probably wouldn't make it out this summer. *Good news*, Amber thought as she cleared and wiped down tables.

The men sat another twenty minutes or so before getting up to leave. Jake held the bill in one hand and with the other picked up his hat from the chair. He strode over to Amber. "Here you go, young lady. Great service. Thank you," he said, and handed her the check with a wad of cash. They were out the door before she could ask if he wanted change, and when she counted the money, she saw that it was true what they said about Texas men: they were polite, watched their language, and took their hats off at the table. They also left great tips. Their bill totaled \$78.53, and Jake had added a crisp fifty for her. If he was this generous with a waitress he'd only just met, imagine what he'd be willing to share with his wife.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Amber was sick to death of having to wash and style her hair every day, not only to get rid of the sickening smell of bacon grease that clung to it, but to give it that Marylou Ann look. She'd always worn her natural chestnut hair long and loose. Looking in the mirror as she finished teasing it, Amber figured the final do was fairly modest by some Texas standards, but she still thought she looked like a bobblehead. If, as they said in Texas, "*the higher the hair, the closer to God*," Amber couldn't exactly shake hands with Him, but she could definitely give Him a friendly wave.

There was no question, though, that the red hair was paying off. That first week Jake and his friends had been at the restaurant for breakfast every morning, and at the end of the week he'd asked Amber her name. When she'd told him, he'd said, "Amber. That's a nice name. Goes mighty good with that pretty red hair."

Over the next few weeks, she and Jake began exchanging pleasantries and making casual conversation about the weather and town goings-on. With rising satisfaction Amber noticed that Jake's gaze was often on her when she glanced over at his table, and he engaged her a little more each day. Even though she had to wear the restaurant T-shirt and apron, Amber made sure the jeans she wore hugged her long legs like a second skin.

Today was the first time Jake sat alone at the table he usually shared with his friends. After giving his usual order to the kitchen, Amber took his coffee to him.

"Good morning, Jake. Where are your friends today?"

“Mornin’, Amber.” He took a sip of coffee and put the cup down. “They’re out fishing.”

“Really? How come you didn’t go with them?” Amber swiveled her hip and placed her hand on it, striking a model pose for Jake.

“Wish I could’ve. Had a little company problem to take care of this morning. Wound up having to fire somebody. Sometimes you need to play hardball.”

The way he said it made Amber see a flash of something she hadn’t before. He was no longer the kindly older man, biding his time. No. In that instant, she caught a glimpse of steel in his eyes and the commanding tone in his voice. This was not a man to misjudge—he was still sharp and powerful, and she needed to keep that in mind.

“What a shame you couldn’t go. If I had a job that started later, I’d be out there fishing every morning.” Amber hoped she wasn’t laying it on too thick and was relieved when Jake’s mouth broke into a wide grin.

“Well what do you know? A gal who likes fishing.”

“Oh, I love it. I’m even pretty good at tying my own flies.” She might as well pour it on, Amber thought.

“You’re kidding me, right?”

Amber stood up straight and opened her eyes wide in hurt innocence. “I wouldn’t kid you. My dad taught me. We used to sit in his workshop on weekends and make them together. I put my fishing pole away after he died, though. I was twelve.” Amber brushed away an imaginary tear and thought about her very much alive father and the soiled clothing she’d hated touching all those years he’d forced her to work like a slave in his dry-cleaning store. “Wasn’t until I moved to Gunnison this year that I picked it up again, going

out with a friend every once in a while. I'm a little rusty though. I don't get much practice," she said with a sad smile.

"I'm sorry, Amber. That's a tough thing, losing your dad so young." Jake got a faraway look in his eyes, as if a memory had taken hold of him. After a moment he looked up at her and said, "Tell you what. I have a little spread up Ohio Creek. Why don't you come on out one morning you're off, and we can do a little fishing together? Would you like that?"

"Gosh, Jake. That would be amazing. Thank you." She could feel the adrenaline pumping through her veins.

"Good. You just let me know." He lifted the coffee mug to his lips and drank.

"Miss?" a man's voice called, and Amber turned to see new customers sitting at a table in the corner. *Shit*. Just when she was about to close the deal.

"Be back," she said to Jake, and moved to the other table to take their order.

A few minutes later she returned with Jake's steak and eggs. "Here you go. And a couple of extra biscuits to take home for later."

"Why, that's mighty nice of you."

"Well it's pretty nice of you to invite me fishing." She hurried on, not about to let this opportunity slip through her fingers. "I'm off next Monday. Would that work for you?"

"Monday. Let's see." Jake picked up his phone. After a few seconds he looked up from it, nodding his head. "Monday's good. We should get an early start. Say around six thirty. Unless you want to go out before sunrise? There's nothing like going out before dawn and watching the day break

through.”

Ugh, she thought. That meant getting up before five on the one day she could sleep in. “Yes, I’d love that. But...I don’t have my own rod anymore. Do you have an extra?” she asked.

“Sure. You can use my late wife’s. Marylou Ann’s. It’ll be nice to pick it up again.” Jake was quiet for a minute and sighed. “Okay then,” he finally said. “If you come a few minutes past five, we’ll be good. I’m about six miles up Ohio Creek Road on the left. You’ll see black metal ranch gates with a big ‘J.’ I’ll make sure they’re open for you.”

Amber already knew where Jake’s place was. She’d ridden past it several times with Craig when she’d asked him to show her around Gunny. Ohio Creek was one of the most beautiful spots in the whole county, with its epic views and endless sky.

“Oh, one more thing.” Jake handed her a card. “Here’s my phone number.”

Amber hesitated, clearing her throat. “Thank you. There’s just one slight problem,” she said.

“What is it?”

“Well, see, I uh...I don’t have a car. I walk to work, and I ride my bike to get around town.”

Her words elicited the sympathetic look she’d hoped for. It was probably beyond his comprehension that anyone could survive without a motor vehicle.

“No worries,” he said. “I’ll have Brian, my ranch hand, pick you up. Where do you live?”

Amber was a little miffed that he was pawning her off on one of his lackeys and hadn't volunteered to get her himself, but it was a small offense in the grand scheme of things. Anyway, Brian wouldn't be picking her up for long—it was only a matter of time before she'd be living in the big house with the big boss.

CHAPTER NINE

Monday's forecast was for clear skies and warm temperatures, but when Amber got out of bed and peered through the window, the outdoor thermometer registered only thirty-nine degrees. She was getting used to the wide swings in weather, however, and she could finally sprint up a flight of stairs without feeling like her lungs would burst.

Before going to bed last night, Amber had laid out clothing for today—quick-drying nylon pants, a short-sleeved T-shirt, her brand-new Patagonia hoodie with built-in sun protection, and her blue “Gunnison” baseball cap. She dressed quickly and sat down to pull on the waterproof boots she'd bought online, which weighed a ton. After rent, she'd been spending almost all of her earnings on expensive gear, but Amber considered it an investment in her future. Fortunately Jake had waders she could borrow. Lastly, she stuffed sandals, a white cotton shirt, a pair of jeans, and her polarized sunglasses into a tote bag, along with the cinnamon buns she'd picked up at the farmer's market over the weekend—she knew all about Jake's sweet tooth.

Gathering everything up, Amber turned out the lights, locked the door behind her, and walked to the front of the house to wait for Brian. It was quiet, all the houses on the street dark, and she shivered, hugging herself against the chill air. Tapping her foot, she craned her neck to look down the road for headlights and moved closer to the streetlight to look at her watch. Five o'clock. A few minutes later, she saw lights shine through the darkness, and soon the orange Jeep came to a stop at the curb and the passenger window went sliding down.

“You Amber?” the driver asked her, leaning toward the open window.

“Yup. Brian?” Amber wrapped her fingers around the door handle and pulled.

“Yeah. Hop in,” he said.

The heated seat and warm air from the vents were a welcome relief, and she flexed her fingers to hasten circulation. “Thanks for picking me up.” Amber checked out the interior, surprised at the luxury look of the leather and dashboard on such a sporty vehicle. “I love your car. Great color too,” she said.

“Not mine. I usually drive the pickup, but Jake thought you’d be more comfortable in this.”

“How long have you worked for Jake?”

“Hmm. Going on fifteen years now.”

She looked at him more closely, taking in his dark good looks and lean, muscular body. He looked to Amber to be somewhere in his late thirties, and even though the light was dim, she could see that he had that sort of roguishly sexy stubble on his face. She tore her gaze away from Brian, fixing her eyes on the road ahead, and they continued in silence for the ten-minute drive to the ranch. He might have been sexy looking, but she wasn’t the least bit interested. After all, the luxury car, the ranch, the money—they all belonged to Jake. Now, *that* was sexy.

Brian drove through the open gates and down the long driveway, stopping the Jeep in front of the house.

“Thanks for the ride, Brian.” She opened the car door, grabbed her bag, and slid out of the seat.

“Anytime,” he said.

Amber smiled at him and shut the door, and as she turned toward the house, she heard Brian pull away. Walking up the wide steps, Amber now saw details she’d not been able to see from the road on the occasions she and Craig had driven past. For one thing, the house looked way bigger up close. The wide veranda was covered with an intricately arched timber roof that had a magnificent chandelier hanging from it. There were large chairs and a sofa made of heavy wood arranged in a semicircle around a stone outdoor fireplace. She supposed this was the kind of front porch you got with a six-million-dollar house.

The door was open, and Jake stood there waiting for her, a wide smile on his face. “Come on in,” he said.

The moment she entered, two big dogs came barreling toward her.

“Okay, boys. Stay.” At the sound of Jake’s voice, the dogs stood perfectly still, staring up at Amber. It was intimidating, these two hunks of yellow fur and big teeth giving her the once-over. He pointed at the one closest to him—“This is Buck”—and then at the other. “And this is Shot.”

Amber leaned down and gave each an awkward pat on the head. “I get it. Buckshot. Cute,” she said, even though she thought it moronic.

“Why don’t you put these on and we can get along,” he said, handing her a pair of waders. “Housekeeper put coffee in thermal cups we can take with us.”

After she changed, they gathered the fishing gear and their coffees. As they walked across the fields to the creek, Amber breathed in the sweet earthy scent of sage. She loved the way it smelled. The light was just beginning to peek through as they reached the bank, and Amber had to admit that it was a gripping sight to see the day come to life. She turned to Jake.

“You were right. This is wonderful.”

“I had a feeling you’d like it,” he said, a tender look in his eyes.

The water was cold, and Amber was beyond thankful for the waders. By the time sun had been up for an hour, they’d caught eight trout between them, and Amber’s fingers were freezing. Why anyone would stand in ice-cold thigh-high water for hours on end to catch fish you could just as easily buy at the grocery store was completely beyond her, but Jake was in hog heaven. Finally he called time and they took their haul back to the house.

“We’ll take them to the kitchen to clean them,” he said, and Amber felt her stomach lurch at the thought.

She was pleasantly surprised when they entered the room and Jake handed the basket of fish to the woman Amber assumed must be the housekeeper. She looked to be in her forties or fifties—it was hard to tell with her cheaply dyed black hair and sun-damaged face devoid of any makeup. Even if she did bother with some mascara or lipstick, Amber didn’t think she had to worry about this bland-looking woman turning Jake’s head. But then again, you could never be too careful.

“Good catch today, Brenda. Would you mind cleaning them?” he said. “Oh, and by the way, this is Amber. She caught the first one,” he said proudly.

The two women appraised each other. “Nice to meet you, Brenda,” she said, to which the woman looked her up and down with an obvious glare when Jake turned his back.

Amber watched Brenda take the fish to the sink and lay them out for cleaning. This was good: she was getting a look at the people who surrounded Jake and what kind of obstacles they might present to her. Brian seemed harmless, and might even be valuable to her given how long he’d

been with Jake. Brenda, on the other hand, could be trouble.

CHAPTER TEN

I could get used to this, Amber thought as she sipped her coffee while gazing at the mountains in the distance—the majestic Castles in the foreground and the Anthracites beyond them, Jake had told her. She'd combed through his impressive library, finding several books on the land formations and geography of Colorado, which she'd read to educate herself. Amber had also thumbed through the many literary classics on the shelves, most of which contained an elaborate bookplate with Marylou Ann's name. One shelf was filled with the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Amber had counted sixteen and leafed through a few of them, reading comments Marylou had scratched along the margins. In one particular book, there was a quote from the book written on the front inside cover, and Amber took note, smiling. Their shared love of books and learning made her imagine Marylou up in heaven somewhere, cheering Amber on.

Monday, her day off, was dedicated to fishing mornings with Jake, and now they'd added Saturday evening fishing to their schedule. Jake would pick up Amber after the restaurant closed at two, and they would spend the afternoon together until it was time to fish. Sometimes he'd send Brian to get her, and Amber would find Jake still at work in his office when she got there, usually on the phone. She knew he talked to Daisy every day, although as far as Amber knew, his daughter knew nothing about her.

They had just returned, and Jake was putting away the fishing gear, insisting she relax on the back deck until he joined her. They'd fallen into an easy companionship, and Amber could see that he was growing attracted to her. She was staying for dinner and was hoping the meal would extend well into the night. Planning her strategy as she finished the last of her coffee, she

put the mug down on the table next to her. Suddenly Buck came barreling toward her and knocked it to the ground. The yellow Lab jumped up on her, his hot breath in her face, and began to lick her. She pushed him away while doing her best not to sound annoyed. Fortunately the mug hadn't broken.

“Down, boy, there you go, sweetie.” His breath was foul.

Brenda appeared and, sighing, walked over to clean up the mess the dog had made.

“Shoo, shoo,” Brenda scolded him, but the dog ignored her, his tail wagging while he began to lick the liquid she was trying to wipe up.

“Buck, on your bed,” Jake's deep voice boomed from the yard beyond, and Buck immediately retreated to the corner of the deck. Next to him was Shot, the other slobbering beast, who was only slightly better behaved. Jake adored the two hounds, but they were quickly becoming the bane of Amber's existence. If he had to have dogs, why couldn't they be cute little ones that fit in a handbag and knew when to shut up?

“Mr. Crawford, what time would you like me to bring out dinner?” Brenda asked.

Jake walked up the steps to the deck and took a seat in the chair across from Amber.

“Six should be fine. But I think we'll have our meal in the dining room. Okay with you, Amber?”

Amber nodded. “Sure.” Was Brenda going to be hanging around all night? How was she supposed to advance her plan with that woman constantly hovering? When Brenda finally went inside, Amber turned to Jake.

“You know...I'd love to cook for you sometime. I don't have a

kitchen where I'm staying. And I've been dying to make you my special barbecue chicken with some peach cobbler for dessert." She'd found a recipe in an old cookbook put together by the Dallas Women's League some thirty years ago. The peach cobbler recipe was Marylou Ann's, and Amber guessed it was a favorite of Jake's. She put a hand on his arm. "Maybe on Brenda's night off?"

"Well, I'll be. Peach cobbler, huh? That happens to be my favorite dessert. And I'm partial to barbecue, of course. I'd love that. Let's pick a night."

"When is Brenda off?"

He shook his head. "She never really takes days off. Lives by herself, and to tell the truth, I think she feels like this is more of a home than her own place. She likes to cook for me every night."

That was not going to work. Amber forced a smile. "How wonderful. She's a real gem." She gave Jake her most earnest look. "She might enjoy a night to herself, though. Cooking every night's a lot. How about you give her Friday night off?"

He thought for a moment and shrugged. "I guess maybe she'd appreciate that. I'll tell her." Jake squeezed Amber's hand. "It's a date. Now, how about another drink?"

They sat talking for another hour, until Brenda poked her head out to tell them dinner was ready. As they walked inside, Jake surprised Amber when he took her hand in his. She almost whooped with glee at how things were progressing. Dinner, however, was a chore to get through with the dour Brenda plopping Amber's food down in front of her and giving her sour looks whenever Jake wasn't looking. It was infuriating, and by the time they'd finished their meal, Amber's head was throbbing with suppressed rage.

Brenda swooped into the dining room and as she cleared the dishes said, “Do you want dessert in here, or in the living room?”

“No dessert,” Amber blurted out before Jake could say anything. Obviously it was going to be impossible to have a romantic evening here with Brenda skulking around—but luckily, Amber had a backup idea. “We have other plans tonight.”

Jake gave her a puzzled look.

“We’re going to a bluegrass concert at the I Bar Ranch. Storm Pass is playing tonight. You like bluegrass, don’t you, Jake?”

“More ’n cream gravy on a hot biscuit.”

“So you up to listening to a little music and doing a little dancing?”

Jake pushed his chair back and rose from the table, reaching his hand out to her. “Let’s do it, little lady.”

Amber could practically feel the daggers flying from Brenda’s eyes, and she smiled. She and Jake would be holding hands and listening to music under a starlit sky, while Brenda fumed and washed their dirty dishes. She pictured how she would lean her head against his shoulder when a slow song came on and then shyly ask him to dance. She would put her arms around his neck and push her body close to his, nestling her head against him. He was ripe for the picking. And Brenda? Brenda was history. She just didn’t know it yet.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They'd had their first kiss that night under the stars at the bluegrass festival, and she could tell that he didn't want to let her go. Amber knew that by Friday night, only four days away, Jake would be hungering more for her than the dinner she'd promised to cook. From the moment he picked her up on Friday night to the time they sat down to eat, his eyes never left her, his face filled with desire.

"Why don't we have a nice smooth cognac and sit in the living room," Jake suggested after their meal.

It was Amber's favorite room in the house, with its wall-to-wall windows reaching all the way up to the cathedral ceiling. She sank into the deep cushioned leather couch while Jake went to the liquor cart and poured two glasses.

"Thank you," she said as Jake handed her the drink and sat next to her. Amber tucked her legs underneath her and pivoted to face him. "I can't think of any place I'd rather be," she said, looking over the rim of her glass at him as she took a sip.

"Sitting here together? I can't either."

Time to make my move, Amber thought. "You don't know how much it means to me, you taking me fishing. Takes me back to such happy times in my life." Amber pressed her lips together and looked at the floor.

Jake reached over and ran his finger down her cheek. "I know how rough it must have been. Marylou Ann's daddy died when she was just

thirteen. She never really got over it.”

Of course, Amber had read about the death of Marylou Ann’s father back in that cold Nebraska motel room. Now she turned her head slightly so that her lips grazed his hand on her cheek, and then, closing her fingers around his, she kissed his palm. Instantly Jake’s arm was around her waist, pulling her closer and pressing his mouth to hers.

That had been the real beginning. And now, she spent most of her free time at his house.

He came every day for an afternoon cup of coffee near the end of her shift, then took her back to the house with him, where they’d spend time either fishing, hiking, or rafting down the river. Two days ago she’d arranged for one of the other waitresses to cover the last two hours of her shift. At precisely one thirty, she walked past the W, struggling with four bags of frozen microwave meals from Safeway. As she walked by the window and saw Jake, she raised a hand to wave, causing her to drop two of the bags and the food to go flying all over the sidewalk. He was out the door and by her side in moments, cowboy hat in hand, helping her to pick up all her packages.

“Goodness, Amber, this is a lot to handle. You do this every week?”

She shrugged, looking at the pavement. “Oh my gosh—I’m so embarrassed. But you know I can’t afford a car. The truth is, I’ve been sending part of my wages home to my mama to help her out since she lost her job.” The lie came easily to her lips.

“Well, now, you’re just sweeter than stolen honey.” He put his Stetson on his head, picked up both fallen bags, and took the other two from her hands as well. “Come on, I’ll give you a ride.”

It was the first time Jake had seen where she was living, and she could tell he was surprised by the modest surroundings. What did he expect

she could afford on a waitress's salary? She couldn't help but get annoyed at the pity in his eyes, even though she'd brought him here with the express purpose of eliciting his sympathy.

He started to say something, then stopped. "Amber, um, listen. I've got plenty of vehicles back at my place. Why don't you go ahead and use one of them? It would make me feel better knowing you have dependable transportation."

"Jake, that is so kind of you, but I wouldn't feel right."

"Come on now. I'll make a deal with you. You agree and you can use it to drive over and make me some more of that delicious peach cobbler. Tastes just like Marylou Ann's."

"Well..."

He gave her a big smile. "Is that a yes I'm hearin'?"

"Well...okay. If you insist."

They drove to his house and she made a quick choice. The pickup truck was driven mostly by Brian, and Jake always drove the Suburban. That left a green Volvo station wagon and the orange Jeep Wrangler. She chose the Jeep, and pictured herself tooling around Gunnison with the top off, her hair flying in the wind, feeling like a somebody for a change.

"Let's go inside and I'll get the keys. You can take me for a spin," Jake said.

Brenda was in the kitchen, stirring something that smelled delicious on the stove when they came in.

"Jake. Amber."

Amber felt like Brenda said her name with a bit of an attitude, but before Amber could respond, Buck came bounding into the kitchen and jumped up on her, his muddy paws leaving a big smudge on her new jeans. Amber wanted to shove him away, but she gritted her teeth and gave him a gentle push instead.

“Down, boy!” Jake commanded, and the dog retreated. He ruffled the dog’s head. “Your manners are atrocious,” he said good-naturedly to the dog. Turning to Amber, he gave her a sheepish look. “Sorry ’bout your jeans, honey, but it’ll wash out.”

“It’s fine. He’s just a big ole sweetie who was saying hi.” She knew better than to let Jake see how much she despised these two drooling canines. She’d deal with them later.

“They are big loves. Glad you understand. Why don’t you take a seat while I go and fetch the Jeep fob for you?”

After he left, Brenda turned from the stove, her eyebrows raised. “You’re taking the Jeep? For how long?”

None of your damn business, Amber wanted to say. Instead she gave Brenda a sweet smile. “For a little while, I guess. Jake offered, seeing as how I’ve been managing with no car.”

Brenda’s eyebrows looked as though they were permanently stuck in midair. She sniffed but said nothing and turned back to the stove muttering under her breath.

“Excuse me, were you speaking to me?” Amber said. Who did this woman think she was?

Brenda swung back around. “I was just saying that it seems like you’re spending an awful lot of time here. Don’t you have friends your own

age to hang around with?”

Amber took her time answering. It wouldn't do any good to be antagonistic toward Brenda. She'd been working for Jake a long time, and Amber had a strong feeling that Jake was nothing if not loyal. She didn't need to give Brenda any ammunition to use against her. “I guess it does seem a bit odd. But I'm new in town, and Jake has been so kind. I've been a little blue lately. This week is the anniversary of when my daddy died. I guess Jake reminds me a bit of him.”

She could tell by the steely glint in Brenda's eyes that she wasn't buying the bullshit Amber was peddling, but she was too shrewd to say so. Instead she simply nodded. “I'm so sorry for your loss.”

“You ready?” Jake called as he strode into the kitchen.

“Ready to take you for a ride,” Amber said, looking at Brenda and grinning. She couldn't resist.

* * *

The outdoor dining table on the lawn of the restaurant had a spectacular view of the Gunnison River. When they'd driven past Garlic Mike's earlier that day, she'd casually mentioned that she'd heard they had the best food and atmosphere in Gunnison. Jake had pulled out his cell phone and made reservations right then.

“This is perfect,” she said, lifting her glass of rosé and taking a sip. “The view is stunning.”

“Not as stunning as my view,” he said, giving her a warm look. Things were definitely heating up, and she had a feeling tonight would be the night their courtship moved to the next level. She appraised his looks dispassionately. He really wasn't bad-looking for an old guy. His eyes were a

pretty shade of cobalt blue, and he had a nice smile. Sunscreen over the years would have kept the craggy lines more at bay, but men wore wrinkles much better than women did. Another unfairness Amber despised.

“Jake, I have to tell you something,” Amber said, staring into his eyes. “This past month has been the happiest of my life. I’m so glad we met.”

“I’ll admit that you’ve put the shine back in my eyes. But—” He stopped, took another sip of his wine, and leaned forward. “I am concerned about our age difference, though. You’re younger than my daughter, you know.”

“Age is just a number. What matters is the heart.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” He smiled. “You’re the young one.”

“I don’t know about that. We all have souls of different ages.”

He looked at her in surprise. “*The Beautiful and Damned.*”

She shrugged. “What can I say? It’s one of Fitzgerald’s best lines. I adore his works.”

He got a faraway look for a moment. “So did Marylou Ann. You remind me so much of her.”

From the beginning Amber had encouraged Jake to talk about his sainted first wife and how much he’d loved her. After all, the more Amber knew about Marylou Ann, the more she could imitate her. “I’m glad I remind you of Marylou Ann, but I hope that doesn’t make you sad,” she said.

“The opposite. I feel such a connection to you. But no matter what you say, there are a lot of years between us. I don’t want folks thinkin’ I’m taking advantage of you.”

She looked down at her lap and then up at him. “Brenda said something to you, didn’t she?”

His brow creased. “Why do you ask?”

“I didn’t want to say anything. Thought maybe I was imagining it, but...well, she’s not been very friendly to me. Always giving me these looks. And she asked me why I’m not hanging around with people my own age. I think...I don’t know, I think maybe she wants you all to herself.”

“Brenda?” he scoffed. “She’s practically a nun! I don’t think she sees me that way.”

Amber leaned in now. “That’s where you’re wrong. You’re a sexy, intelligent, vibrant man. Any woman would be attracted to you. To be honest, I’m a little jealous that she gets to spend so much time with you.”

She could see she’d hit her mark. His chest puffed out a little bit more with every word she spoke. Men were so gullible.

“You have nothing to worry about. I only have eyes for you.”

Amber chewed her bottom lip and frowned. “I know that, Jake, but maybe I shouldn’t come around so much. I don’t want to upset her. She really doesn’t seem to like me, and I know she’s been with you a long time. I don’t want her to be uncomfortable.”

He shook his head. “Absolutely not! Don’t you worry about Brenda, leave that to me.”

Amber smiled. Miss Busybody was the one who should be worried.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Amber was finding that she really liked country music, the way each song told a story or a lesson. As she listened to the lyrics of “How Can I Miss You When You Won’t Go Away,” an idea came to her. She decided that now was the time to play it cool. She and Jake had spent every evening together the week following their dinner at Garlic Mike’s, his ardor growing, but she didn’t want things to heat up too fast and then burn out. For the past three nights, she’d canceled their plans at the last minute, each time citing a believable excuse: a migraine, a crisis with a friend, and last night, pure exhaustion from work. She was taking a slight risk that Jake might stop calling, but Amber was playing the long game and she needed to get things moving. It was mid-August and he’d be going back to Texas in another month.

Her cell phone buzzed and she looked at the screen and smiled. Jake.

“Hi, honey,” she answered.

“How are you doin’, sweetheart?”

“I’m better. Feeling much more rested. But I miss you.”

“I’ve been feeling lower than a gopher hole without you. How ’bout I take you out for a nice dinner tonight?”

“Couldn’t we have dinner at your house? I’d really love some time alone with you after all these nights we’ve been apart.”

“I’d love that too, sugar. I guess I can order something in. I haven’t

had a chance to tell you, but Brenda's gone."

Yes, she thought, raising her fist and drawing it down in a swift motion. "Oh no, what happened?" she asked.

She heard him sigh on the other end. "I spoke to her about the way she was treating you. She didn't bother trying to hide how she feels about our relationship. Then she called me an old fool."

"What?" Amber had thought she had Brenda all figured out, but this surprised her. Why would she ever say something like that to Jake?

"Yes, well, I've been mooning a little over the past few days without you, and she told me I needed to snap out of it. Act my age. Now, I don't mind someone speaking their mind, and she's been with me a long time, but no one's going to call me a fool while I'm the one paying their bills."

Serves her right, Amber thought. *Good riddance*. "Well, I'm so sorry she was disrespectful. I think you did the right thing. And don't you worry about ordering something. I'll cook for you." She had no idea what the hell she was going to make. The most complicated thing Amber had ever cooked was the barbecued chicken, and that had been a pain in the ass.

"Well, all right then. That sounds mighty fine," he said, and Amber could hear the jubilation in his voice.

"I can't wait. I'll see you around six then," she purred.

* * *

Amber called her friend Marla from the W. "Hey, I need a favor. Could I get some help whipping up a gourmet meal?"

Amber had covered for Marla on a few mornings when she'd been too hungover to get to work. Marla loved to cook and was hoping to work her

way up to chef in the restaurant. She'd be able to make something that would impress Jake. Later that afternoon, the meal packed up in two insulated bags on the seat next to her, Amber made her way to his place.

“Well, well. What have you got here? I thought you were gonna cook!”

“I did. I used my friend Marla's kitchen. I didn't want to waste any of our time together cooking and cleaning pots and pans, so I worked all afternoon to have everything ready when I got here.” She went up on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek.

“Aren't you something?” He gave her a playful tap on the behind as she pulled out the venison bourguignon, garlic potatoes, and honey-butter carrots.

“You do like venison, right?” she asked, even though she knew he did.

“Almost as much as I like breathing.”

They set the table together, Jake poured some wine, and they chatted casually as they ate. After dinner, they went out to the deck with another glass of wine, looking at the mountains as they sat side by side on the porch swing.

“I'm really going to miss this view,” Amber said, leaning her head on his shoulder.

He pulled away to look at her, causing the swing to stop. “What do you mean? You going somewhere?”

She sighed. “Not right away, but...I don't think Colorado is the place for me. The winters are so cold, and you'll be gone in a month. A friend of mine is headed to California in two weeks. I thought I might as well go with

him.”

Jake’s eyes narrowed. “Him?”

She put a hand on his arm. “Oh, no, don’t worry. He’s just a friend. But I have to think of my future.”

Jake leaned back, quiet now, and they rocked in silence for a while, Amber massaging his thigh and leaning closer into him. Finally, she turned toward him and kissed him. “I can see you’re upset. I didn’t mean to ruin our evening. I love you, and it would hurt too much to be here on my own after you’ve left.”

It was the first time either of them had said it.

“You do?”

Eyes wide, she cocked her head to one side. “I do what?”

“Love me.”

“Yes, very much.”

“Oh, Amber. I love you too. I just didn’t think you felt the same way. Especially after you kept breaking our dates. I thought you were getting tired of this old goat.”

“Don’t call yourself that! I love you so much it hurts.”

“Listen, Amber, don’t move to California. Come back to Texas. With me.”

She pretended to look shocked. “What do you mean? I can’t just tag along with you like some extra luggage.” He wasn’t the only one who could spout cute sayings.

He shook his head. “How can you even say such a thing? You know how I feel about you, honey. Come back to Texas with me, meet my family. I know they’ll love you just like I do.”

Was he really that dense? There was no way his daughter was going to approve of her. Amber wasn’t about to test those waters.

She bit her lip, pretending to think. “I don’t know, Jake.”

He took her hands in his. “I love you, Amber. And...I want you to be my wife if you’ll have me.”

“Oh, Jake. I want that too.” She put her arms around his neck and pulled him close until their lips met.

“It’s settled then,” he said as she rested her body against him. “You’ll come home with me and we’ll plan the biggest darn Texas wedding you ever saw.”

Amber sat up and looked into his eyes. “I have a better idea, Jake. Why don’t we get married *here*, where we fell love? In front of our beautiful mountains and the creek where we’ve spent all these wonderful days. It would mean so much more to me. We can have a party with everyone in Texas afterward. But let’s make our wedding romantic and special, just the two of us, like a fairy tale.”

“Is that really what you want, my sweet gal?”

“More than anything.”

His eyes were shining. “Okay, we’ll go down to the courthouse tomorrow and file the paperwork.”

She jumped up from the swing and took both of his hands in hers until he stood and enveloped her in his arms. “I’m so happy. I can’t wait to be

Mrs. Jake Crawford,” she said, and drawing his face to hers, kissed him deeply.

There was just one more thing she needed to do to seal the deal. She didn’t want him waking up tomorrow with cold feet. Jake was old-fashioned. Once they’d slept together, there would be no way he’d back out. And if there was one thing Amber excelled at, it was pleasing a man. He’d be hooked for good.

Amber wrapped her arms around him. “Let’s go consummate our engagement,” she said in a throaty voice.

His eyes were clouded with desire, and when they reached the bedroom, he slowly undressed her and then himself. Even though he was in good shape for a man of his age, the sagging belly and white-haired chest completely turned her off. But once the lights were out, things improved. She was surprised to realize he didn’t need any pharmaceutical help, and she had to admit he was a skilled lover. When it was over, and he fell asleep, Amber disentangled herself from his arms and left the bed, walking through the rooms she’d come to love, with their terra cotta floors and Southwest furnishings. She poured a glass of wine and walked outside to the deck, where she sat gazing at the moon shimmering on the jagged peaks. Soon this would all belong to her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Amber stretched contentedly and turned to look at Jake asleep next to her in the king-sized bed. They hadn't missed a single night making love since their marriage two weeks earlier, and Amber continued to be amazed by Jake's staying power. The last thing Amber had imagined was how good a lover he would be, but still—that wasn't enough to throw her master plan off course.

She wiggled over in the bed until her body was up against his and flung an arm over him.

“Mmm. You feel good,” he mumbled, turning over and pulling her on top of him.

They made slow love and lounged in bed for another half hour. Amber was nestled in the crook of Jake's arm. “I love it here so much, Jake. I hate the thought of leaving,” she said.

He kissed her forehead and moved his hand up and down her back in a gentle motion. “I know, sweetheart. But you'll love Dallas too. You'll see.”

“When do we have to go again?”

“Not till late September, after hunting season.”

“You're going hunting?”

“Oh yes. Every year. Deer and elk. September twelfth is the beginning of muzzleloader season this year.”

Amber wondered what the hell a muzzleloader was. She leaned up on

one elbow and looked at Jake. “Well, that sounds amazing. I want to go with you.” The picture of Marylou Ann holding that elk rack popped into her head and made her want to gag, but she tried to look enthusiastic.

“Are you kiddin’ me, gal? You really want to hunt with me?”

“More than anything.”

“Course you can come. You just made me happier than a clam at high tide.” Jake pulled her into a bear hug.

“What’s a muzzleloader, Jake?” Amber whispered, her lips against his chest, and a plan beginning to form in her mind.

* * *

It turned out that Amber’s pre-Jake months of practice at the shooting range had only marginally prepared her for muzzleloader shooting. This so-called black-powder gun was a totally different animal than the rifle she’d practiced with all those weekends. The first thing Jake had done was to take Marylou Ann’s very own muzzleloader from the gun safe and present it to Amber, as if he were giving her a priceless treasure. He then spent hours with her over the two weeks before season began, teaching her how to load the gun with pellets of black powder, then bullets and starter, and finally, tamp it all down the muzzle with the ramrod. You got one shot with a muzzleloader, Jake told her, so you had to focus, stay calm, and remember not to hold your breath once you had the animal in the crosshairs of your scope. He practiced with her every day and praised her for her fine aim. “A real Annie Oakley,” he called her. But Amber coughed at the black smoke that spewed out every time she shot and hated that the stupid thing needed cleaning so often. By the end of the two-week prep period, she thought she’d scream if she saw another bottle of bore cleaner or tube of bore butter.

It was dark when they rose on opening day, and Amber donned the

camo pants and jacket Jake had bought her specially for the occasion.

“You look real cute,” Jake said as they left the house together.

Amber was nervous. To calm herself, she thought back to the conversation that had put all the puzzle pieces into place for her. They had just left Gene Taylor’s with the new hunting gear and were headed to Mochas for a coffee.

“You told the salesgirl we didn’t need an orange hunting vest. Do you have one my size at the house? Maybe a little more stylish than the ones in the store?”

“You’re funny,” Jake chuckled. “I have a dozen of them. All the same, but I never wear ’em.”

“Why not? Isn’t it a law?”

“Nah. You’re supposed to, but there’s no law. In some states it’s not even a requirement.”

“I don’t understand. It’s for safety. Why wouldn’t you wear one?”

“I hunt on my own property. No one else around. Why should I walk around in Day-Glo orange? You either. You know, they say deer and elk can’t see color, but hell’s bells, I bet that fluorescent orange screams at ’em.”

The morning of opening day, it was still dark when they left the house carrying their guns. They walked together, not speaking, and every now and then Jake would put his hand out and stop, listening closely. This continued for two hours until they neared the portion of his property that bordered the national forest. Amber was cold, tired, and bored when he stopped for the tenth time. “Look here,” he said, barely above a whisper, and stooped down, pointing to a spot on the ground. “This here’s a deer rub. They been through here. They’re around for sure, so walk real quiet, and no

talking. We're gonna see some animals."

Amber saw her chance. "I have to pee," she said in a quiet voice.

"I'll walk slow. You catch up," he whispered.

Amber made her way to a clump of sage, all the time watching as Jake continued walking. A sudden rush of heat swept over her body and she felt the dampness spread under her arms despite the cold. Her heart raced, pounding against her chest as if it would break through. This was exactly how she'd felt the day she'd lied in court, the day she'd sent an innocent man to prison. Even though he was free now, at least he'd gotten what he deserved when that inmate knifed him and left him paralyzed.

She held her breath and let it out slowly, trying to stop the rushing sound in her ears. This wasn't a time to lose her nerve. Her hands shook as she lifted the gun to her shoulder and looked through the scope, keeping Jake in its crosshairs. His words rang over and over through her head—*breathe, stay calm, focus, take your time, and be sure of your shot*. This would be her only chance. She held the gun, her arms growing heavy and her fingers stiff as she watched. When he was about twenty yards away, Amber pulled back the hammer and put her finger on the trigger. She took one last deep breath, telling herself this was the only way. She had to look out for herself this time. She aimed and fired. Through the cloud of smoke, she saw Jake's body drop to the ground like a broken marionette.

With the gun in one hand at her side, Amber stared at the crumpled body in the distance. She remained standing there for a long time, and then finally walked calmly down the hill. Jake lay facedown and perfectly still with a hole in his back. She watched for a few minutes to make sure he wasn't breathing. When she rolled him over, she almost threw up when she saw the enormous hole that had blown out his insides. She pulled out her cell phone, but she knew it was no use—no cell service out here. Taking her time,

she walked back to the house, called 911, then closed her eyes and waited. When she opened her eyes, Jake's dogs stood there, staring at her, as if they knew what she'd done.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They weren't able to pin anything on Amber. The cops completely bought her distraught-widow act, and after an investigation, Jake's death was ruled an accident, one that might have been prevented had he been wearing an orange safety vest. His body lay in the hospital morgue for over seven hours before Amber finally got up the nerve to phone Daisy with the sad news.

"Daisy Briscoe?" Amber asked when a female voice answered.

"Speaking."

"This is Amber Crawford—Mrs. Jake Crawford. I'm calling from the ranch in Gunnison. Your father and I were married on August twenty-first."

"What? Who is this? Is this some kind of joke?"

"I assure you it's not a joke, and I regret that this is how you have to hear about it—I'm afraid I'm calling with some bad news."

There was silence on the other end.

"There's been a hunting accident. I'm sorry to tell you this, but your father is dead."

Amber held the phone away from her ear as the loud wail came over the line.

"No!" It was a scream. "He can't be. No!"

Of course, Daisy never bought her story, even after she hung up with

Amber and spoke to the National Forest law enforcement and the sheriff, who all confirmed the details of the accident. She and her husband, Mason, arrived the next morning and stormed into the house before Amber was even finished dressing. Amber pulled on the cashmere sweater she'd stolen from Greta, ran a brush quickly through her hair, and hurried downstairs. She ran into the kitchen where she heard voices, and Daisy spun around to face her. "You! Are you Amber?"

"I am." Amber saw that Brian was with them, and staring at her with pure hatred.

"Where's my father?"

"At the hospital. In the morgue."

Daisy lunged at Amber, but Mason quickly moved to restrain her.

"I want to see the marriage certificate! There's no way my father would have gotten married without telling me!"

Amber gave her a defiant look and walked to the desk by the window. She opened the middle drawer and retrieved the copy she'd placed there for just this purpose. "Here you are," she said, handing the paper over.

Daisy's face flushed as her eyes traveled across the document. When she finished, she fixed her gaze on Amber. "You tricked him into marrying you. And then you killed him. I'm not going to let you get away with this! My father's been hunting for over fifty years with no incidents," she said, her voice rising hysterically.

Amber regarded her coolly and refrained from pointing out that a fatal accident can only happen once. "Good luck with that. I think I would prefer if you left my house. I have arrangements to make for my late husband," she said.

“Oh no you don’t.” Daisy’s face was mottled and her eyes red and swollen with tears. “I’m taking my father’s body back to Dallas today, and I’m the one who will make arrangements.” She turned to Brian. “Firstly, I’d like you to stay on. I know Daddy would want that too.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Amber said, angry now at Daisy’s attempt to sideline her. “I’m in charge here. It’s up to me whether Brian stays or not.”

Daisy’s head snapped around, and Amber recoiled at the look of fury in her eyes. “Don’t push me, Amber whatever the hell your name is. You’ll stay out of my way if you know what’s good for you.”

She walked past Amber as if she didn’t exist, and Mason followed her out the door. Brian just shook his head and gave Amber a look of disgust before he walked out. How dare they treat her that way? Didn’t she deserve a little sympathy and kindness? After all, she was the one who’d just lost her husband.

* * *

Amber tried to calm her jangling nerves as the plane began its descent. She only had to make it through the next few days, and then she’d be free. Daisy had been so horrible to her since arriving in Colorado, accusing her of murder and ordering her around like she was a servant. She’d raised hell with the police and the coroner, insisting that they collect evidence and bring charges against Amber. It was humiliating. The situation had already been investigated and Amber’s name had been cleared. The force of Daisy’s fury had been intimidating, but in the end, there was nothing poor little Daisy could do. Jake’s death had been officially ruled an accident. Case closed. This nuisance of a daughter had nothing on her, yet still Amber wasn’t looking forward to facing her again in person.

Daisy had hired a pilot to fly her and her father’s remains back to Dallas on Jake’s private jet. She’d made it clear that she wasn’t about to have

Amber go with them. Instead, she'd booked Amber a first-class ticket on a commercial flight. At first Amber had been angry, believing that Daisy was deliberately humiliating and ostracizing her, but the more she thought about it, the less annoyed she was. Even though she'd had to take a crappy little puddle jumper from Gunnison to Denver, once she got there, she'd been able to skip the lines and wait in the first-class lounge for the first time in her life. And besides, if she'd flown on the private jet, Jake's corpse would have been right there with her, and it creeped her out to think of his body occupying the same airspace as hers. Now all she had to do was perfect her distraught-widow act. She glanced down at her hand and the simple gold band on her left finger. Jake had promised to have a diamond ring custom-made for her when they got back to Dallas. She'd never get the engagement ring of her dreams, but pretty soon she'd have enough money to buy herself any kind of jewelry she wanted.

She still hadn't decided whether or not she'd stay in Dallas long-term. The pictures she'd seen of the estate were magnificent, but who knew what the inside looked like? Maybe she'd want her own place, one that she could put her own expensive stamp on. But she had plenty of time to decide. Even though Jake's assets would be distributed between Amber and Daisy, by Texas law, the surviving spouse had the right to stay in the homestead. Amber had done her research. She'd been surprised to learn that compared to most other states' standards, Texas unfortunately bent over backward in favor of the children. She could have pushed Jake to change his will and leave everything to her, but that would have made her look suspicious after the accident. Jake's fortune was in the billions—on top of the properties and other assets, his business was a Fortune 100 company. As a surviving spouse, Amber would be entitled to one third of those billions, plenty even for someone as ambitious as Amber. As her father liked to say, *pigs get fed, hogs get slaughtered*.

Amber was the first one off the plane. The minute she stepped from

the Jetway into the Dallas/Fort Worth airport, a uniformed airline employee approached her. “Mrs. Crawford?”

Unused to hearing herself called that, Amber hesitated a moment. “Yes,” she said.

“Please follow me. We have a car waiting for you, and as soon as your baggage is unloaded we will have you on your way.”

As the woman turned to lead the way, Amber smiled. She didn’t know how Daisy had managed to arrange this special treatment, but she’d definitely earned some points with Amber. “Make sure they get all my luggage, and be careful with it,” Amber said to...whatever her name was. She thought back to the night that Jake had almost choked on his bourbon when his Amex bill arrived, a few weeks before his death. She’d spent over \$150,000 on a six-piece Bottega alligator luggage set she’d ordered online from their store.

“Darlin’, what in the Sam Hill did you buy at Bottega Veneta?”

She’d looked at him with wide eyes. “You told me to get new luggage.”

“Well, yes, but I didn’t think it was going cost as much as two cars.”

She sniffed and looked down. “I’m only trying to fit in. You’re taking me home to your children and your friends, and they’re all rich. Grew up with nice things. They’re all going to laugh at me, the poor little nothing that you decided to marry. I’ve had nothing but hand-me-downs all my life. I just wanted to come in style. For them to think I deserve you.”

“Aw, pumpkin, come here now.” He put his arms around her as she fake-cried into his shoulder. “It’s fine, it’s fine. They are gonna love you. And you don’t have to impress anyone.”

“I love you so much. I just want to make you proud,” she whispered, rising on tiptoes and giving him a long kiss on the lips. “You make me feel so special and safe.” They spent the rest of the afternoon making love, Amber putting on the performance of her life. After that, he told her to use the card for whatever she needed.

Now she followed the woman as they walked through a maze of empty corridors and then outside, where several black SUVs and limousines were parked. The day was boiling hot, the air thick with humidity. After getting used to the dry Colorado climate, Amber felt like she was breathing underwater. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and scanned the lot for Daisy, but as they approached a long black limo, Jake’s daughter was nowhere in sight. Instead Amber saw a good-looking guy in jeans and cowboy boots leaning languidly against the car. The instant he saw Amber, he stood at attention. Her stepdaughter really couldn’t be bothered to come in person?

“Hello, ma’am. I’m Bart,” he said with a strong Texan twang. “I work at the ranch. Mrs. Briscoe regrets that she wasn’t able to be here to greet you. She’s tied up with arrangements for Mr. Crawford and will see you at the house.”

She bristled. “He was *my* husband, and *I’m* the one who should have been making the arrangements. That’s how Jake would have wanted it,” she said with indignation.

His expression didn’t change and he simply nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Let me get the door for you. Air-conditioning’s on and the luggage should be here any minute.”

Within twenty minutes they were hurtling along I-20 to the ranch. “If you’d like somethin’ to drink, just push the button for the portable bar, ma’am. We should be at the ranch in an hour or so.”

Amber leaned back and closed her eyes. How old did he think she was, calling her *ma'am*? So far, she wasn't liking it much here. She sighed and went over the funeral wardrobe she'd bought. She'd wear the black Escada with the V-neck and cap sleeves tonight, sticking to her plain gold band and small pearl earrings as the only jewelry. Simple and discreet. She'd save the best for last. The crepe Valentino was for the funeral tomorrow, along with the black Philip Treacy hat and widow's veil. She'd paid a fortune for the designer clothes and almost as much to have all of it overnighted from New York. Poor Jake. Such a shame. He would have loved the dress she planned to wear tonight.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The limousine hummed along so smoothly and quietly that Bart's voice startled Amber. "This here is the beginning of the ranch, ma'am." He stretched out his right arm and pointed.

She leaned forward and gazed out the window assuming their arrival was imminent, but they drove on for what seemed miles and miles until the car turned right and passed under the iron arch with the words "Crawford Ranch" across the top. The first thing that struck Amber as the car continued its long course up the drive was just how immense the house was. The pictures hadn't done justice to the full scope and sheer size of the columned mansion. The second thing she noticed was all the cars parked in front and along the curve of the driveway. She counted seven of them and wondered who she'd have to confront inside. It had been bad enough meeting Daisy when she'd come to Colorado after Jake's accident; she couldn't imagine what was in store now.

The driver held the door open, and when Amber stepped out of the car, she could tell that the humidity had dropped a little, but the afternoon was still blazing hot. She smiled to herself and remembered Jake telling her in his deep drawl that September in Texas could be *hotter than a preacher's knee*. In a way, she'd miss his corny little sayings. She stood facing the house and took a deep breath, frozen momentarily by the thought of what and who lay beyond.

"I'll bring the luggage right up." The cowboy was already hauling her suitcases out of the vehicle.

“Be careful with them,” Amber said without bothering to look at him, and began walking to the house.

“Sure thing. I can see they’re brand-new. Yes, siree!” he said.

She turned and glared at him. Was he making fun of her? He gave her an innocent smile, but she made a mental note to do a full background check on him down the road. He might have to go now that she was in charge, but right now she had bigger fish to fry. She inhaled deeply and stood for a moment before the large front door, calculating Daisy’s strategy in her mind. If the door was locked, that would mean Daisy was treating her as a guest or a stranger, someone who needed permission to enter. An unlocked door might mean that Daisy had accepted the fact that this was now Amber’s house to enter as she pleased. Slowly she raised her hand and wrapped her fingers around the thick brass handle. With her thumb pressing down on the latch she heard a click and pushed the door open. Good. Daisy was getting with the program.

“Amber.” Daisy swept into the hallway the moment Amber stepped from the porch to the marble floor. Her luxurious blond hair was loose, and she wore long, flowing white pants with a soft turquoise top. She looked elegant, casual, and rich, rich, rich. Amber, for an uncomfortable instant, felt like the poor dry cleaner’s daughter from Missouri again.

Amber threw back her shoulders and held her head high. “Hello, Daisy,” she said, matching the woman’s frosty tone.

Daisy looked at Bart, who stood there, unspeaking, with Amber’s suitcases at his feet. “Please take those to the green guest room on the second floor, Bart,” she said, then looked back at Amber. “You can follow him to your room. I think you’ll find everything you need.” Her voice was cold and unwelcoming, despite her words, and she turned to walk away.

“Wait,” Amber called.

Daisy stopped, turned slowly around, and gave Amber a frigid stare.

“My place is in the master bedroom. And I’d like to know what all of the arrangements are. After all, I *am* the widow.” She stuck her chin out defiantly.

Daisy took a few steps until she was in Amber’s face. “The arrangements?” Her eyes blazed and her voice was tinged with menace. “You want to know the arrangements, Amber? There’s a coffin, Amber. My father will be inside of it. Tomorrow, the man you murdered will be put into the ground. You got what you wanted. What more do you need to know?” she hissed.

Amber had known Daisy would be a problem, but she hadn’t expected her to continue accusing her after the investigation had closed and she’d had—what? An entire week to mourn? She stood her ground. “How dare you,” Amber said, sounding braver than she felt. “I loved your father with all my heart. And he loved me. He would be furious to see the way I’m being treated.”

“Let me tell you something, you lying bitch. You may have fooled my daddy, but you’ll never fool me. We’ll play nice for now, because there is no way no how you’re going to ruin his funeral,” Daisy whispered, her face just inches from Amber’s. “Now,” she said, and took a step back. “I have family here—aunts and uncles and cousins—and we will have a civilized meal tonight without any drama or histrionics. Tomorrow’s service is at eleven o’clock. Once everything is over, we’ll never have to see each other again.”

Amber blinked twice, pressing her lips together in fury, but forced herself not to react. She smiled to herself as an idea occurred to her, one that would infuriate the spoiled Texas princess more than her presence alone already had. “I’m afraid I’m far too distraught to join everyone for dinner. I

would prefer to grieve alone and in the privacy of my room.” She fixed Daisy with an iron gaze. “Would you kindly have dinner sent up to me?” Amber turned on her heel and walked to the foot of the curved staircase. Placing a hand on the bannister, she looked back at Daisy. “Until tomorrow,” she said, and walked up the stairs with her head held high.

The fellow who’d driven her was standing in front of a door at the end of a very long hallway, along with her suitcases. She’d forgotten all about him.

“This is my room?” she asked as she reached him.

“Yes, ma’am.” He opened the door and stood aside to allow her to enter first.

She scanned the space, still annoyed that she had been shunted to a guest room, although she had to admit it was lavish and well-appointed. *It’ll do for tonight*, she thought. “You can bring my bags in. And please, stop calling me ma’am.”

* * *

The morning of the funeral Amber rose early and took her time getting dressed. She had no intention of going downstairs until precisely ten fifteen, when the cars would be ready to take them to church. As she slid on the black pantyhose, she thought about how uncomfortably hot they would be, but she’d have to suck it up and bear it—the look didn’t work without them. Now, regarding herself in the gold-framed full-length mirror, she parted her lips in a sexy smile. The black linen dress clung to her body, showing every curve, and her legs looked a mile long in the black stockings and six-inch Louboutins. The last thing she donned was the black wide-brimmed hat with the veil that dropped to a little below her chin. There would be no question in anyone’s mind why Jake had been so taken with her.

At the top of the stairs Amber faltered for a moment when she heard the buzz of conversation and activity below. Exhaling, she put one high-heeled foot in front of the other and stuck her chin in the air, refusing to let them get to her. All conversation stopped, and there were gasps as a sea of faces turned to take in the sight of Jake's young widow. Amber nodded slowly, and her eyes skimmed across the assembly until they landed on Daisy. "Are the cars ready?" she asked.

Daisy gave her a withering look and stretched her arm toward the door, indicating the waiting limousine. "You're in the first car, of course," Daisy said stiffly. "I'll ride in the second car with Mason and the children. All of us—the immediate family—will sit in the front row at the church."

That was fine with Amber. She had no wish to make small talk with Daisy or her husband and little brats. She slid onto the plush leather seat, already feeling quite used to being chauffeured from place to place.

Amber walked down the aisle of the church ahead of Daisy and her family, stunned at the immense size of the sanctuary. It must have seated over a thousand people, maybe more, and every pew was packed with mourners. Amber knew she was the object of intense scrutiny by all these onlookers and made sure to keep her eyes downcast and sad. From her front-row seat, she watched and listened to the eulogies. Jake's best friend spoke first, and then Jake's brother, both extolling the generosity and charity of this great man. The governor got up next, and talked about all the money Jake had given away to charity, the hospital's children's wing he'd donated, and the clinics he'd funded in underserved parts of Dallas. And finally one of the Texas senators rose and praised Jake as a brilliant businessman and one of integrity and honesty. Amber hadn't fully realized just how important a man Jake had been. Finally, Daisy took the pulpit and gave an emotional tribute to the father she obviously adored.

Amber was getting restless and anxious for everything to wrap up.

She barely got through the graveside ceremony, where Jake was buried next to Marylou Ann. Maybe some good had come of this for Jake after all, Amber thought: he was finally reunited with his beloved first wife.

At long last the immense line of cars made it back to the ranch for the funeral reception.

The house spilled over with guests, and Amber fumed as the crowd surrounding Daisy grew larger. Everyone was so sympathetic to Daisy. What about Amber? She was the widow. What a heartless bunch of snobs. Almost everyone was giving her the cold shoulder. There was a sit-down lunch planned, but that wouldn't be for another half hour or so. In the meantime, it felt more to Amber like a cocktail party than a funeral reception—waiters moved through the house with trays of wine and assorted drinks to offer the mourners. There was a loud buzz of conversation in the room, and the occasional cackle of some Southern matron, which grated on Amber's nerves. She moved around the room, trying not to show how out of place she felt. Taking a long swallow of wine, Amber was about to tell the staff it was time to get the show on the road, when an older woman dressed in a black linen suit and done up to Texas perfection approached her.

“So sorry for your loss,” the woman said, her accent strong.

Amber gave her a slight nod. “Thank you.”

The woman held out her hand. “We haven't met. I'm Lucille. Marylou Ann was my best friend.” She cocked her head and looked at Amber. “Funny, your hair is the exact same color as hers.”

Amber felt her cheeks grow warm. What the hell was this woman playing at? She gave her a stiff smile. “Yes, it's funny. Jake actually said I reminded him a lot of her.”

Lucille narrowed her eyes. “Well, I'm not so sure—you seem to have

much more in common with the second Mrs. Crawford. Too bad Jake didn't see that."

Amber was about to tell her where she could put her opinion when Daisy approached.

"It's time to go in for lunch," Daisy said to Amber, then turned to Lucille and gave her a hug. "Thank you so much for coming."

"Of course, Daisy Doo. I'm so, so sorry. He was far too young." She glared at Amber and then looked back at Daisy. "The only silver lining is that he and your mama are together again."

Amber arched an eyebrow. "Jake told me he wasn't a believer in the afterlife. So I wouldn't be too sure about that." He'd never said any such thing, but Amber delighted in the horrified looks on both of their faces.

"I'll see you at the table," Daisy said, her voice shaking.

Lunch dragged on and Amber counted the minutes until she could retreat to her bedroom, pour herself a glass of wine, and soak in the luxurious tub in the master bath. She found Daisy and pulled her aside.

"I'd like my things moved to the master bedroom—that's where I'll be sleeping." She was done being nice. From now on, things were going to be her way.

Daisy gave her a look that Amber couldn't quite decipher. "I had everything moved for you this morning while we were gone. First door on the right as you get to the landing."

Amber smiled at Daisy in surprise. Good. She was finally getting the message. This was Amber's house now. She hoped all the friends and relatives downstairs were enjoying their food and drink, because it would be the last time they'd be invited. Well, except perhaps for the governor and

senator.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Just one more day and Amber could be rid of them all. She didn't think she could take another minute of all the weepy condolences and attention given to Daisy and her children, not to mention the over-the-top accolades for her wonderful dead father. Hardly anyone thought to offer Amber their sympathies. And the stares and whispers. All of them, looking daggers at her and talking behind her back. They should have been thanking her for making Jake so happy in his last days. Okay, so he'd died before his time. But Amber had spared him a decline into infirmity and old age. Who knew what could have lain ahead for him? Maybe he'd have developed dementia, or some horrible disease that riddled him with pain. She'd done him a favor, actually. He'd gone down in a blaze of glory, doing what he loved best. Wasn't that the best way to go? And let's face it: she'd made the last month of his life ecstasy. She'd bet he'd never had such great sex before, and she was over forty years younger than he was—most men would gladly cut a few years off their lives for that. She'd catered to his every whim during their short marriage, been the perfect little wife, and now it was time to reap the benefits.

Just one thing left to do: Noah Wilder, the family lawyer, arrived, and they adjourned to Jake's library, where he would go over the provisions of Jake's will. Daisy had barely spoken to Amber in the past three days, and her husband, Mason, was only slightly more friendly. What did she care, though? Today would be the last day any of them set foot in this house. Tomorrow, her first order of business would be to have all the locks changed and then begin looking for new staff. The snooty housekeeper, Joan, had also given Amber the cold shoulder, continuing to look to Daisy for instructions during

the funeral reception and after. They would all be sorry that they hadn't given Amber a warmer welcome.

Amber pushed ahead of Daisy and took a seat behind Jake's large mahogany desk, taking the power position. Noah raised his eyebrows and looked at Daisy as they all sat in the club chairs in front of the desk.

"Miss Daisy, you're aware that you are the executor of your father's will. He did call me after his marriage to let me know that he wanted to make some changes, but of course, that never happened."

Amber kept her expression impassive, anxious to just get to the good part already. She didn't really care that she wouldn't be mentioned in the will—she knew she was entitled to a third of his estate anyway. And since Texas was a community property state, she'd also be getting half of any income earned during their short marriage, which should be considerable, since Jake's fortune was in the billions.

Noah continued. "First of all is the provision for Buck and Shot. They are to go and live with Daisy and Mason."

"Of course. They've already been driven back to our house." Daisy dabbed at her eyes.

Thank God, Amber thought. She never wanted to see either of those drooling monsters again.

"The rest of the will is rather simple. The only thing in his name is his checking account, which has two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in it. It would normally go to you, Miss Daisy, but as his wife, Amber is entitled to one third of the principal plus one half of the interest earned in the past month."

"Wait. What? Don't we have to talk about the houses? Jake's *many*

other assets?” Amber’s heart was beating a mile a minute.

“Well...no.”

“What do you mean, *no*? Is this some kind of joke?”

“Of course,” Daisy interrupted, “she doesn’t know.” She was smiling. At a time like this—reviewing her dear father’s will—Daisy was *smiling*. Amber wished Jake could see the look on his darling daughter’s face almost as much as she wanted to wipe the grin right off it.

“Mr. Crawford transferred all of his assets to his daughter a couple of years ago,” Noah continued. “She is the trustee on all the accounts, both personal and the business. He resigned as the CEO three years ago and appointed Daisy in his place. He also gave up his board position. He has no financial interest any longer in any of the holdings, either personal or real property.” Noah Peterson’s face was impassive as he spoke, betraying no emotion.

“But...he’s the boss. He’s still running things. He...he talked about his business. I can’t believe what I’m hearing.” It felt like the room was spinning around her.

Daisy stood up and leaned over the desk. “Well, you heard right.” She waved her hand around the room. “All of this. It belongs to me. The house. The company, all the money. After my mother died, my father made the mistake of remarrying quickly. Until I met you, I thought that was the worst mistake he’d ever made.”

“Now wait just a minute—”

Daisy put a hand up to silence her. “Let me finish. She was only after his money, and she walked away with plenty of it. After that, Daddy transferred everything to me so that something like that would never happen

again. He knew he could trust me. Which is why the only asset in *his* name is that checking account.”

“That’s not fair!” Amber said, pounding her fist on the desk.

Daisy looked like she wanted to kill her. “Fair? You want to talk about fair? You’re a cold, calculating bitch. You tricked my father into marrying you and then you shot him in the back! I don’t care if the police cleared you. I know you did it on purpose! And believe me, I won’t rest until I prove it!”

Amber felt like she couldn’t breathe. This couldn’t be right. There had to be something she could do. “This can’t be legal. It sounds like a loophole, frankly. Jake was in charge of that company. I don’t care what you say. I’ll contest.” It was an empty threat. Even if she did have a legal leg to stand on, there was no way she could risk getting involved in a court case. Her real identity would come out and they’d discover the outstanding warrant for her arrest.

Noah spoke then—clearly annoyed and possibly offended. “I assure you, it’s perfectly legal. Mr. Crawford had the right to do whatever he wanted with his assets and this was done well in advance of your marrying him. As I said, the only asset in his name is the checking account. You’re entitled to one-third of that, and half the interest accrued during the time of your marriage.”

She did a quick calculation in her head. One third of \$250,000 was around eighty-three grand, and the interest couldn’t be more than \$300 or \$400. She felt the heat rise from her neck to her face. “But he wanted me to have more.” She turned to Noah. “You just said he called you and wanted to change things. Doesn’t that matter?”

“Not legally.”

Daisy glared at her. “Just think: if you hadn’t killed him, you’d have been set for life. Now get out of here before I wrap my hands around your neck.”

The irony of it wasn’t lost on Amber. She’d thought she had everything so perfectly figured out, and she’d ended up screwing herself. But life had prepared her for raw deals, and she knew how to make the best of things. At least she’d get something: eighty grand was more than she’d make working a lifetime at the W. She’d learn from her mistakes, and she’d end up on top eventually no matter what. Amber stood and looked at Noah. “When do I get my money?”

“It’ll take a little time to settle the estate, maybe thirty days.”

She looked at Daisy. “I’m not going anywhere until I get it.”

Daisy’s face turned beet red. “You calculating lowlife. I can’t stand looking at you for another day. I’ll write you a check for it now and the estate can reimburse me. I want you out of here today.”

“Are you really going to throw me, a grieving widow, out of the house? What will all your society friends think when I call the newspapers and let them know?” Amber was bluffing, but she had a feeling Daisy cared a lot more about her image than she chose to admit.

“You are even more reprehensible than I thought! I’ll make it a hundred thousand dollars and you’ll get the hell out of here *now*.”

The extra twenty would come in handy. Amber figured that once the dust settled, Daisy might begin digging into her past, if she hadn’t already. Amber needed to be long gone before Daisy discovered the truth—that Amber was wanted for jury tampering and perjury, and had skipped bail. Her parents had probably already lost their house because of it, but it served them right. If her mother hadn’t betrayed her by going to the judge with the truth,

Matthew would still be rotting in jail and Amber wouldn't be a fugitive. And wasn't Amber the real victim here? Golden boy Matthew Lockwood had been her ticket out of her miserable life. They were supposed to raise a child together, to start a family somewhere brand-new. When he abandoned her for another girl, she had no choice but to lie, to convince the jury that this spoiled brat had raped poor, innocent Lana.

"Deal," Amber said, finished feeling sorry for herself. She began to walk out of the room.

Daisy's voice made her turn around. "One more thing. That expensive luggage you bought? That was on my Amex, and I didn't authorize it."

"Jake gave me his card. It had his name on it."

"He was an authorized user, but it's my account. Leave the luggage or I'll have you charged with grand larceny." She gave Amber a murderous look. "Or, better yet, take it, and I'll have your ass thrown in jail. Your choice."

Amber wished she could take *Daisy* hunting. She hated her with every fiber of her being at that moment. "What I am supposed to put my clothes in?"

"Joan will give you some trash bags. That seems more appropriate."

Amber was too furious to even answer. She walked out of the room with her head held high, even though she felt like crawling into a hole. Why was life always so unfair to her?

She went upstairs to the master bedroom and began folding her clothes. She glanced up at the portrait over the bed of Jake and Marylou Ann looking so happy and so...smug. She wondered if they really were together

now.

She had to figure out a new plan. This time, she'd be sure to target a man that she could see herself actually staying married to. And just to be sure there were no tricks, she'd find a way to investigate his business ahead of time, maybe even work for him so she'd really know all the ins and outs. She pulled out her phone, navigated to a browser, and typed in *Fortune 500 companies*. She busied herself over the next few hours, clicking link after link and reading up on the various CEOs. Her mouth dropped open when she clicked on the *About* page of Parrish International and saw a picture of Jackson Parrish. Now, *this* was a man she could have some fun with. Piercing blue eyes, thick black hair, and a gorgeous face. She put his name into the search engine and the screen was populated with article after article. His company was based in New York. She'd always wanted to go to the Big Apple. She clicked on an article in *Vanity Fair*, and her heart sank as she looked at the photo of him with his stunning blond wife and two daughters. They seemed so happy. But then again, no one really knew what happened behind closed doors. No marriage was perfect, and Amber was an expert at finding the cracks. She put his wife's name—Daphne Parrish—into Google and methodically clicked through all the articles on her. As she devoured every word, a plan began to formulate in her mind. Forget California. Amber was heading to the East Coast.

THE END