

I'm reminded of that the second I see my stepfather's face through the small glass window in the door.

His salt-and-pepper hair is more salt than pepper and he's gained at least ten pounds around his waist since I last saw him—nine years ago—but there's no mistaking Jack Warner. I don't think he recognizes me, though. The way his steely blue eyes wander over my violet hair . . . my piercings . . . the giant "Jared" tattoo that coils around my right shoulder, I think he's wondering if the police officer led him into the wrong room.

I'm lucky that I'm even in a room this time. Normally they throw you into a holding cell or make you sit in an uncomfortable chair next to a drunk named Seth who stinks of malt scotch and body odor. I'm pretty sure the female arresting officer felt sorry for me. By the lethal glare she threw at Jared and Caroline as I was escorted out of Lina's apartment, past *their* apartment door, on my way to the cruiser, the officer wasn't impressed with what she'd heard of the situation.

She didn't hear it from me, of course. Growing up around lawyers, I've learned not to say a word to the police without one present. It was my best friend and next-door neighbor, Lina, who declared that the apartment I trashed earlier today is still technically mine—even if my name isn't on the lease—and that they should be arresting the thieving, heartless bitch who stole my husband.

Unfortunately, I'm the only one sitting here now.

I hold my breath as I watch Jack take a seat, adjusting his slightly rumpled suit jacket on his large frame as he tries to get comfortable in the hard plastic chair. It's ironic—in this moment, it feels like he's both an integral part of my childhood and a complete stranger.

I can't believe I called him.

I can't believe he actually came.

With a heavy sigh, he finally murmurs, "Reese's Pieces." He's looking down at me the same way he did when I got caught rearranging the letters of a Baptist church sign to read something no nine-year-old girl—or twenty-year-old, for that matter—should have in her vocabulary. Despite the severe strain in our once close relationship, warmth immediately spreads through my chest. I haven't heard that nickname in years. "So . . . destruction of private property?"

I guess the cops filled him in. "I prefer to call it artistic expression." The canvas included Caroline's prissy clothes, her pretentious throw cushions, and that damn pornographic picture of them hanging over *our* bed. "Besides," I raise my hands, stained in crimson, and offer in a deadpan tone, "they can't prove it was me." When Lina found me sitting quietly in the dim kitchen light of her apartment, where I've been staying for the past two weeks, she let out a single yelp before realizing that I hadn't turned into a homicidal maniac and was in fact covered in red *paint*. I probably should have made the cops' job harder and showered before they arrived.

A tiny sad smile creeps over his face. I wonder if my attempt at humor adequately hides the crushing heartbreak and rejection that I'm drowning in after finding out my husband was having an affair with his high school sweetheart.

"I phoned Barry on my way here. Sounds like you've kept him busy these past few years." By his clenching jaw, I see that wasn't an easy call for Jack to make, even nine years later. Not surprising. Friends since they could barely walk, Jack and Barry were once equity partners together in his law firm. Until Barry had an affair with Jack's wife.

My mother.

All relationships instantly dissolved in a bath of bitterness that obviously hasn't fully drained yet. Glancing at his hand, I can't help but notice the absence of a wedding ring. I guess he hasn't remarried. After what my mother put him through, I don't blame him.

"And I understand why you called me now. You didn't have a choice, did you?"

"Not really," I admit, focusing on the stars and circles I'm finger-drawing over the table's cold, metal surface. Barry is a high-priced, successful criminal lawyer who has gotten his unruly stepdaughter out of more than one debacle. The last incident was on my eighteenth birthday when I decided it would be funny to go retro and moon cars.

One of those cars was a police cruiser.

The cop was an uptight prick.

And I was drunk.

After helping me avoid indecent exposure and underage public drunkenness charges, Barry announced that my juvenile record was sealed, I was now an adult, and he was officially washing his hands of me. Three months later, when my mother left him for husband number four, it *really* became official.

"I'm surprised Annabelle's new husband didn't want this swept under the rug quickly."

"I didn't phone her. I don't want her to know about this." I stopped calling Annabelle "Mom" when I was eight. We both agreed it wasn't fitting for a woman whose true passions lay in exclusive club status and dirty martinis.

My doodling finger freezes suddenly. "*You* didn't phone her, did you?" That would be like handing her torpedoes for an effective insult air strike. She had called it after all. She'd said I didn't have what it took to keep my "blue-collar pretty-boy" husband happy for long.

Jack chuckles softly, though there's no mirth in it. "No, I definitely did not phone her. What would I tell her, anyway? You weren't exactly informative on the phone. Sounds like you're in some hot water, though."

My sigh of relief slides out and I'm back to doodling. "That's what they tell me." When the cops started throwing around words like "larceny" and "threats of bodily harm"—things that sounded excessive and unfitting, but permanently damaging to my fresh and clean adult record should they stick—I knew I wasn't going to talk my way out of this one. It didn't help that I used the picture of Caroline for target practice during my rampage, leaving a pair of scissors strategically placed through her eyes. "It's a good thing you still have that same law firm. You were easy to find."

Jack folds his arms over his chest and regards me with an unreadable face. A tiny part of me—the angry little girl lost somewhere inside—is ready to burst, to demand, "How could you have left me? I know why you left my mom, but how could you have shoved *me* out of your life so easily too? *I* didn't cheat on you!" but I bite my bottom lip. Pissing off the one person who can help me right now wouldn't be smart. I need to be smart.

Finally Jack leans back in his chair and says, "Okay, Reese. Start from the beginning and let's see how we can solve this."

I find myself pressing my lips together to keep from smiling. Not because this is amusing. It's just that we've been here before. This really is starting to feel like days long since lost, when we'd meet up in the kitchen around midnight—after Annabelle had gone to sleep, when Jack was finally home from work—to contemplate my latest mischief over bowls of ice cream. He's even adopted the same hypnotic tone that always got me talking, when my teachers, my guidance counselor, or anyone else really, couldn't. I'm pretty sure he uses it on all of his clients.

Twenty minutes later, after I've given him a rundown of my situation, I hear his disappointed sigh. "Working in a pet shop, Reese?"

"Not anymore." After leaving work early with the flu and coming home to *the big discovery* of Jared and *her* in the shower—oddly enough, the more it replays in my mind, the more it begins to resemble the shower scene from *Scarface*—I spent a week in Lina's bed, heavily sedated with Jim Beam and Nyquil. My boss fired me over the phone.

I don't care.

"And eloping in Vegas with a guy? At nineteen years old? After knowing him for *six weeks*?" I know that the chuckle that fills the room now isn't directed at me, even before his words confirm it; Jack's laughing at the irony of it all. "And you were always so adamant that you'd never get married."

I have no answer to that, except a quiet "I loved him," as the painful knot forms in my throat, as I fight the sob from tearing out of me. I did. I think I still do, despite how much Jared has hurt me. Since that day a year ago when I stepped out of my best friend Lina's apartment and quite literally ran into her neighbor, a reincarnation of a mint-eyed Greek demigod, I knew that I had met my soul mate. Fireworks exploded, lightning struck, electricity coursed. All that love-at-first-sight bullshit that I didn't believe in—I instantly became a poster child for it. Common sense flew out the window with a cement block tied to its ankle.

Jared said he felt it too.

And now, after almost six months of marital bliss, without a single warning sign, he's back with *her*.

That rotten illness festering inside me enflames with the thought, the humiliating reality a burn that doesn't want to subside.

"Look, Reese. I know you've always had a wild streak in you, even as a little girl. These choices you've made since I saw you last, though," his head is shaking, "possession of marijuana . . . trespassing . . . underage drinking . . . a fistfight?"

"It's not really that big a deal. A lot of people drink and smoke pot in high school," I argue, adding, "I'm just the one who kept getting caught."

"Drag racing?" He stares at me questioningly.

"Those were derby cars and that was totally blown out of proportion," I clarify.

Jack slides his glasses off and gives his face a rough rub, looking exhausted. It's a four-hour drive from Miami to Jacksonville and he arrived here five hours after I called, meaning he pretty much dropped everything to come. I can't help but wonder why he'd do that.

"At least I didn't get knocked up," I joke.

By the look of exasperation he shoots me, he doesn't find that remotely funny. "I had hoped you were too smart to get into this kind of trouble."

"I guess even smart girls can make a clusterfuck of their lives, can't they?" I mutter, though his words sting.

Because they're true.

There's a long pause, where Jack's mouth twists in thought as he regards me. "What are you going to do with yourself now, Reese? How are you going to make up for this?" When I was little, Jack always asked me for suggestions as to how I should be punished for my various childish misdemeanors. I think it was his way of getting me to agree on the outcome without looking like the harsh stepfather. I was pretty good at coming up with suitable penances and it was definitely preferable to sitting in a chair while my mother shrieked about what an

embarrassment I was to her, the gin sloshing out of her martini glass with her mad hand gesticulations.

But I'm not a little kid anymore and Jack's not asking me to come up with a suitable punishment. He's asking me how I'm going to fix my *life*.

All I have for him is a defeated shrug.

Because that's how I feel right now. Defeated. "I don't know. Get another job, I guess."

"What about college?"

The eye roll happens before I can stop myself. Jack always hated my eye rolls. "My transcripts aren't exactly going to woo the administrative offices." Neither will the private school expulsion, earned when I broke into a teacher's office and stole a midterm exam.

"Because you *couldn't* do the work?" My arched brow answers him. "Because you *didn't* do the work," he answers for himself, shaking his head, his face a mask of extreme disappointment. "Is this how you want to live your life? In and out of police cars? Working minimum-wage jobs? In unstable relationships?"

"Does anybody ever really *want* that?"

Jack's right. I *was* smart. Some may say I'm still smart. But I've made so many wrong turns along the way, I don't know how many right ones it will take to course-correct.

I don't know if that's even possible.

I sit in silence, listening to the monotonous *tick-tick-tick* of the second hand on the wall clock above, watching Jack as he spends an exorbitant amount of time playing with the gold Rolex on his wrist, his breaths deep and ragged. I don't know that I can count on him. I mean, he forgot about me once. Looking at the twenty-year-old version of who he once knew, he's probably ready to stamp "lost cause" across my forehead.

And then he settles those kind gray eyes on me. "I honestly didn't know what to expect when I arrived, but I had a long car ride up to think about it." Folding his hands together on the table in front of him, a stern expression settles over his face. "I have a proposition. It comes with conditions, though."

A small exhale escapes me as I chew the inside of my mouth, relief and wariness dancing together. "Okay. I guess?"

"No more, Reese. Not even the harmless stuff."

"This is my first time here in years, Jack." Ironically, I convinced myself that meeting Jared was a turning point in my life, leaving me the sated and smiling wife who was happy hanging out at home and keeping out of trouble.

"Yes . . ." His eyes graze the walls of the police station room. "And yet here you are again."

He doesn't get it. He must not have heard me. "This was different, Jack! She *moved in!* I haven't even moved *out* yet! All my stuff is still in that apartment!"

He raises his hand to silence me. "You should have turned around and walked out. That would have been the mature, responsible thing to do. Instead, you let your emotions get the better of you."

I smirk as another wave of familiarity washes over me. "You always said I was too emotional for my own good."

"I did say that," he acknowledges with a sad smile. "And I'm still right. No more, Reese."

Picking at a loose thread on my sleeve as if the topic isn't cutting into my heart, I offer casually, "Well, I can definitely promise that I won't be getting married again. Ever."

That earns a soft chuckle. “You and me both, kiddo.” A pause. “You remember Mason, don’t you?”

My geeky stepbrother who used to spend half his time scowling at me and the other half staring as if my head were about to revolve on my shoulders. I recall that the day we moved out, he watched with a bitter smile, condemning me to follow in my mother’s footsteps.

He despised my mother from the very first day that he met her.

My pursed lips at the mention of that name has Jack smiling. “Oh, yes. How could I forget? Your nemesis. Well, he’s finishing law school this spring.” Jack takes a deep breath and then holds it, as if he’s hesitating. “Why don’t you come and live with us until you get back on your feet.”

*What?*

Jack continues, not addressing the bewilderment that must be plastered over my face. “I can get you into the paralegal program at Miami U. If you finish that, you can work for me. It doesn’t have to be forever, but at least you’ll have something solid to put on a résumé. It’s a fresh start.”

“I . . . uh . . .” Did I just hear all that correctly?

His eyes drift over my hair again. “You should think about a more natural color for an office environment and . . .” His focus settles down to the tiny diamond-encrusted septum ring in my nose and he cringes. “Maybe a few less piercings.”

*But . . .* My tongue has somehow coiled itself into a useless ball inside my mouth as my mind grapples with this offer. It’s far from what I had expected. “Why are you doing this, Jack? I mean, it’s great and all, but why?” He really doesn’t owe me anything. It’s enough that he came all the way out here to bail me out.

“Because I shouldn’t have turned my back on you, Reese. I let—” A flash of pain betrays his otherwise calm demeanor. “Let’s just say I’m making amends.” He pauses. “What do you say? I need to get out of this town. I can feel Annabelle’s shadow looming.” He shivers for effect, making me snort.

“Well . . .” My fingers rap across the table as I give my current situation—that of a police station room—another once-over. I have no job, no home, a shattered heart, and a pending criminal record. I should probably make the first smart choice I’ve made in a long time. But . . . “Not sure the cops will let that happen, Jack.”

“You leave that with me.”

Another pause. “I’m riding my bike down.”

His mouth twists with displeasure. “I assume you’re not referring to one with pedals.”

“No pedals,” I confirm with a small smile. I got my motorcycle license when I turned eighteen and bought a bike a few months later. Another element of my “badass” self that Jared loves.

Loved.

Jack heaves a sigh. “That shouldn’t surprise me. You always did threaten your mother with getting one. Anything else I should know?”

“I’m a slob,” I warn him. “And a certifiable bitch in the morning.”

“Well, I guess some things just don’t change, after all.” Reaching up to give his neck a slow scratch, he mumbles, “Mason will be thrilled.”