

*The*  
**MAGIC**  
**ALL**  
**AROUND**

*A NOVEL*

JENNIFER MOORMAN



HARPER MUSE

*To Natalie, whose perpetual hope and eagerness  
to see the magic everywhere ignites my own  
passion to look for miracles every day*



*Synchronicity is an ever-present reality for those  
who have eyes to see.*

CARL JUNG



*Chapter 1*

## PENELOPE

PEOPLE ASSUMED JULY WOULD BE THE HOTTEST MONTH IN Ivy Ridge, Georgia—probably because it fell slapdab in the middle of the scorching summer months. But they were wrong. August blazed in behind a sweltering July when people were already melting. Pushing through the humidity was secondhand nature to most Southerners, but everyone had their limit. There was only so much sticky heat a kindhearted person could handle before she turned into a cantankerous old woman with a venomous tongue.

Penelope Russell still had a few more degrees of heat she could stand before her compassion and manners evaporated, but the same couldn't be said of a mother who had flames burning in her eyes as she tried to wrangle two crying toddlers into their car seats in the grocery store parking lot. She'd shouted colorful words to the heavens and startled a flock of geese. The frightened birds had changed directions, pointing their V away from town. Then there was the man who had literally stripped down to his checkerboard boxers on the edge of Highwater Creek right before he waded in. Steam had risen off his body like a lobster in a pot of boiling water.

Indoor fan blades spun fast enough to lift houses a few inches off their foundations. The Pixie Dixie Creamery had a line that stretched around the block from nine in the morning until nine at night. Children begged their parents to let them run through lawn sprinklers all day long, and their laughter filled the streets of the town, offering sounds of joy that helped to alleviate the growing

agitation over rising temperatures.

Penelope had felt restless all day, and not just because of the August heat wave. Two air-conditioning units had been installed in the historic Russell home in the 1950s when AC first came into fashion. While many townsfolk had been wary of modern advancements, the Russell family didn't see any reason to suffer through Southern summers another day if they didn't have to. Three years ago when the original units started sputtering and groaning like old copper pipes, they replaced them. Now the more energy-efficient units were blasting cold air, and Penelope stood beneath a ceiling vent in her sewing room, letting the coolness wash over her upturned face. She thought of Sophia and Robert, her retired godparents who also shared the house with her. They'd taken a jaunt to Savannah for a long weekend, and she wondered if a cooler breeze blew off the Savannah River, offering temporary relief, or if the whole state of Georgia was dissolving into sweaty goo.

A noise downstairs pulled her focus and she listened, hearing music. Penelope followed the sound of it until she stood in the downstairs parlor. The tabletop radio, bought by her great-grandmother in the 1920s, was on and playing "Best of My Love," which was one of her younger sister Lilith's favorite songs when they were kids. Penelope smiled thinking of the time Lilith had danced through the backyard, hands reaching toward the sky, singing the lyrics in her mesmerizing bluesy voice. An ache attached itself to the memory, and Penelope rubbed her fingers across her collarbone.

In most houses it might be unusual, spooky even, for a radio to turn on by itself, but not in the Russell house. There was nothing *usual* about the century-old Victorian. Whether it was true or

not, Penelope had grown up being told the house was built from enchanted trees grown in the Appalachian Mountains that were felled during a full moon, and this was why the house was never treated as a *thing* but rather as another member of the quirky, slightly eccentric Russell family. The house was very much alive, and when it had something to say, it found interesting ways of letting you know.

Penelope crossed the room and turned off the radio. Enid, her eleven-year-old gray cat, curled on the parlor sofa, blinking shiny amber eyes at her. Penelope scratched between Enid's ears and murmured, "Did you turn on the radio? I thought you were more of a classical music lover." Enid meowed. "No? Oh, I see. Celtic music fan." Enid meowed louder. "That fits you."

A strong wind buffeted the front of the house, then whipped around the sides toward the backyard. Wind whistled through the eaves and the house protested in response. Penelope walked through the foyer and opened the front door. A gust of wind pushed her backward. Enid meowed again behind her.

A cluster of black-eyed Susans in the front flower bed knocked their blooms together as though sending a frenzied message. In another strong gust, a stalk uprooted and dropped itself onto the front porch, scattering dirt and yellow petals all over the boards. The unexpected wind continued for a few minutes while Penelope returned the battered flower to its spot in the front garden. Then just as quickly as it had arrived, the wind disappeared, leaving behind temperatures that had dropped a few degrees and an unsettling feeling expanding in Penelope's stomach.

At lunch the strangeness continued. When Penelope went to gather ingredients for a salad, she discovered that all the vegetables in the refrigerator had become bruised or shriveled overnight.

An overpowering scent of roses wafted out of the pantry as soon as she opened it, and a bag of holy basil loose-leaf tea dropped from the shelves onto the floor.

Penelope made herself a peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich and brewed a cup of mango and bergamot tea. Enid wandered into the kitchen and weaved around her legs when Penelope sat at the table. “What are you trying to tell me?” she asked the kitchen, but it didn’t respond.

Later in her sewing room, while stitching blue lace to the inside of a wedding gown, Penelope pricked her finger with the needle three times before she laid down the project and decided to work on something less frustrating.

She’d thought the tea would help to calm her, but *something* else was brewing today. Eventually whatever *it* was would reveal itself. Organizing and cleaning usually relaxed her mind, so for the next hour Penelope worked in the sewing room. She had always loved this flamboyantly colorful room with its cramped shelves and cubbyholes that stretched all the way to the ceiling. It was like a hive of treasures stowed away in what might have appeared to be chaos, but Penelope knew where every golden ribbon was spooled, every bolt of silk tucked away, every piece of dreamy lace lying in wait. There were dozens of hues and almost any fabric imaginable, from shiny turquoise satin to delicate ivory chiffon to sturdy black cotton. There were demure floral patterns with tiny tulips running along one edge and outrageously bright florals the young Southern women liked to don in the summer. Soft wools, in oyster and charcoal and tan, whispered of fall and winter when days were short and nights required extra comfort. Spools of thread for any task were organized by colors of the rainbow, and her four sewing machines were parked in each corner of

the room where they awaited their next project.

Fabric and thread and sequins—Penelope understood these much more than people. People were complex and frayed when you least expected; they wore holes in themselves from repeated wear and tear, even though they had explicit instructions for how to care for their well-being. Their colors changed and faded over time, and you could start with one version and end up with an entirely different one years later.

Penelope suspected whatever was going on today had to do with her family, but rather than try to sort it out, she straightened bolts of fabrics and rummaged through boxes of pins, ribbons, and fabric tape. She cleaned up stray spools of thread and rewound yarn that Enid liked to bat around the room while she worked.

Then Penelope draped the female dress form mannequin in the indigo-and-black Bohemian-style dress she'd sewn to give Mattie, Lilith's daughter—and Penelope's only niece—on their next visit. Mattie's upcoming twenty-fifth birthday was on Halloween, and Lilith and Mattie often visited during the holiday so they could celebrate. It had been two years since Lilith and Mattie visited, missing the past few birthdays and holiday seasons. Penelope had repeatedly invited them, but Lilith had a dozen excuses that all sounded valid while simultaneously sounding empty of truth. Most often she said Mattie didn't have any time off since whatever job Mattie worked seemed to be closed only on Christmas and New Year's Day, which left no time for travel. Because Halloween fell on different days every year, for the past two, Mattie's job had kept her away. Penelope hoped Mattie's birthday this year would be different; maybe she'd see them both soon.

During Mattie's childhood and teenage years, Lilith had dropped off her daughter in Ivy Ridge every summer so Lilith

could have some alone time. For those three months in between school years, Penelope and Mattie were an inseparable pair, looking every bit the part of mother and daughter, and Penelope missed those days. She missed the sounds of Mattie's rapid foot-falls on the staircases, of her laughter echoing through the kitchen. She missed seeing Mattie outside in the garden with her easel and even missed wiping smudges of paint from the counters and floors when Mattie tracked it inside, oblivious to the trails of colors she left behind. After Mattie's high school graduation, her visits only happened during the holidays since she spent her summers working odd jobs in whatever city she and her mother were living in at the time.

Penelope fiddled with the fabric on the dress. Although playful and curious, Mattie had also been a serious child, often taking on responsibility and soberness like an adult, the opposite of Lilith. Penelope wondered if Mattie hadn't felt forced to be the responsible one since Lilith lived life like a hummingbird, flitting from here to there, never landing anywhere for long.

Penelope hoped that with a few extra silver threads and a string of tiny tiger's-eye stones sewn into the waist, Mattie would try on the dress and dance through the house, laughing the way she used to as a young girl. Penelope turned the mannequin to face the falling sunlight so it could watch ribbons of coral and amber light the sky, as if she were sharing the moment with Mattie too.

In the early evening Penelope repotted a few plants in the greenhouse and then ate an apple for dinner while sitting on the back patio. Enid toyed with fireflies, raising up on her back paws and swatting at them, intentionally not making contact. They seemed to be playing a game of chase. The almost-full moon shined through the tree branches, turning the edges of everything

silvery. A warm breeze blew the scent of roses through the backyard, which reminded her of the pink roses her daddy used to bring home to her and Lilith when they were girls.

*Pink roses*, Penelope thought. *A flower that conveys elegance and refinement, something Lilith and I were slow to practice.* Pink roses also symbolized joy and happiness, two states of being that teased Penelope with their existence but never quite settled into her hands. She stood and called Enid inside.



A loud banging noise caused Penelope to jerk upright in bed. She'd been tossing and turning all night, kicking off the covers in a sweat and then yanking them back up when she started to shiver from the air-conditioning.

She lifted her cell phone from the nightstand. The face lit up, displaying the time 12:12 a.m.

Had she dreamed the sound? The thumping started again, softer but more persistent. Penelope crept out into the hallway. The noise was coming from the bedroom Mattie always stayed in. *Thump, thump, thump.* The sound reminded Penelope of a loose shutter knocking against the side of a house during a storm.

Penelope flipped on the bedroom light. Enid sat on Mattie's bed and stared at the closet. Was someone in there waiting to jump out and grab her? *Thump, thump, thump.*

She flung open the louvered closet doors and something heavy fell out, covering Penelope's head and draping down her shoulders. Her scream pierced through the night, and Penelope shamelessly flailed around, knocking backward into the bed. Enid yowled her displeasure.

She yanked the object from her head and stared down at the

wad of fabric in her arms. It was the colorful quilt she'd sewn for Mattie years ago. Every October she put it on Mattie's bed for the fall and winter. Penelope's gaze drifted to the closet. Nothing else was in there. No monster trying to get out. Only a determined quilt.

Penelope folded the quilt and left it on Mattie's bed. She shouted an apology to Enid, who had disappeared to somewhere in the house. No chance she would be able to fall back asleep now, so she shuffled downstairs to make herself a cup of chamomile tea. In the kitchen Penelope filled the kettle and set it on the stove. She walked into the pantry to get the honey, but it had crystallized and formed intricate honey-flavored shapes on the jar. So she grabbed the sugar canister instead and placed it on the counter. When she scooped a small spoonful of sugar into her mug, a clinking noise sounded.

Penelope tilted her mug and inspected the insides. A blue stone the size of a pebble sat among the sugar granules. She plucked it out and rested it in her palm. Lapis lazuli. Penelope's throat tightened. "I see you," she said to the stone. Then she looked around the kitchen. "I don't understand. What truth are you trying to tell me?"

Saying she didn't understand wasn't completely honest because Penelope had a strong sense that *whatever* was unfolding had to do with Lilith and Mattie. She'd like to think they were both on their way to Ivy Ridge for a surprise visit. But the knot in her stomach hinted otherwise.

Penelope sat in the window seat in the kitchen nook with her knees pulled up toward her chest, cupping the mug in both hands. She stared out into the dreamy moonlit backyard, drinking her tea, until she dozed off with her head leaned against the

windowpane.

A ringing phone awoke Penelope as the sun rose. She opened her eyes, disoriented and with a crick in her neck. Why was she in the kitchen? The phone rang again, and Penelope's mind snapped to attention. She scrambled out of the window seat and snatched her cell phone from the kitchen island. When she swiped to answer the call, her voice failed her.

“Penelope?”

Words jumbled together for another second before Penelope could use them. “Mattie? Is everything okay?” But Penelope already knew the answer. Mattie responded with a sob. “Oh, baby, tell me what's happened.”

“It's . . . Mom.”

Penelope's legs buckled, and she sagged down onto the tile floor. She clutched the cell phone like a life preserver as air squeezed from her lungs.

“She's gone,” Mattie whispered in a heartbreaking voice. “She died last night in her sleep.”

## Chapter 2

# MATTIE

THREE DAYS AFTER HER MOM DIED, MATTIE RUSSELL stood on the sidewalk on North Wells Street outside of Century Tower in Chicago. They had lived in eleven cities across the United States. Two years was the maximum time her mom wanted to stay anywhere, but they'd lived in Chicago longer than anywhere else. For the past two and a half years, she and Lilith had called this luxury apartment home. When Mattie questioned Lilith about why they weren't packing up and leaving at their usual two-year mark, Lilith flashed her brilliant smile and said, "*Time will uncover all secrets.*" Cryptic as ever. Years ago Mattie stopped trying to *figure out* her mom. Whatever motivated Lilith's life choices was as transparent as oil paint, but living and traveling with her was the only kind of life that Mattie knew.

In the August heat, downtown Chicago smelled sweaty with a funky hint of raw sewage wafting from the river. The winds mingled the scent of lake water—part fog, part fish—with an aroma of warm chocolate coming from the cocoa bean processing at Blommer Chocolate Factory.

Their apartment was only a few blocks from Grant Park, where Mattie and Lilith had taken picnics in the spring, ridden bikes in the summer, strolled arm in arm admiring the jewel tones of the autumn leaves, and ice-skated in the winter. For two nomads living paycheck to paycheck, Mattie often marveled at how they'd resided so close to such wealth.

Lilith had a way with people—an unexplainable quality that drew people to her almost as soon as she arrived in any town. For years Mattie thought it was her mom’s striking beauty, the way she glided through the world like a being not *of* this world. Her attractiveness definitely contributed to her magnetism, but as Mattie grew older, she knew there was more to her mother’s appeal.

Mattie sometimes wondered if Lilith emitted a frequency that certain people could feel. Someone might be standing on a street corner about to turn right, but she’d pick up on Lilith’s energy and take a left instead. Then she’d bump into Mattie and Lilith, and they’d become instant friends. Or someone would order three lunches instead of one and find Mattie and Lilith looking for places to eat.

Because of Lilith’s ability to draw people to her, she and Mattie were never in want of anything. In Asheville, North Carolina, they were researching apartments they could afford, and a woman in the grocery store parking lot heard them and said she had a guesthouse that had just been vacated. And in Austin, Texas, while her mom scrolled through job openings online and chatted with Mattie about her qualifications, the man having coffee next to them on the park bench said he needed an executive assistant since his had just retired. These types of wonders happened in every town, multiple times.

It was no different in Chicago. The week after Lilith decided to leave Portland, she and Mattie bought tickets for a flight bound for O’Hare. The airline had oversold the flight and offered first-class tickets to anyone who wanted to pay a few hundred dollars more. No one was interested, so Lilith made her way to the counter. In less than five minutes, she and the airline worker were laughing. Lilith wrote on a page torn from her notepad and handed the

paper to the woman behind the counter. When her mom returned to her seat beside Mattie, she held two first-class tickets in her hand, whispering that she'd been given them at no extra charge.

Mattie had never flown first class. The oversized plush seats wowed her. A flight attendant offered free champagne before takeoff, along with squishy pillows and fuzzy blankets. Lilith struck up a conversation with the man across the aisle from her, who looked vaguely familiar. Turned out he was Orion Aboiye, an actor famous for his roles in sci-fi and adventure movies. He'd just wrapped up shooting a film in the lush Oregon forests.

The next evening in Chicago, Orion took Mattie and Lilith out to Boka, an exquisite seasonal-food restaurant, where Mattie ate grilled Spanish octopus and kampachi for the first time. Her dinner of Tasmanian ocean trout followed by a roasted blueberry sorbet was some of the best food she'd ever eaten. Mattie only joined in the conversation when they directly brought her into it. She'd seen this similar scenario play out dozens of times, but each time it was slightly different. The town, the man, the restaurant, the scenery all changed. The power of Lilith's charm was the only constant, an inescapable force. Even Mattie was often captivated by her.

When Orion hailed Mattie and Lilith a taxi outside the restaurant that night, he asked for their address, which was a downtown hotel until they could find more permanent lodging. Orion offered the apartment he rented near Grant Park. When Lilith protested, Orion assured them it was no trouble. The next morning he would be off again for a promotional tour. He insisted Mattie and Lilith stay at his place rent-free for as long as they needed. As absurd as the whole offer sounded, Mattie had long ago lost her sense of surprise over what people, often strangers, gave her mom.

Orion and Lilith continued to spend time together when he had days off from publicity tours or filming, which wasn't often, but they spoke on the phone a few times every week. Orion never asked them to vacate the apartment. Anytime he was in Chicago, he stayed with his brother, and Lilith would disappear with him for days, leaving Mattie on her own, which suited her just fine at the time.

But now, two and a half years later, Mattie stood alone on the Chicago sidewalk, and she wasn't fine. Not at all. The keys to a rental car warmed her palm. She didn't have any close friends, only acquaintances. After traveling for years, she learned not to accumulate stuff or attach to anything, including people. The few personal belongings she did hang on to were placed in cardboard boxes she'd gotten from the neighborhood pizza restaurant where she'd been working. All her clothes fit into one suitcase—the same beat-up, hardback teal one she'd had for years.

Mattie didn't know what to do with her mom's stuff other than pack it up and figure it out later. Lilith's vinyl collection and acoustic guitar were safely stowed in the trunk of the rental, and her jewelry and clothes were packed into a fancy rose-gold suitcase that had been a gift from a man in Portland. Two suitcases, eight boxes, Mattie's canvases and paints, and five potted plants crowded the back seat, leaving the passenger seat open for emptiness and sadness to occupy.

A man wearing a red baseball cap, aviator sunglasses, and running clothes whistled a tune as he walked up the sidewalk toward Mattie. Sweat glistened on his face and arms. He played imaginary drums in the air above him, and his grin caught the sunlight. Mattie watched him for a few seconds, envious of his ability to lose himself in a moment of joy. She moved out of his way and stood

by the driver's door. The man stopped a few feet away, lowered his arms, and turned to look at Mattie as she slid behind the wheel and closed the car door. He stared at her for a moment, rubbed the back of his neck, and then continued in the opposite direction.

Mattie buckled her seat belt and turned on the ignition. The radio came on, playing "I Put a Spell on You." A buried memory tried to unearth itself, but her exhaustion halted it. She drove out of Chicago toward the only town she'd ever repeatedly visited: Ivy Ridge, Georgia.



The drive south to Ivy Ridge would take at least fourteen hours, and since Mattie hadn't planned to leave until midmorning, Penelope insisted Mattie stop halfway, book a hotel room, and sleep. But Mattie was restless, and when she stopped for too long, even to pump gas, her mind filled with despair and thoughts of her mom, creeping her closer to the edge of collapse.

She and Lilith had spontaneously traveled to new places dozens of times without a solid plan, and Mattie never worried about the lack of preparation. Lilith's style of planning was hoping for the best and going with the flow, but this unplanned trip to Ivy Ridge felt different in the worst kind of way. Even when she didn't know where they were going, Mattie always trusted her mom. Somehow Lilith had a knowing about what lay ahead of them. Whenever and wherever they arrived, Lilith would have everything arranged like there *had* been a plan.

But Mattie didn't have a plan; she didn't even have a speck of knowing. She felt completely untethered, like someone had cut her kite string during a tornado. Her future had suddenly been swallowed up by the vast nothingness gobbling up every part of

her—except her sadness. The nothingness left that, as though despair was something too heavy for even it to take. Her grief expanded while her world shrank.

She'd lost her sole companion, her best friend, and her mom. All at once.

Being an only child raised by a free-spirited single mom had felt like a spectacular gift, until this moment when she was abandoned. Her aunt would argue that Mattie wasn't alone because she had family in Ivy Ridge—the small Russell family unit. Although Lilith didn't talk much about her hometown, she'd shared plenty of stories about their extraordinary family, explaining numerous times that the Russells weren't like other families. You'd never catch them doing ordinary things. Generations of Russells would be more likely to walk barefoot in the moonlight, grow extravagant gardens, and keep prisms near windows. They burned homemade candles while reading novels about fairy tales and ancient civilizations. Russell women opened doors to unexpected guests before anyone even rang the bell, they knew which herbs healed and which ones harmed, and they could see the secret truths in your heart.

Lilith swore the Russell family was enchanted, if a little unusual. Mattie couldn't deny the strangeness she'd seen in their lives. Others believed these whispers about the Russell women, and so in Ivy Ridge they were often met by those pretending indifference though inwardly burning with curiosity. Were the Russells magical or just peculiar? Did they sew courage into clothing or have singing voices that caused men to fall in love with them like the mythological Sirens?

Ivy Ridge, Georgia, was a place Lilith spent as little time in as possible since she'd escaped on a Greyhound bus when she was

eighteen. Lilith rarely talked to Mattie about her life in Ivy Ridge, only once admitting that she had never fit in with the locals. Not with her blue-streaked hair, and certainly not with her uncanny ability to charm other people's boyfriends and husbands. Being different in a small Southern town was worse than wearing white after Labor Day—an unfortunate circumstance that people couldn't help but gossip about. Combined with her bohemian beauty and her candidness, the likelihood of Lilith being widely accepted in Ivy Ridge was about as probable as someone being struck by lightning.

But Ivy Ridge was where Penelope still lived in the family home—a place Lilith had used when the walls around her felt too close and her lungs squeezed tight, when she needed a retreat from parenting. Rather than feeling discarded when Lilith dropped her off, Mattie loved her time there with Penelope every summer. To her, running rampant through the quirky Victorian home was the best sort of fun. She anticipated summers the same way children vibrated with excitement for Christmas morning.

Mattie's summers in Ivy Ridge exploded with possibility. The house, the garden, and even the town felt full of secrets waiting to be discovered. Being in Ivy Ridge was the only time Mattie felt free to truly be a kid because Penelope took care of everything. There was always food in the kitchen, clothes were always washed, and painting supplies were endless. Mattie, of course, had to help out around the house, but Penelope kept life organized and easy, and Mattie never worried about responsibilities being forgotten. Summer was one of Mattie's favorite times of year—along with Halloween, her birthday. As a special gift to Mattie, Lilith always made sure they spent Halloween in Ivy Ridge so they could celebrate together as a family, but the last two years had been different.

Mattie drove the fourteen hours, stopping only for gas and snacks, until she reached the city limits of Ivy Ridge. In the wee hours of the morning, heat pressed inside the car, dampening the cloth seats with humidity, so Mattie cranked the air conditioner higher. She parked on the street in front the Russell family home, which had been built in the early 1900s and was a grand Victorian settled among other impressive historic houses. At nearly four thousand square feet, the house was absurdly large for only three people—Penelope, Robert, and Sophia. Until a few years ago when Robert and Sophia retired, Penelope had lived in the house alone. It was way more space than a small family needed, let alone a single woman. Mattie knew this intimately because she and her mom had lived in apartments smaller than this house's kitchen.

She peeled her cramped hands off the steering wheel and opened and closed her fingers into fists a few times to get the blood flowing. The lights in the house were off except a lamp illuminating a window in the primary bedroom.

Her aunt was awake and expecting her because Penelope *always* waited up. She seemed to know Mattie would ignore the suggestion to break the drive into two days. As Mattie eased the car door closed, the interior staircase light turned on, then the foyer light, then the front porch light.

By the time Mattie's foot touched the bottom porch stair, the front door opened. Penelope stood backlit by the house's now-bright interior. She reached her hands out toward Mattie, opening her arms. The last of Mattie's energy went out like a blown match. She stumbled up the stairs, released her suitcase, and fell into Penelope's arms, letting her aunt hold her like she was a little girl.

Penelope rolled Mattie's suitcase into the foyer and led her up the stairs to her bedroom. "I'll come back for your bags."

Mattie's bedroom hadn't changed much through the years. A silvery harlequin pattern overlaid the solid teal background of the wallpaper. The cocoa-brown wooden bed had a carved headboard with two posts and a smaller matching footboard. A hand-carved armoire with crafted panels was pushed against one wall. For additional storage, a closet with sturdy louver doors had been added when Mattie was in middle school. One double window allowed in late-afternoon sunlight, but Penelope had sewn heavy drapes with blackout liners to block out the light if needed.

"Don't worry about my stuff," Mattie said, sitting on the edge of the bed. She smoothed her hand over the colorful patchwork quilt her aunt had sewn for her years ago. Her fingers tingled against the fabric, and exhaustion spread through her. A framed photo of Penelope and Mattie smiled at her from the bedside table, on which she also spied a brand-new set of paintbrushes and a small fabric bin full of unopened paints. Mattie brushed her fingertips across the unused bristles.

"I thought you might need those," Penelope said softly. "There are empty canvases upstairs."

Through the years, even while she and Lilith traveled, Penelope always kept Mattie's paint supplies stocked. Just when Mattie painted on her last canvas and knew she would need to sell it to afford more supplies, a new pack of canvases would arrive from Ivy Ridge.

"I called Robert and Sophia," Penelope explained. "They're leaving Savannah first thing in the morning." Mattie nodded. "Sure you don't want me to get the rest of your bags?"

Mattie shook her head. "I don't need much, just that one suitcase, and I won't be staying long."

"Oh?" Penelope said.

Mattie fell back onto the bed, lying sideways and dangling her legs off the side. “I’ll do the funeral, and then I’m leaving.”

Penelope’s expression was unreadable. “And where will you be heading? Back to Chicago?”

“No. I’m done there, and . . . I don’t know where I’m going,” Mattie said. She rolled onto her side and curled into a ball, hugging her knees to her chest as if pulling everything close would help fill up her hollowness. “Nowhere. Anywhere.” Tears squeezed out of her closed eyes.

“Try to get some rest, sweet girl,” Penelope said. “It’s okay to feel this way. It’s allowed.”

“To feel what way?” Mattie’s voice cracked.

“Everything all at once. And nothing. Swinging like a pendulum from one extreme to the next,” she said. “I’ll at least grab the plants from the car. I wouldn’t feel right about leaving them out there all night.”

Mattie peered up at her from the bed. “How do you know I have plants?”

Penelope touched her temple. “I can hear them.”

Mattie smiled sadly. Penelope had been talking to plants for as long as Mattie remembered. “They’ll be fine. No one is going to steal them.”

Penelope smiled softly. “Oh, I’m not worried about that. I’m worried about *them*. I don’t want them to feel sad and left alone in a new place. I’ll put them downstairs, and you can decide what you want to do with them tomorrow.”

Mattie pointed to her purse. “Keys are in there.”

Penelope turned off the light and left the door partially open. Mattie guessed to keep the cat, Enid, from yawling at the door later. Mattie rolled onto her back, stared up at the ceiling, and felt

the swell of tears inside her, but no more would release.

*How did Mom do it?* she wondered. How did she always know just where they should go next? Mattie had zero ideas about what to do or where to go. Nothing seemed to point her anywhere. No signs from heaven, no nudges from her subconscious. The only thing she'd been certain about recently was that she needed to return to Ivy Ridge, if only for a few days. The rest of her future steps were nonexistent.

Mattie had forgotten how *quiet* Ivy Ridge was. Chicago, although not as noisy as New York City, still swelled with constant commotion—construction, traffic, and emergency sirens blaring toward the sky. The long, straight avenues lined with tall, concrete buildings echoed the sounds of traffic and jackhammers, and the sirens bounced off the buildings and reverberated all around. Voices carried up the streets all day, anything from people hawking wares to laughter to arguments to languages from all over the world. At first Mattie hadn't been able to sleep well through the noisy activity of the city, but eventually it became a steady rhythm that was the soundtrack of her life there.

Ivy Ridge was so incredibly silent that Mattie could hear her own breathing. She also heard the front door open as Penelope went out to the car. A few minutes later, she heard the front door close and lock. Penelope eased back into Mattie's bedroom. She brought in her suitcase, returned the car keys, and whispered good night. Not long after, the bedroom door pushed open wider, and a draft of cooler air swirled through the room. Mattie looked for Enid but didn't see her. Then the staircase creaked, sounding like someone was either coming up or going down it. Mattie listened for a few more seconds but didn't hear anything else. She got out of bed, walked into the hallway, and stood in the dark house for

a few heartbeats. Quiet music drifted up the stairs. Had Penelope decided to make a cup of tea?

The music grew more distinct as Mattie neared the parlor. She poked her head into the room, and the antique radio crackled its music. Mattie made a pass through all the downstairs rooms, thinking she'd find her aunt, but she didn't. She returned to the parlor and stared at the radio across the room. It was playing one of her favorite songs, Kenny Loggins's "Celebrate Me Home," which soothed her. The music coaxed her farther into the room.

Mattie curled onto one side of the crushed-velvet sofa, breathing in the scent of the room. The combination of music and scents of parchment paper and woodsmoke relaxed the tension in her muscles. She rested her cheek against one of the plush pillows and closed her eyes. Her breathing slowed. A window downstairs must have been open because a warm summer breeze swept across her cheeks, bringing the sounds of cricket song with it. It was as if the house—the whole town—wanted her to rest. And for the first time in days, she gave in to the desire to put aside the heavy burden of her sorrow and try to quiet her mind.

Just before she fell asleep, she murmured, "I'm not staying in Ivy Ridge."

As if in response, the song shifted to "The Weight," telling Mattie to lay down her heavy load. Was there someone there who'd pick it up and carry it for a while? The radio sounded like someone was turning the dial because the song faded out, followed by static, then distant news, and finally became "Lean on Me."

For a flicker of a second, she wondered whether everything was going to be okay. *Maybe I'll get through this. Maybe I'm not completely, devastatingly alone.*

### *Chapter 3*

## MATTIE

MATTIE AWOKE LATER THAT MORNING SPRAWLED OUT ON the velvet sofa in the parlor. In her sleep she'd knocked all the pillows askew. She sat up, blinking in the lemony sunlight, and leaned down to pick up a stray pillow. Voices traveled up the hallway. The scents of baking dough and coffee wafted into the room. Mattie recognized Penelope's voice and the soft Southern accent of Sophia Russell, Penelope and Lilith's godmother and aunt. After the death of their parents, the young sisters had been raised by Sophia and her husband, Robert.

Mattie combed her fingers through her long, tangled hair and realized how much she had missed the cherished birthdays and holidays spent with her family. She could have insisted she and Lilith celebrate in Ivy Ridge the way they'd always done. Lilith hadn't pressed the issue, but why hadn't Mattie? If Lilith was finally exhausted with traveling to Ivy Ridge, why hadn't Mattie gone on her own? Probably because she never argued with her mom or went against her wishes.

Mattie walked and stood at the bottom of the staircase and rested her hand on the round finial top. The varnish was worn on one side from years of people touching it as they started up the stairs or reached the bottom. Mattie debated whether she should take a shower or at least brush her teeth before socializing.

Sophia walked out of the kitchen at the far end of the hallway. "Good morning, beautiful darling," she said, her accent making

her words flow like music. An ankle-length black skirt that rippled as she walked was paired with a plain white T-shirt. She wore an apron dusted with powdery handprints, and even with the slight mess she looked elegant and refined. Everyday fashion never looked simple on Sophia, and Mattie had never seen her without her signature fire-engine red nail polish and matching lipstick.

Sophia was voluptuous with long, shapely legs like a 1950s pinup girl. She still wore her hair long with soft waves like she had as a young woman, and because she had no interest in going gray, she regularly had a stylist dye her hair the rich auburn shade of her youth. She had chocolate brown deep-set eyes, high cheekbones, a narrow nose, and full lips on a mouth that was almost too wide for her face, but her smiles were so expansive and vibrant they could change the mood in a room within seconds.

At almost seventy, she looked at least ten years younger. People begged her to tell them how to find the Fountain of Youth she'd obviously been drinking from. They wanted to know about her diet and her skin care routine, whether she preferred yoga or Pilates, and what daily supplements she took. Sophia told them the same secret she'd been sharing for years, which wasn't a secret at all: youth and beauty and magic all came from the same place—the heart. *"You can tell a lot about the state of a person's heart by looking at their face. If they look run down and sickly, chances are their hearts are suffering and their thoughts are reflecting in their eyes. If they are full of life and vitality, if you can feel the joy all around them, you can bet those are the people you want to know, to listen to. Those are the ones to keep close. They are truly alive."*

"Hey, Sophia," Mattie said. She pointed up the stairs. "I was going to brush my teeth." She gazed down at yesterday's wrinkled clothing hanging drearily on her body. "And change."

“Nonsense,” Sophia said, pulling Mattie into a hug so tight it felt like she was trying to convey a lifetime of love in one embrace. When Sophia pulled away, there was a hint of puffiness in her face, leftovers from a night spent crying. “It’s been too long. Come have coffee—or tea—with us. Penelope made cinnamon rolls and buttermilk biscuits.” Sophia grabbed Mattie’s hand and led her down the hallway.

“I thought you weren’t leaving Savannah until this morning.”

“We couldn’t sleep,” she said as they entered the sun-drenched kitchen.

Every surface sparkled in the rays of summer light that warmed the room by degrees. It smelled just like Mattie remembered, a home full of life and ease. The original Victorian kitchen had been dark and much smaller, a space not intended for cooking with a family crowded around. One holiday when the sisters’ parents, Elena and Douglas, weren’t on tour, Elena had the kitchen remodeled. They knocked down a few walls and created a more open, airy space that included more windows, an island, and a breakfast nook with a bay window and cushioned seat. The kitchen transformed from a cramped room into a place where the family gathered easily and often.

The island was now crowded with baskets of fruit and casserole dishes covered in a mix of tinfoil and plastic wrap. Penelope stood in front of the open refrigerator doors. She glanced at Mattie over her shoulder.

At forty-five, Penelope didn’t look like other women her age. She looked much younger, and Mattie wondered if that bothered women just as much as others were bothered by Sophia aging in reverse. Penelope and Lilith resembled each other, so it was obvious to anyone who saw them together that they were related. But

Lilith was tall and willowy, and her features were sharper and more angular, giving her an edginess that spoke of late nights and wild parties. Penelope was petite, shorter than her younger sister by a few inches, and her body was made of softer lines. She looked like someone you could trust with your car keys. Someone who wouldn't steal your boyfriend.

Penelope's striking green eyes, high cheekbones, and small stature reminded Mattie of a forest pixie who might try to convince you to dance barefoot or create mischief. But Mattie doubted her aunt ever entertained mischief of any sort. Where Lilith had been an untamed spirit, Penelope was responsible and organized, infinitely more serious than Lilith ever had been.

Just like with her mom, people were drawn to Penelope, even though she tried to keep to herself. They often stopped and stared at her before they realized how inappropriate it was of them. Straight black hair hung long down her back, and this morning it was pushed back from her forehead with a stretchy emerald cloth band. Her tank top revealed toned arms, kept in shape by hours of gardening, housework, yoga, and her seamstress work. She wore a flowy blue-green boho skirt covered in purple spirals that swished around her ankles when she moved.

Penelope pointed at a plate heaped with cinnamon rolls. Silky cream cheese melted onto the perfectly shaped rolls and the scent of warm spices wrapped around Mattie like a comfort blanket. Another plate had uniform stacks of buttermilk biscuits. The Russell house was an unusual juxtaposition of the comfort foods found in Southern traditions along with whole food and healthy options. For breakfasts Mattie could often find foods like today's offerings, or Penelope would whip up a bowl of homemade granola served with fresh berries and a dollop of Greek yogurt swirled

with honey. Or scrambled eggs, a side of grits, and crispy bacon.

“Grab one or half a dozen. There’s butter and jam too,” Penelope said. “Just leave a cinnamon roll for Robert.”

“He’s already had one,” Sophia said.

“He’ll pout if we don’t leave him one for later,” Penelope said. “Coffee’s in the carafe. Or Sophia will make you an espresso.”

“Where is Robert?” Mattie asked, pouring a mug full of coffee. She skipped the cream and sugar, now preferring to drink her coffee black.

Sophia pointed at the ceiling with a red manicured nail. “In the music room or the attic.”

Mattie made her way over to the plates of food and sipped her coffee. Bitterness lingered on her tongue as the warmth washed down her throat. “What’s he doing in the attic?”

“He’s looking through—”

“Sophia, hand me that red dish, please,” Penelope interrupted. “I’ve made a spot for it. The rest of those we’ll have to pack into the chest freezer in the basement until we can get them to the shelter.”

“Looking through what?” Mattie grabbed a cinnamon roll from the stack and put it on a small plate, then licked cream cheese icing from her fingers.

Penelope sighed. “The attic is where we send things we aren’t ready to let go of but don’t really need.”

“That’s an interesting way of avoiding a direct answer,” Mattie said before she bit into the cinnamon roll and exhaled a satisfied sigh.

“Good, isn’t it?” Sophia said. She handed Penelope the casserole dish.

“Better than good,” Mattie said. “Once a week I bought cinnamon rolls from my favorite bakery over on Grand Street when we

lived in New York City. The owner grew up in Alabama and knew how to make the dough so fluffy and the most decadent cream cheese icing. She also made a pumpkin pie that tasted like the fall.”

Penelope paused with the casserole dish in her hands. “I haven’t made one of those in years. Another of my daddy’s favorites. Mama used to make those when they were home . . . which wasn’t often,” she said with sadness enveloping the words.

“The bakery’s cinnamon rolls were outstanding.” Mattie held up her half-eaten treat. “But yours are next-level.”

“Penelope’s skill rivals my gran’s, God rest her soul.” Sophia made the sign of the cross over her chest. “I’d never admit that if she were still alive because she’d curse me, but Penelope bakes better than any of the bakeries in town, probably in the whole county.”

Penelope smiled. “You taught me everything I know.”

Sophia’s smile was soft. “Not everything.”

Mattie took another bite and closed her eyes as the warm dough and cream cheese melted on her tongue. Penelope stacked three casserole dishes in her arms and disappeared into the basement.

“What’s with all the food?” Mattie asked Sophia.

“Ivy Ridge showing their sympathy,” Sophia answered. Her hand crept to the space over her heart. “There is healing power in food.”

For a few minutes Mattie had forgotten to think about her mom’s absence. Eating pastries and sipping coffee had distracted her. But the reminder that the town knew they needed sympathy and support brought back reality. Lilith wasn’t upstairs sleeping in; she wasn’t dancing through the downstairs rooms singing along with Fleetwood Mac.

Lilith was gone in the most permanent physical way.

Mattie pointed at the nearest dish and frowned. “There’s no chance that broccoli and cheese casserole is going to heal anyone.” She glanced out the window toward the back garden. “I’m not sure anything will heal this.”

Sophia closed her hand around a ruby stone dangling from the long necklace she wore. “No one prepares you for death. They can’t, but still they try. We try to prepare ourselves for the day, don’t we? We imagine a future without our spouses or children or best friends, as if *thinking* about how terrible it is will help it be less awful when it happens. But you can’t actually prepare yourself for the way loss swoops in and closes around you. Not for the way it paralyzes you, trapping you in a world that keeps moving while you feel immobilized.

“But we must let the emotions come, not fight them, and keep moving through them. We can’t stay here in this grief. It will turn everything, including us, to dust.” Sophia closed her eyes and exhaled a shuddering breath. “Your mama was so wild and so beautiful . . . since the day she was born.” The raw ache in her words spread to Mattie, and her chest constricted.

Mattie put the unfinished cinnamon roll on the plate and stepped into the connected sunporch while she shoved down the urge to cry. By the back door sat a small console with an assortment of items cluttering its top, including an antique Tiffany lamp with a bronze base and red roses on its glass shade. Sunlight filtering through the glass projected distorted red roses on the tile. Beside the lamp was a plastic rotary phone in a shade of 1970s blue that called to mind hideous prom tuxedos and Converse All Stars. Mattie had never seen anyone use the phone, and it had never once rung. It might not even be plugged in for all she knew, and since it seemed more like a retro knickknack than a usable object, she’d

never checked.

Penelope emerged from the basement.

“Can I ask you something?” Mattie asked.

“Of course,” Penelope said. “What’s on your mind?”

“The night Mom passed,” Mattie said and paused, inhaling a slow breath and exhaling before continuing. The knot in her chest didn’t loosen. “She was already asleep when I came home from work. She left me a sticky note on the counter. It said to call you. Do you know why?”

Penelope’s eyebrows raised, but she shook her head.

She blurted the next question out of her mouth before she could rethink asking. “Do you think she knew?”

Penelope looked past Mattie toward Sophia, who stepped onto the porch with them. Unspoken words passed between the two women.

“Knew what?” Penelope asked, her voice cautious and words measured.

“Nothing,” Mattie said. The question sounded insane. How could her mom have *known* something would happen? Her gaze moved to the rotary phone. “Why do you keep that phone? Does it still work?”

“It works,” Sophia said. “It’s a regular landline, and you can call out on it, but we don’t use it anymore, not since cell phones. No one ever calls it.”

Mattie lifted the handset from the receiver and listened to the monotonous dial tone. “I don’t actually know *anyone* who has a landline, and a rotary phone? No way.” She poked her finger into the number 2 circle and spun the dial, removing her finger and watching it rotate back to its starting position. Then she chose the 7 and spun it. The dial tone quieted. A blackbird cawed outside the

window, and Mattie hung up the phone. “If you don’t use it, why keep it? What’s special about this one?”

“Special?” Penelope asked. “Nothing.” She wiped her hands on a towel she’d draped over her shoulder. “It’s just a phone.” Penelope cast a wistful glance at the blue plastic oddity.

“Penelope,” Sophia said, “I’ve never been agreeable to secrets.”

Penelope’s postured stiffened. “It’s just a phone.”

“That’s like saying you are just a seamstress. You’re more than that, aren’t you?”

“Is it like the Bat Phone?” Mattie asked.

Penelope snorted a laugh.

Sophia smiled. “It’s much better than the Bat Phone. There’s a story.”

“That no one can prove,” Penelope said.

Sophia huffed. “Since when do you need proof to believe?”

“Not *me*.” Penelope tilted her head toward Mattie. “I’m not sure this is the right time. And Mattie doesn’t plan on sticking around long, so it doesn’t seem fit to overshare.”

A *crack* followed by a loud groaning sounded from outside and startled all three women. Penelope opened the back door and glanced into the yard. The greenhouse door had fallen open and was dangling from loose hinges.

“Oh my,” Sophia said, “an open door.”

“A *broken* door,” Penelope said.

“Some of these doors have been closed for too long and they’re breaking open,” Sophia said. “We can’t keep what we’ve hidden tucked away forever. Mattie is part of our family.”

“She’s *leaving*,” Penelope argued.

“Hello? I’m standing right here,” Mattie interrupted. “Are we still talking about the phone?”

No one responded.

Mattie pointed into the yard. “Should we fix that before it falls off? Prop it up?”

Penelope waved a dismissive hand. “Later. Sophia, if you don’t mind, let’s get the rest of the casseroles put away. I can call a handyman afterward.”

“Nonsense,” Sophia said. “Robert can fix that.”

Penelope left them standing alone on the porch. “Where are you running off to next?” Sophia asked.

“I’m not *running* anywhere,” Mattie said. “I don’t know where I’m going yet. It’ll come to me. It always does.”

“You mean it always came to Lilith,” Sophia said. “She was the captain of your ship, wasn’t she?”

For a brief second, Mattie had a vision of a sailing vessel captained by her mom. Mattie sat on the bow, wind blowing her hair back and her face turned toward the sun. She never bothered with choosing the adventure because she didn’t *have* to make any decisions. Lilith had always chosen everything, always made life spontaneous with the thrill of uncertainty. But without Lilith steering the vessel, Mattie realized the empty feeling inside her had a name. *Adrift*.

“Let’s help Penelope put away the food,” Sophia said. “You’ll figure out what’s best for you. We Russell women always do.”

## JONATHAN

JONATHAN CARLISLE HADN'T SLEPT THIS LATE SINCE NEW Year's Day five years ago, and that was because he'd been out watching the sunrise in Grant Park and hadn't gotten home until eight in the morning. He'd argue with anyone that Chicago held one of the best New Year's Eve celebrations in the country. But last night's gig hadn't been nearly as entertaining as an end-of-the-year blowout. The lingering champagne headache definitely wasn't.

The bedroom featured floor-to-ceiling windows with views of the Chicago River and his favored running path near the waterfront. His fifty-seventh-floor apartment had spectacular views of the cityscape. Jonathan rolled out of bed with a groan and lifted his cell phone from the bedside table.

Twenty-seven text messages and seventy-five emails. Jonathan scrolled through the texts and clicked on only the ones that caught his interest. His mom wrote, *Call us this week. I'm making plans for the holidays.* "It's not even Halloween, Mom." But he made a mental note to call his parents. He tried to remember the last time he'd talked to his brothers, David and William. Months, probably. He'd shoot them a text this week too. Do his brotherly duty.

At two in the morning an unknown number had texted, *Hey, it's Stefanie! It was great to meet you last night. Let's get together soon! Call me, okay? Anytime this week is great! Can't wait to see you! XOXO!* Jonathan closed his eyes. That was a lot of exclamation

points for this time in the morning, or anytime for that matter. He remembered meeting Stefanie—a nice, if tenacious, young woman. She'd asked for his number and, ever the nice guy and perpetual networker, he'd given it to her. But Stefanie was looking for a date, and Jonathan was looking for a client. Not a perfect match for either.

Last night's event was at Fusion Lounge—one of the most hyped clubs in the city and the most difficult to get into, especially after Jonathan had been promoting it for the past month. Last night he'd packed a half dozen runway models and just as many high-profile celebrities into the VIP area, drawing in hundreds of people hoping for admittance. Hiring a band with a current number one hit on the charts added to the mania. Jonathan had been surrounded by people all night. Between the free alcohol, the packed dance floor, and schmoozing into the wee hours of the morning, Jonathan could barely remember his name. He'd do both himself and Stefanie a favor and not text back. Jonathan swiped to delete the message.

There were a dozen messages from clients raving about the success of last night's Fusion Lounge event, including the owner. Every one of them was ready to book their next event with him. All he had to do was open up his planner and start scheduling. Jonathan calculated the revenue he'd generate from these client messages alone. If he booked only this handful of events, he'd earn enough to pay his rent for a year. And there would be more—he was confident of that. There always was when you lived among those who thrived on excess.

During college at St. John's University in Queens, New York, Jonathan knew he'd make a fortune playing professional baseball. As one of the top players in the college league, Jonathan was

a naturally athletic shortstop with solid hitting stats. He was as skilled at offense as he was at defense. Jonathan was also charismatic and a team favorite because he had a way of bringing everyone together and raising morale. People believed he knew what he was talking about, even if he didn't.

A teammate knew Jonathan had grown up working at his dad's corporate event planning business and asked Jonathan to help his girlfriend organize a musical concert for a club opening in New York City. Jonathan's skills weren't on par with the professionals in the area, but he took what he'd learned from his dad and found mentors in the business who could guide him. He turned that one-night success into a concert-and-venue-promotor side job with a steady income. The part-time work got squeezed in between his academic and sports schedules by sacrificing his sleep and his freedom.

Jonathan didn't think his side gig would last past college. He'd dreamed of one day playing with his home team, the Atlanta Braves. He would have settled for the New York Yankees, but that was before the compound leg fracture from a collision with another player at second base during his senior year. In the span of a few seconds, Jonathan's entire life changed, and his dreams of pro ball disappeared faster than a one-hit wonder.

After his college graduation and knowing his baseball career was over, his family thought he'd come back to Ivy Ridge, Georgia, and work for the family business. Instead, Jonathan threw himself completely into being a full-time promoter. New York City was competitive and often cutthroat, so when an opportunity in Chicago presented itself, Jonathan pulled up what little roots he had in New York and caught the next plane out of LaGuardia. Living in Chicago, promoting other people's aspirations, wasn't

how he'd imagined his life, but he had everything he wanted that money could buy.

Except food in the fridge. Jonathan opened the stainless steel refrigerator that dominated the kitchen space. Premade juices were delivered every four days, and he noticed he'd skipped the last two days' bottles. Had he eaten yesterday? He remembered hors d'oeuvres at the bar—prosciutto-wrapped figs, mini beef wellington, togarashi seared ahi, and lobster crème puffs. He taste-tested everything, but then his focus had been on mingling, introducing powerful influencers to one another, making sure the client was happy. Free drinks were always part of his contracts. Even though he no longer drank himself into forgetfulness as he'd done when he was younger and just starting out, he still drank enough to keep his stomach satisfied, which meant he often forgot to eat real food.

The leftover Chinese takeout stared at him from the middle shelf. It was at least a week old and starting to smell like the soles of his tennis shoes with extra funk. His stomach growled. Jonathan closed his eyes and imagined a homemade breakfast. He thought of his mom's buttermilk waffles with melted butter and syrup. For holidays and special occasions she'd added festive sprinkles to a glob of Reddi-wip she sprayed onto each waffle. He wondered if she still did that. With Halloween approaching in a couple of months, would there be an avalanche of pumpkin and black-cat sprinkles?

Although Jonathan stayed busy all year long, his holiday schedule was extremely booked, sometimes overbooked, so he hadn't been home to Ivy Ridge in a few years. Guilt poked at his chest. His mom never failed to tell him he was always welcome to come home, even for a day if that was all he could manage. And every year he explained how he didn't even have *one hour* to spare.

He grabbed a juice bottle labeled *The Night After*. The ingredients of grapefruit, ginger, aloe, burdock root, basil oil, and milk thistle touted they would expel all toxins from his body.

He cranked up Phil Collins on the surround sound, played air drums while he drank toxin-annihilating juice, and let the music pull him away from his thoughts about being the disappointing son who never made the time to come home and see his family. David and William always made time. Maybe that was enough.



An hour later Jonathan stood on the street corner, sweating in the sixty-five-degree weather, with the sun shining down on him. Rays of light beamed off the skyscraper windows, and Jonathan looked up at clouds reflected in the silver glass panes. Two cabs raced up the street, honking their horns and making hand motions that seemed to be the secret language of taxi drivers. A bike messenger zoomed in between the street traffic, and a man on the opposite corner sold hot dogs, sausages, and pretzels from his rolling cart. The air smelled like cooked meat, car exhaust, and the neighborhood pizza joint two doors down from where Jonathan stood.

He turned down the music blasting in his Bluetooth earphones and listened to the city noise. Compared to Ivy Ridge, with its summer nights so quiet you could hear crickets chirping from pond reeds and owls hooting from the hollow, Chicago was shockingly loud—so loud he couldn't hear his own thoughts. And that was exactly what he loved about the city. With all the wind, car alarms, people laughing, trucks rumbling up the streets, and dogs barking, Jonathan's inner dialogue couldn't compete.

He ducked into a small market and grabbed a water, an apple, and a bacon, egg, and cheese on a roll. Stepping onto the sidewalk

while still unwrapping his food, Jonathan almost walked right into someone. He stopped himself just in time.

“Sorry,” he mumbled before taking a huge bite of his roll.

“Jonathan?” the young woman asked.

He made eye contact and forgot to keep chewing. Through a mouthful he said, “Laura? Hi . . .”

“Wow, hi,” she said, flashing the unchanged gorgeous smile that had mesmerized him when he met her two years ago. “It’s been . . . a while.”

Indeed it had. At least six months. Not that he was counting. He’d kept busy with work, which helped him suffer less through the breakup. But that had been the problem, hadn’t it? Too much work, too little play *together*.

Jonathan folded the wax paper around his roll and dropped it into the brown sack with his apple and water bottle. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. “Good to see you. You look well.”

She looked better than well. Laura looked stunning enough to cause a traffic jam on Lake Shore Drive. She was the kind of beauty that cowboys in western movies would drape their only coat across a mud puddle for. And she knew it. Everything about her was intentionally placed, adorned, and manicured.

“You too,” she said with a flip of her styled hair.

“I just finished a run,” Jonathan said with a laugh. “I’m sweating and eating a sandwich out of a bag.”

Laura laughed, and for a second, the sound of it tempted him like a bad habit he hadn’t quite given up. She squeezed his bicep and then wiped her hand on her designer jeans. “You pull off that athletic look, and you know it. You make sweaty look good.”

Jonathan stared down at his shoes. Was she flirting with him?

Had she hoped to meet him here and rekindle their relationship? They hadn't exactly been the most compatible couple, but he'd be lying if he said he hadn't missed having someone to spend time with . . . *when* he had spare time. He cleared his throat. "So what're you doing—"

A sharp-dressed man who looked to be in his fifties wrapped an arm around Laura's waist, leaned over, and kissed her temple. He may as well have been a walking advertisement for Ralph Lauren.

"Honey, this is Jonathan Carlisle," Laura said, leaning into the man. "You remember me telling you about him. He's the big promoter who did Fusion Lounge last night. Freddie was talking about it over brunch." She grinned at Jonathan. "Freddie said it was the best event he's been to all month, and that's saying a lot because Freddie goes to *all* the biggest deals. Jonathan, this is Dominique Laurent."

Jonathan squared his shoulders, and Dominique, who was a head shorter than him, mimicked the movement. Dominique held out his hand. "Pleasure to meet you. I've heard a lot about you, about your work."

Laura's new boyfriend was French. How *not* surprising. He probably jetted her off to Paris every other weekend. "Always good to hear," Jonathan said. "I put everything I have into it."

"You can say that again." Laura punctuated her words with a laugh.

Dominique chuckled. "We should get going, *mon chérie*, if we're going to make the train."

"We *can't* miss tea with the Brinkmans," Laura said in a mock-serious tone. "I love hearing all about their travels." She smiled at Jonathan. "Good to see you. Enjoy your bag sandwich."

"Sure, yeah, nice seeing you," he mumbled, but Laura and

Dominique were already hurrying off to make a train, probably on its way to Happily Ever After. “Tea with the Brinkmans,” he said to no one. “Right after we have scones at Downton Abbey.” Both of which sounded exactly like what Laura would want and exactly like what Jonathan never could have offered her.

Jonathan walked home in a mood that continued to sour, and he ate his roll with half the fervor he started with. He stood at the floor-to-ceiling windows in his living room, staring at the river. A group of people practiced tai chi in the park. *Send me some of your zen-ness.*

Seeing Laura with Dominique bothered him more than it should have. She was attractive, well-spoken, and knew how to handle herself at prominent parties. She stayed aware of the fashion trends and how to use them to her advantage. How had such a beauty ended up with him? She joked that they were well matched in the looks department, saying that Jonathan had a face for movies.

Other than expensive parties and nice clothes, he and Laura didn't have much in common. She wanted someone to take her out to fine dinners, show her off at galas, and adorn her with jewelry from Tiffany's. The one, and only, time Jonathan suggested they go to a Cubs game together and eat hot dogs while drinking beer, she said that was the grossest idea she'd heard since someone told her crimping irons were coming back into style. He shouldn't have been surprised when she wanted a change, but he'd been side-swiped by her leaving.

After returning to his apartment, he showered and then sank into on the couch. He flicked on the TV to the news and muted it. Then he opened his laptop to scroll through more than one hundred emails. Maybe his apartment and his refrigerator were empty

JENNIFER MOORMAN

of life, but at least he had his work to occupy his mind, to keep him distracted from the uncomfortable feeling expanding in his gut.

