

Chapter 1

HE WASN'T COMING HOME.

The grandfather clock I'd inherited when my mom died chimed eleven times, each marking the late hour and seeming to mock me for waiting as long as I had. The candles on the dining room table had burned to stubs, white wax dripping off the collars of the candlesticks and onto the table.

I stared at the wax, pooled and dried to the shiny oak surface, and couldn't even muster the ability to care that it was likely leaving a waxy ring that would never come out of the wood without stripping, sanding, and restaining. It was all work I'd do on my own. He'd be mad, and he'd comment on how it showed my lack of . . . whatever it was I should have. And then he'd fume silently for a while longer before moving on to something else that actually interested him, something that wasn't *me*, something that wasn't our anniversary dinner sitting cold around the two flames bobbing above their almost-spent candles.

Nick hadn't even called.

Hours had gone into preparing the dinner. Hours of my life I'd never get back. Creamed peas, asparagus with that maple-mustard sauce he loved, grilled lemon garlic halibut, and fresh homemade rolls. I scraped my chair back and blew out the flames, my breath sweeping more wax down onto the table.

I flipped on the light switch and pressed my palms into my temples as I paced around the table. *When did we come to this? How did we get to uneaten anniversary dinners?* We used to be a fun couple. We used to be the couple everyone envied—the one everyone wanted to be like. He used to be the one surprising me with flowers and kissing me loudly in front of our small children just to hear them say, “Ew! Gross!”

The pendulum of the clock ticked off every moment he wasn't home as though it were personally keeping track. *What should I do?*

With a sigh, it occurred to me that the only thing to do at the moment was clear the table and throw out the food since it had been sitting out for more than four hours. I'd picked at it after the first hour, taking nibbles from the sides where it wouldn't disrupt the visual effect—as if it had mattered. At least the only dishes I'd have to wash were the serving dishes and the cooking pans. *There. That's better. Find something positive. Breathe deeply, and look for something to be glad about.*

It sounded Pollyanna but was a habit I'd picked up as a child when my mom had snuggled under a lap blanket with me and watched old classics, *Pollyanna* among them, while thunder pounded the sky and wind howled through the rafters of my childhood home. Those had been good days in years filled with good days; I'd been held in the safety of my mother's arms, warm and loved and needed. The glad things in my life seemed endless at the time, and counting them all had sounded like fun.

Mom had encouraged me to be like Pollyanna. And later she told me my personality quirk had gotten her through some rough times in her own life. She'd once called me her life preserver. What would she say if she could see me now, clearing an uneaten meal from my dining table in a home too large to feel cozy and too cold to feel homey? A forty-one-year-old woman with four kids and a husband who didn't remember the plans of a special anniversary dinner? A woman who hid the gray sneaking into her brown hair with bottles of blonde dye? A woman who could find precious little in her cold, silent house to feel glad about?

The china plate I'd been holding slammed into the wall and shattered into an explosion of porcelain, startling me enough that I jumped.

But what startled me more than the fact that I'd thrown a grossly expensive plate into my decorator wall, leaving a dent of chipped blue paint and white drywall, was the fact that the action offered real relief.

I felt better having thrown the plate.

So I threw the other one.

And smiled.

Then frowned.

"You're an idiot, Livvy," I told myself. "Who do you think is going to clean that up?"

Talking to myself was a habit I'd picked up after my mom died four years ago. My dad had died before her. I had no siblings. Mom's passing left me vacant. She'd had a blood clot that had found its way to her brain when she'd been out watering her red hibiscus. The hose was still

running, pointed up at a crazy angle, caught between her arm and body, when I'd found her. The mulch had floated on top of the little pond of water, and the drenched flowers had drooped with the water weight as though they were bowing their heads in respect for the woman who would no longer care for them.

I bowed my own head now. She was no longer caring for me either.

Even at forty-one, I needed my mommy. I blinked back the sting in my eyes for the want of her arms around my shoulders.

I went to the kitchen and came back with the dust pan and a little sweeper. "The same person who made the mess is the one who's going to be cleaning it, that's who." It's one thing to talk to yourself, but I'd started answering myself two years ago when I'd realized no one else ever did.

I stayed on my tiptoes to keep from crunching the glass into the hardwood floor as I swept around and under me, running the hand broom along the edge of the open cardboard boxes and into the dust pan before I dared to actually look *inside* the two boxes—donations to the library book drive in one box and my son's fourth grade volcano project in the other. Books and volcano both had a new coating of porcelain chunks and splinters.

Perfect.

"Just perfect!"

I stood up and dumped the contents of the dust pan into the trash then pulled out the vacuum and the hose attachments so I could suck the little shards out of the boxes without cutting myself. A lot of the sand used to make Tyler's volcano look more realistic and a couple of the plastic palm trees I'd picked up at the Newport Birthday Party Supply House went the way of vacuum bags. By the time I was done, I'd scratched up a couple of the books with the end of the hose and made the volcano scene look like the remnants of a long-dead planet. I hoped the books weren't first editions.

"What's all the noise in here?" Amanda stood in the doorway of the dining room, her arms folded across the pink tank top she slept in, which completely clashed with the green flannel bottoms covered in smiling skulls. She'd been studying at her friend's house and had planned on spending the night. Her brown hair strayed from the sloppy ponytail.

"Why are you home? I thought you were staying at Cassi's." It was just as well she'd come home. It wasn't like the big anniversary plans had panned out anyway. When Amanda said she'd be at her friend's and my oldest

child, Chad, had said he'd be doing a game night at a buddy's house, I'd called the in-laws to see if they'd take Tyler and Marie. I didn't ask for those kinds of favors very often from my in-laws—even if they did live only a half hour away. The in-laws were complicated in ways that made me tired.

"Cassi's brother is a creep. He and his friends ate all the good food and then wouldn't turn off their stupid games. I finished the project and just want sleep now. What are you doing?" She stepped farther into the dining room.

"I dropped a plate. I needed to clean it up."

"You could do that in the morning. You're going to wake up Dad. It's like . . . midnight."

"Dad's not home yet." I didn't bother correcting her about the time. It was only just past eleven.

Her eyes swept quickly over the table, the candles, the dinner, and the dent in the wall. In less than a glance, understanding dawned on her face. "*Dropped* the plate, huh?"

I swallowed and looked down, feeling stupid for having been caught throwing the kind of tantrum she was famous for in our family.

She laughed. "Looks like you dropped it real hard against the wall." She wandered over to me and traced her fingers over the new dents. "Looks like you dropped it real hard against the wall *twice*."

Nothing could be said to dignify my actions. Not denial or admission. So I stayed quiet, feeling the heat crawl up my neck and into my face.

"Did he at least call?" she asked, the humor gone from her voice.

I shook my head and coiled the vacuum hose.

She took a sharp intake of breath, as if she'd been about to shout something but then had changed her mind. She nodded and gave me a gentle hug. "I'm going to bed. You should too." Her whisper was barely audible. She turned and left, her feet treading softly on the stairs like she still worried she might wake up her father who wasn't home.

By the time I'd cleaned up the dinner and the tantrum, my soul felt scoured. I checked the boxes again to make certain there weren't any stray bits of plate still hanging around and inspected the top book in the library box—Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*.

The dust jacket had been scratched pretty badly from my raking the hose nozzle over it. Donating something so damaged seemed uncharitable in every way. And they'd already asked us not to use the donations as a chance to discard worn and unwanted items but instead to try our best to

donate quality merchandise. It had been quality merchandise when it had been donated by one of the neighbors.

I ran a finger along the new scars of the book. Reading had once been a favorite pastime. What had happened to time that actually belonged to me?

I hefted the book out of the box, liking the weight of it in my hands. It felt like something of substance, something more than the emptiness the evening had brought me. I opened the book and began to read.

Imagine a ruin so strange it must have never happened.

I read a few pages in, right up to the sentence:

I had washed up there on the riptide of my husband's confidence and the undertow of my children's needs.

I snapped the book closed, looking at my surroundings anew with those words echoing through me. I wasn't in Africa, wasn't in any jungle more ferocious than the 405 freeway, and yet, sitting there on the floor between boxes of charity and childhood, my hands dried out from antibacterial dish soap, I felt I *had* been washed up on the riptide of my husband's confidence and the undertow of my children's needs.

The house was in perfect shape, no dust—not even on the blades of the ceiling fans—nothing out of place or amiss in the Robbins household. Nicholas didn't yell or throw tantrums. He certainly never threw dishes at a wall. But over the years, he'd become silent. The silence felt like disapproval in so many ways. I kept thinking if I did things better, worked harder, he would start talking to me again.

He'd been married before, but it had ended badly . . . with him catching her and his best friend together having breakfast in bed—*his* bed. We had dated for almost two months before he'd confessed to having an ex-wife. Along with that information came the confession that he also had two small children.

He'd expected me to walk away. Looking back, sometimes it felt that he'd told me about his past and his two children with the *intention* of me walking away. But when I was excited to meet his kids and take on this new challenge, he finally opened up.

I felt like I'd passed a test. He knew my devotion was total. If an ex and two kids didn't make me waver, nothing would.

It had worked out well enough . . . in the beginning. His kids became my kids. And then we started having *our* kids—four of our own to add to his two. We should have been a happy family of eight. But somewhere

along the way, Nick had compartmentalized his life from before and his life with me, no matter how hard I tried to mesh us all into one family unit. He distanced himself from things that weren't perfect. His previous marriage had been imperfect, and he distanced himself from that life—even the kids from that life.

But I was also imperfect. Is that why he distanced himself from me? My body had filled out over the years, going from a toned size six to a softened size twelve. And I *did* throw dishes at the wall—not that he'd ever know about that because I'd never admit to it and Mandy would never rat me out. I'd pull out the spackle and paint tomorrow and fix it myself. Calling someone to fix it would require paying a bill I'd have to explain later. I stared at the newly bruised wall and hoped a repair job was possible.

But so what if it wasn't?

What if my patch-up job looked worse? Who was around to care? My undertow children were all nestled away in beds somewhere, and my riptide husband had yet to make an appearance. I scrambled to my feet—my body not reacting to my brain's commands as swiftly or as easily as it once had—dropped *The Poisonwood Bible* on the table—I'd been right about the wax leaving its mark on the table—and headed to the front door.

I needed some air.

Walking at night was not a habit of mine. I lived in an upscale area, but it was still California, and smart women didn't go walking around on their own at midnight without at least a bottle of pepper spray and a cell phone. But anger fueled the walk. Any punk kid who might try messing with me would find himself turned upside down in a dumpster.

My anger flowed from one source.

Nick.

He would excuse himself tomorrow with, "I had to work late." And that would be the last of it.

But it wouldn't be the last of it. He'd do it again. And again. And again.

What killed me was the wondering. Was it work? He was a CFO at Soft Tekk. Could that work be exciting enough to keep him hours away from his home? Was it a woman—a secretary, a coworker, a barmaid he'd met in some dark, smoke-filled place where he could watch a Lakers game without the kids running through the house making noise? Or was it worse? Was it simply the fact that he'd rather do *anything* than be with me?

He escaped our marriage every day through the convenient excuse called work. And yet his life spun a web around me that held me cocooned

in place while he came back on occasion to feed on my energy.

His house. His children. His community. *My* responsibility.
Riptide.

I turned toward the shops. Too bad it was the middle of the night. No comfort shopping for me. I passed a nail spa in a strip mall. No comfort manicures either—not that I ever really indulged in things like that. It was an expensive habit, and the kids were always needing something that competed for the financial attention. A few doors down from the nail spa, a blue flyer taped to the door flitted in the night breeze. In a brief moment of need, I imagined it was waving to me—asking me to stop and read whatever message it had for me and me alone.

*Looking for serious readers to join the Newport Ladies Book Club.
Women only! Eating and good conversation!
Space limited. Call Ruby Crenshaw asap.*

I looked up to see the sign above the shop. *Grey's Used & Rare Books*. A book club. How long had it been since I'd held a novel in my hands for the sheer pleasure of losing myself in its pages? How long had it been since I'd held any book without needing to stuff it in a box for charity or a backpack for a child or a shelf to put it away for when the riptide wanted it?

No. That wasn't fair. Calling Nick a riptide every four seconds would get me nowhere. Find something glad.

But there wasn't anything glad I could associate with Nick at that moment. Even the fact that I lived in a beautiful home and had beautiful children just made me tired—not glad at all. It reminded me of schedules and soccer games and visits to the dry cleaners and grocery shopping and school functions and Junior League meetings and volunteer work and cleaning a house that never felt like home anymore. Tired.

The breeze picked up, and the little flyer waved at me again. I pulled the blue paper from the door, feeling guilty for removing it and hoping the bookstore owner had a spare to put up. Even if I didn't have to face my minister every Sunday, I hated taking anything that wasn't mine.

Depression replaced anger for the walk home. I blinked away the sting in my eyes again, imagining him cuddling up with some flirty female who wasn't me.

But the accusation in that image wasn't fair either. Nick had once been the victim of infidelity. Cheating was something he abhorred,

something that made him physically ill. Nick was the last man on the planet who would be the cheater. He didn't even cheat at Monopoly back when he'd stayed home long enough to play a game with us. And there had been no evidence of infidelity—aside from his absence.

But what did absence prove, if not infidelity? It proved he didn't care enough to be with me. Another woman or not, I'd been rejected. He didn't need or want me.

I looked down at the paper in my hand and considered it. The woman's name was Ruby. I needed something with the ability to shine in my life. A ruby was as good as anything. And for the first time since setting the table for dinner, I found something to be truly glad about. Because I was going to, for once, do the selfish thing. I was going to join a book group, read, eat, and have good conversation.

Chapter 2

HE CAME HOME AFTER I'D already changed into a nightgown and curled up under the blankets on my side of the bed. He didn't turn on a light but bumbled around in the dark, undressing himself, tugging off shoes and dropping them to the floor. All the noise he made overrode any show of politeness in keeping the light off.

He whispered my name once, his voice soft like a caress in the darkness. I didn't respond, not wanting to hear the excuse now, not with the stinging back in my eyes and my pillow already damp. For as sweet as the whisper might have been, the excuse without apology would be a slap. I couldn't handle the slap, not when I clung so desperately to the little bit of glad the idea of a book group gave me.

When his bulk settled into the space next to me, he stretched a little, his toe touching my leg. Surely the touch was an accident. Surely he hadn't meant to make contact with me, like he'd done at the beginning of our marriage when he'd felt he needed to touch me every moment we were together. It almost burned where his skin connected with mine, but I couldn't move away, not without him realizing I was still awake. The few tears that had trickled out before became a steady stream of quiet mourning for the love I'd once felt in such a touch.

His foot stayed against my leg.

When I awoke, my eyes felt scratchy; my head ached from crying. Nick still slept the sleep of an oblivious, stupid, dumb, uncaring ox of a husband. I took a deep breath.

No, Livvy. That doesn't help you. Stop casting insults at the man who can't defend himself in his sleep. But no self-admonishment replaced my desire to fill his shoes with oatmeal. Grateful he still slept, I slid out of bed and went to the bathroom to quickly get ready. I had a lot to do, and not dealing with him would help the morning run more smoothly.

I frowned at the mirror, noting the dark roots against the blonde dye job. I'd have to go back to the hairdresser. I hated getting my hair dyed all the time. But Nick had come home one day talking about how he thought blonde hair would highlight my blue eyes.

At the time, everything in my life had swirled around Nick's opinion. The next day I'd walked into the hairdresser a brunette and walked out a blonde.

He'd been wrong. The blue in my eyes faded with the blonde, becoming typical and uninteresting, whereas the brown hair had offset my eyes and made them more vibrant. Nick loved the change though, and I loved what Nick loved.

Until today.

Today I wanted to shave my head just to teach him a lesson, except, like the dishes, I'd be the one dealing with the mess that would follow. I finished getting ready, pulling my hair back into a ponytail to keep it out of my face.

He rolled over as I tied my shoes in front of the closet. *Stay asleep*, I thought. *Stay asleep until I leave*.

It wasn't until I was downstairs and starting breakfast that my body relaxed into the routine of the day. I put some eggs on to boil, remembering to set the timer so I didn't let them get too hard, lest Nick turn his nose and mumble something about catching breakfast on his way to work.

Amanda followed the smell of bacon to the kitchen, her hair now in messy clumps around her shoulders and her eyes squinting in that way she did when she really hadn't slept enough. "Morning, Mandy." I handed her a plate so she could serve herself. The rest I would pop in the warmer oven for whenever Nick pulled himself out of bed, which hopefully wouldn't be until I was long gone.

"Is Dad home?" she asked, accepting the plate and piling on most of the already cooked bacon. Someone once told me that having a teen boy would cost me a fortune in food, and they were right. Chad ate a ton. But no one had warned me about the teen girl. Mandy ate twice the amount of food her older brother ate.

I nodded. "Still sleeping."

She snorted. "If I came home that late, I'd still be sleeping too. You *do* know you would totally ground me and *not* let me sleep in if I came home that late."

"I'm not his mother," I said.

She moved to sit on the barstool at the island while I finished cooking. "Then you should call his mother, because if he's going to act like an immature brat, he ought to be punished like one."

I shot a warning look over my shoulder and went back to the fry pan. “Don’t disrespect your father, Manda-Bear. You know that’s never okay with me.”

I felt her tensing behind me, wanting to say more, but she didn’t. Mandy had always clashed with her father. They’d been butting heads since she was two and wanted to have her own puppy. She’d finally gotten her way, but when that dog died, he’d refused to get another one. Not much had changed. They still clashed, and I still came between them and smoothed out the wrinkles of the impact. If I ever divorced Nick, Mandy would choose to live with me like his other kids had lived with their mother.

I blinked and exhaled sharply. *Divorce?* Where had that thought come from?

The phone rang, cutting into the tension of Mandy’s mood and my worry over the appearance of a word I’d never really allowed into my mind before.

“Hello, DeeAnn.” I greeted my mother-in-law. “How were the kids?”

DeeAnn once asked me to call her Mom, but I already had a mother and wasn’t looking for any replacements—and DeeAnn never felt motherly to me. She was still in love with the wife who hadn’t worked out.

The voice on the other end of the line informed me that Marie had a fever and refused to eat breakfast because she didn’t feel well, but Tyler was fine.

“I’ll come get them as soon as I finish making breakfast,” I said. “I’m so sorry Marie’s sick!”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I know how to care for a sickly kid; she’ll be better off here with some grandma spoiling. I really don’t get to see them often enough. Get whatever you need to do done and then come by. I just wanted to let you know she wasn’t feeling well so you aren’t surprised when you pick her up.”

DeeAnn was like that, helpful, willing, pleasant. And yet there always seemed to be a barb under the pleasantries. Marie would be *better* there? I knew how to take care of a sick kid as well as the next person. I’d raised four of them just fine, thank you very much! Nick accused me of looking for unintended criticism, so I stopped mentioning my feelings of inadequacy around his mother to him. The fights weren’t worth it.

I considered throwing the phone against the wall after she’d hung up but remembered how the plate incident had turned out and instead placed the phone gently on the counter.

Mandy rolled her eyes at me. How was it that she could look so cute while doing something so infuriating? “You had his mother on the phone and failed to mention that he needs a timeout and a spanking.”

“I am not about to confess to that woman that I have no control over my own household. She’s already thinking she can handle things better than me anyway.”

“You’re being paranoid, Mom.” Mandy finished her bacon and eggs and eyed the rest I’d cooked in the interim.

I pulled the plate of bacon away from her view so she didn’t get any funny ideas about eating everyone else’s breakfast. Chad would come home soon and be starved. Chad was always starved. And Nick would get up sometime and be unhappy if he had nothing waiting. I was too sick-to-my-stomach mad over the previous night to be hungry. Maybe anger would work where diets had failed me. “It isn’t paranoia if they’re really out to get you,” I said, feeling sullen at having my daughter call me paranoid.

Mandy laughed, got up, and kissed my cheek. “But it *is* paranoia if they really *aren’t* out to get you. But paranoia’s kind of a cute look on you.”

“I’m glad you’re my daughter.” I pulled her into a light hug.

“Any mother would be,” she said, smiling. She shook her head and went back upstairs to get ready for the day.

I grimaced at the fact that her plate still sat on the counter, not in the sink or, heaven forbid, the dishwasher. I considered calling her back to put her own dishes away but decided getting her back downstairs would take more energy than my rinsing them and putting them away on my own.

All food went into the warming oven. All dishes went into the dishwasher. And the counters were cleared and ready for the next meal. I went to the dining room, where it joined with the front hall, so I could fetch the book box for the library. I glanced at *The Poisonwood Bible* sitting on my table and remembered my decision to join Ruby’s book club. My schedule for the next month ran through my mind. I had Junior League, Marie’s piano lessons and her recital, Mandy’s dance academy stuff to deal with, Chad’s play rehearsals and performances if he got the part, and Tyler’s speech therapy. Where would a book club fit?

Nowhere. I’d have to forget about adding one more thing to my life.

I scooted the book off the table and into the box to go to the library. Maybe they wouldn’t care about the dust jacket. It would be best to

let the library decide. They could donate the stuff they didn't want to Goodwill. I glanced into Tyler's volcano box. I'd have to stop at the party supply place and pick him up some new trees. He certainly couldn't take the project in like that.

As much as I wanted to get Marie and Tyler home, I couldn't ignore the fact that the library and the store would be faster errands without them. So with the book box balanced on my hip, I grabbed my keys from the key dish on the counter and opened the door leading to the garage.

"Where are you going?" Nick's voice called from behind me.

My eyes squeezed closed, and a few words that were less than admirable raced through my mind. "To pick up the kids from your mother's."

"What are they doing at Mom's?"

There would be no quick escape, so I steeled myself against tears and turned to face him. He looked good for a man who'd been out all night and had barely pulled himself out of bed. His messy hair had fine highlights of silvering, nothing major, not enough to call him gray. I hated that I loved the way that looked on him. His bathrobe hung open, revealing his bare chest, which was still toned and solid, and flannel pajama bottoms. He looked like he was doing an advertisement for men's sleepwear. "They had a sleepover last night. Your mom thought that since it was September twenty-first we'd want to have some time alone together." I kept the words factual, removing the icy bitterness and the icier accusations. A confrontation wouldn't help anything.

He considered my words before his expression widened with comprehension. So he at least remembered what September twenty-first was *supposed* to mean, even if he hadn't remembered that I told him to plan on a special dinner for the occasion. "I had to work—"

"I know." I cut him off before he could tack on the word *late*, though his tongue was caught between his teeth in the *L* position. "Breakfast is in the warmer. I have errands to run before I pick up the kids, so I'd better get going."

"What errands?" he asked, though his voice carried a hint of contrition, which wasn't typical.

"The library and then to the party supply store." I wanted to tell him to mind his own business. I hadn't asked him where he'd been until two thirty in the morning.

"Who's having a party?"

Not me. "No one. It's for Tyler's volcano project. I need some trees."

The contrition was gone. He pursed his lips in that way he did when he was about to be critical, cynical, or outright rude. He looked like his mother when he did that. “I’m surprised you call it Tyler’s project. I’ll bet you did all the work on it while Tyler played with his friends.”

I really should have filled his shoes with oatmeal when I’d had the chance. His words embarrassed me enough to cause the heat to climb through the collar of my shirt and onto my face. I knew that meant my neck had red splotches and my cheeks were stained as though I’d used too much makeup. He’d know his words hit their mark.

I didn’t respond, just nodded to acknowledge he’d spoken and turned to get out of the house.

His voice from behind me ripped out any shred of dignity left in me. “Really, Liv. The kids need to take responsibility for their own work. You can’t follow them around once they’re in college, doing their homework and mopping up their dorms.”

I shut the door hard enough that the noise made me jump.

Riptide of my husband.

My heart pounded, and my throat burned with the need to cry some more. After waking up with a headache, the last thing I wanted was to cry again. I shoved the box into the back seat of my Pacifica. It was outdated and the manufacturer didn’t make them anymore, but I loved that car and had decided to run it into the ground before allowing anyone to make me part with it.

I pulled the blue flyer out of my purse, where I’d stuffed it the night before, and dialed the number on my cell.

Ruby answered, sounding cheerful enough in her hello, but when I mentioned the book club, she moved from cheerful to ecstatic. “You saw my flyer then? Wonderful. Wonderful! And I suppose you’re a great reader?”

Did it count if I *had been* a great reader once? “Of course I am.”

“What’s your favorite recent read?” she asked.

I looked down into the backseat of my car at the book with the scratched cover. “*The Poisonwood Bible.*”

My answer delighted her. She hadn’t read it yet but had heard wonderful things about it and certainly wanted to give it a try. I hadn’t read it either. But I *did* have it in my possession, which sort of counted. Ruby grilled me on my schedule, making sure I would actually make it to the monthly Saturday night meeting.

I walked around the car to the driver's side, agreeing with everything Ruby said, promising I'd be there, promising I was serious.

She ended the call with the statement, "And I'm not a serial killer, so you can feel safe when you come to my house." She laughed and hung up.

I stared down at my phone. "And somehow that's supposed to make me feel better?" I asked myself.

"No. No, it really doesn't," I answered myself as I turned the key in the ignition and backed out of the driveway, wondering how crazy it made me to have full conversations without the addition of any other person. But I took a liberating breath. Hang that stupid man! I was going to do something for me for a change.

At the party supply store, I picked up some little plastic dinosaurs in addition to the palm trees, knowing I was only buying them to spite Nick. I was grateful the store carried little cake decorations that could be used for anything.

The woman in line in front of me had her cell phone wedged between her shoulder and ear as she paid for her purchases. "Oh, honey, leave him." She paused while the person on the other end said something. "I know you don't want to live alone, but living alone is better than living lonely." She nodded her thanks to the cashier then took her crepe paper and phone call with her.

And that word that had never crossed my mind before this morning came back to me. *I could get a divorce*. Because, really, the woman with the cell phone was right. Living alone had to be better than living lonely. And I'd been living lonely for a lot longer than I wanted to admit.

* * *

"Hi, DeeAnn. I'm here for the kids." So many of my smiles around this woman felt painted on—as pretend as a china doll's smile on her cold, glass face.

A smile like that could break if not handled carefully.

I knew that from past experience.

"Oh, they're on the back patio. We were having a picnic. They'll be so sorry to have to leave early."

I flinched.

Paranoid, Livvy. You're being paranoid. She couldn't be criticizing me for coming at this exact moment. She couldn't be hinting that I'd ruined my children's day by showing up.

She wasn't a dragon.

Seemed like a dragon, certainly . . . but wasn't.

Though she *had* been the one to call me and say Marie was sick—which hinted at her wanting me to get them earlier rather than later. She *had* been the one to hem and haw until she couldn't think up one valid excuse to not take the kids for the night in the first place. She *had* been the one to cry on my wedding day and say, when she thought she was alone, when she thought no one else could possibly hear her, that if Nick would have just *tried* harder the first time around, she wouldn't have to be attending this current disaster.

I wouldn't have believed that anyone, certainly not my new mother-in-law, would be calling my wedding day a *disaster*. I wouldn't have believed it except I had been the one to overhear.

I was the one witness to DeeAnn's confession. No one else knew. Not even Nick. Why tell him? It would put a wedge between us that would end up damaging us. I couldn't allow that. DeeAnn warranted proof that she'd been wrong to cry alone in the gardens of my reception hall. I would make Nick so happy that someday she would have to approve of me.

That had always been my plan: to be glad, to be grateful, and to give everything my very best.

I didn't wait for DeeAnn to lead me to the back patio. I didn't need an escort and hurried off toward the French doors before we were forced into conversation that would make me drive too fast after it was all over. It scared Tyler when I got like that.

It scared me too.

"Hey, my babes!" I said, thrusting as much cheer into my voice as possible as I planted a kiss on Tyler's head and pulled Marie out of her chair and into my arms. She was way too big to actually pick up anymore since she was seven now, but I didn't have her full weight on me since I was bent down and she was still half on the chair. She was a little flushed, and her forehead was warm but nothing dramatic—nothing that popsicles and Tylenol couldn't fix. I pressed my lips to her forehead then pulled away as if she'd burned me. She giggled.

"I heard you weren't feeling well, lady love."

She nodded emphatically. "I'm *sick*," she declared.

"Have you eaten anything?"

She shook her head but stopped herself as if the action had caused her pain. "No," she answered instead. "And my head hurts too."

I tucked her in closer and started to croon soothing words when, from around the table, I noticed a pair of blue eyes peeking out from a bob of light brown curls. She'd been hidden by the large bouquet sitting on the middle of the table. But now that I was down at her level, I could see that my own kids hadn't been sitting alone.

Grace—my step-granddaughter—was with them. She sat on a box so her two-year-old body could eat comfortably at a table made for big people.

Before I could process the information or greet the little girl, Jessica, my stepdaughter, arrived on the patio, holding a chubby and smiling baby Kohl in her arms. She came at the same time DeeAnn finally showed up.

“Jess!” And this time my smile was real. I wanted so much for Jessica to feel my love for her—wanted so much for us to have a relationship in some capacity beyond the typical, evil stepmother stereotype. I'd never wanted to be that stereotype for Nick's kids, and yet I had failed.

Jessica barely knew me beyond the cards on holidays and passing phone calls where I was usually only taking messages for Nick. The kids had come over all the time in the beginning. I couldn't pinpoint when it had all changed, but one day Nick had just stopped caring that they existed. He couldn't look at them without his face twisting into one of irritation. He hardly spoke to them except in grunts and shrugs. I tried to help—to make things better. It was as if I'd pushed them on him—pushed him to really see his children—and that had caused him to retreat into himself.

He'd paid the child support without question and without requiring anything in return. He hadn't expected them to come for holidays. He hadn't asked for them to come on weekends or during the summer when they were out of school.

And then one day . . . they'd just stopped coming.

Who could blame them?

He hadn't been the one to walk Jess down the aisle at her wedding. It also hadn't been her stepfather, Andrew—the man who'd once been Nick's friend and the same man who'd been caught cheating with The Ex before she'd become The Ex. The man who had walked Nick's daughter down the aisle had been her new father-in-law.

Nick had been slighted by the whole situation. It had never occurred to him that he wouldn't be walking Jessica down the aisle. He'd left the wedding early, but I'd stayed—stayed and watched Jess glow and smile in this new family who adored her as much as she adored them. I liked

her in-laws and made a point of being friendly with them. These would be the people who would share Nick's grandchildren. I didn't want to see those new babies pushed away the same way Jess and her brother, Kohl, had been pushed.

Yet, I hardly ever saw those babies—hardly knew little Gracie or little Kohl—named after his uncle.

I gently nudged Marie back on her chair and gave a hug to Grace and made a big show of loudly kissing her cheeks and neck so she'd giggle. It had been a long time since I'd had little ones like this.

Jess grinned while I kissed on my grandbaby. And I *did* consider them my grandchildren. They were Nick's grandchildren, and I was Nick's wife. That meant they belonged to me too.

"Hey, Livvy!" Jess said, the smile in her greeting as real and as warm as my own. She didn't hold me responsible for Nick's bad parenting anymore. She knew I'd tried to make things work for all of us. But she hadn't really understood until she had married and started having children of her own. The realization that I wasn't the evil stepmother had come about very slowly for her.

I didn't blame her for that. How else would she have been able to view me? The Ex had told her a lot of untrue stories about Nick and about me specifically. Nick's "hands off" approach to everything made the stories seem true. Who could blame a child for believing her mother?

"Hey, Gracie, love. How are you doing?" I asked.

"I good!" Grace said in that high-pitched, sing-song voice that only a two-year-old girl could ever manage to create. I looked over the table of food and tried not to roll my eyes.

"You've got finger sandwiches. How elegant!" I said, trying not to feel hypercritical of the fact that DeeAnn was feeding dry, old, boring, grown-up food to little kids.

"Wanted hotdog," Grace muttered.

I leaned close and whispered in her ear. "When you come to my house next, we'll have hotdogs and cake and cookies, and we'll eat it all up under a blanket."

Her eyes lit up, and she almost burst out loud with whatever kind of excitement she now had, but I hurried and put my finger to my lips so DeeAnn wouldn't hear things that could make this moment awkward.

It was wrong to try to outdo DeeAnn, but it was a fault I spent a lot of time *not* worrying about.

I stood up, hating that it hurt my knees a little to make that effort. “So how are things, Jess? The kids both look perfect. How’s Mike?”

“Mike’s great. He’s being promoted—that’s why I needed a babysitter at the last minute. He’s been in training down in San Diego, and they put him up in this insane hotel suite with a hot tub in the room. He asked me to come spend the night last night so we could have a little time together. I hadn’t seen him for a week.”

“You could have called me to babysit,” I declared before thinking about it.

DeeAnn narrowed her eyes. “You needed a babysitter last night as well.”

Jess either didn’t notice or outright ignored the cool tone in DeeAnn’s voice and said, “Exactly. I know when your anniversary is. I wouldn’t have dreamed of infringing on anniversary time. So how was it? Did you two do anything fun?”

How to respond? The truth was unpardonable, but lying would be bad too. “I possibly made the best meal of my life last night.” There. Those words were true. The meal had been beautiful. But I couldn’t let Jess or DeeAnn dig for more information, so I changed the subject. “How is . . . Natalie?” I asked, having to pause to keep myself from calling her *The Ex*, like I always did in my mind.

“Oh, you know . . . same as always.” Jessica seemed to have taken an extra breath as she looked down at the baby as a distraction. I’d suspected her relationship with her mom wasn’t great, but I couldn’t have imagined the look on Jess’s face just now. That was a look worse than *not that great*.

“I’m sure she’s doing wonderfully,” DeeAnn said with a smile. “Natalie always manages to sparkle everywhere she goes.”

The only thing that kept me from falling into immense amounts of self-pity at having my mother-in-law compliment *The Ex* like that was noticing the way it made Jessica shift her weight and look away.

“Well, our baby Kohl is sure losing some of that chub I love so much.” I switched the subject again, for Jessica’s benefit this time, and kissed his feet, which made him smile and coo while he drooled down his shirt.

“He’s walking all over the place—no . . . running is more like it. Baby fat doesn’t stand a chance against that kind of exercise.”

“And how is Uncle Kohl?” I asked, still cooing at his namesake.

Her head jerked up, and she glanced at DeeAnn as if somehow deciding what could be said in such company. “You know my brother.

He's doing great. You know . . . school, getting good grades, being smarter than everyone else."

"Well, that's wonderful." I glanced around the table at the biscotti and dry sandwiches. The possibility that Marie's sickness might have something to do with the lameness of the menu didn't escape me. "Are you staying for their tea party?" I asked Jessica.

"Oh no. There's a whole list of things I need to do today. I'm afraid I have to be the bad mom and rush the kids on out. I just needed to change Kohl's diaper before we left."

Her mouth twisted slightly, and I wondered if it was because DeeAnn hadn't changed the diaper soon enough—which was totally believable—or if it was because she thought dry sandwiches and biscotti were nasty excuses for a lunch too. I would have stayed and endured DeeAnn if it meant getting to spend time with Jess and the kids. But since Jess wasn't staying . . .

"I get to be the bad mom too." I tsked and put my hand on Tyler's shoulder as he was about to say something to the effect of not minding leaving early. "It was good to see you, Jess. Tell Mike hello for me, and make sure to call me if you ever need a sitter. I'm happy to take my grandbabes for a bit. They're just so kissable!" And I attacked Grace with more kisses. She giggled some more—a sound I loved like I loved sunshine.

"C'mon Ty-buddy, help me gather yours and your sister's stuff and take it to the car." He shot out of the lawn chair without needing to be asked twice. "Say good-bye and thank you," I reminded him.

"Bye, Nan. Thanks for letting us stay."

"You're welcome, Tyler," DeeAnn said. She never let the kids call her anything besides *Nan*. She felt that *Grandma* or *Nana* made her sound old, in spite of the fact that she *was* old. So she shortened it to *Nan*.

Tyler gave Grace a quick hug and tickled Kohl's belly until the baby made the sort of chuckle that brought a smile to everyone. Tyler really did like his little niece and nephew.

He turned to go when DeeAnn said, "Are you forgetting something, Tyler?"

It appeared as though he'd hoped she'd forgotten too, but he pecked a quick obligatory kiss on her cheek then disappeared through the French doors before he could be instructed to do anything else.

"Well, I'll be off too. Everything's already loaded in the car and ready to go." Jess managed to pick up Grace one-handed and settle the toddler

on her other hip. The girl really was a very good mom. “Thanks, Nan. I’d offer to stay and help clean up, but I know today is your maid day, so I won’t worry about it.”

I almost laughed at that as I moved through the house to the front door. I never worried about trying to help clean up anymore because the woman threw fits about everything being done wrong. I always ended up feeling like I’d inconvenienced her—rather than actually helped. I’d have hated to be her maid. DeeAnn’s expectations were borderline criminal. It wouldn’t have surprised me to find out she went through a new maid service every week simply because no one would work for her longer than a few days.

I took a deep breath. *Stop it, Livvy. You’re being unkind.* I muttered out loud, “I always feel like I need chocolate when I leave this house.”

I hadn’t realized how close behind me Jess was until she caught up the few steps and said, “Could you give me a hand buckling these two in?” She didn’t mention the chocolate comment, either because she really hadn’t heard or because she was too polite. My face warmed because she likely *had* heard, and it was not a nice thing to say.

“Of course.” I sent Marie, who seemed to be feeling better already, and Tyler off to buckle themselves in while I followed Jessica to her car.

“So . . . I thought I should tell you because he refuses to say anything to Dad, but you know how Kohl signed up for the marines so he didn’t have to have Dad help pay for his college?”

I nodded.

“He’s being deployed. He’ll be gone for a whole year. I’m gonna miss him like crazy.”

“Deployed where?” I asked, feeling sick about Kohl being all on his own for a whole year. Idiot Nick! Giving his son no other options.

“Djibouti, Africa. I don’t even know if I pronounced that right. He leaves in January. Anyway, I wanted to have a good-bye party for him—a way for everyone in the family and all of his friends to wish him well and show their support and all that, but he totally shot me down. He says no one in the family wants to see him off, and he doesn’t want to see any of them either.” She blew at her bangs and grunted as she battled against Kohl’s waving arms to try to get them inside his seatbelt restraints. “I’m not sure what to do. This is huge. I want to make a big deal out of it exactly because it *is* a big deal. And he keeps shutting me down. What do you think? Should I just let it go?”

“Tanks, ma-maw!” Grace called out in her toddler language as I finished buckling her into her car seat and straightened to face Jessica directly. Jess had the warmest brown eyes I’d ever seen—like wet sand when the setting sun hit it just right—kind of golden brown and filled with light. They were the same color as her father’s eyes.

“You’re welcome, baby,” I said absently to Grace. I pondered Jessica’s question. It was a dilemma I always found myself caught in. How much pushing toward family togetherness was too much pushing?

“I don’t know,” I said finally, leaning against the car. “You’re right. It is a big deal. It totally matters and should be given the attention it deserves.” I almost picked at the paint on the side of the car door where it had peeled away under the humidity of Southern California but stopped myself. Jess would be mortified if I did something like that. Since Mike was being promoted, they’d likely be upgrading the car. This car represented another thing I admired about Jessica. She lived within her means, rather than overspending on play like her mother or overspending on appearances like her father. Jess was so much like me that it seemed wrong that she actually belonged to The Ex.

Kohl? I didn’t understand him nearly as well, if I understood him at all. Kohl may have had his mother’s looks, but he had his father’s stubbornness. He seemed to push people away just like Nick did.

Jessica waited for me to continue.

“Why doesn’t he want a party? Is it because *he* doesn’t want it? Is he happier as a hermit? Or is it because he’s afraid no one will really care and you’ll be the only one to show up?”

Jessica shrugged. “He doesn’t say anything, but probably both. He says Dad won’t come, and Mom’s never civil.”

The Ex really never was civil. She brewed poison as a hobby—no one could convince me otherwise. Who could blame Kohl for not wanting that to be his farewell before he left for Africa? Add DeeAnn to the mix, and you had the perfect storm. Jessica’s wedding had been proof enough that the family was a sticky entanglement.

“I don’t blame him for worrying, but I don’t blame you for wanting a get-together either. One would hope we could all be in the same room and play nice for the sake of Kohl getting one night where it’s about him and not about the past.”

Jessica nodded.

“The past!” Grace shouted like it was the punch line to the best joke ever.

Grace had it right. The past certainly felt like a joke—only not the funny kind.

That pushed away the indecision. “I think we should do it. I’ll help you set everything up, but maybe let’s pick a neutral location to hold it at. Somewhere where none of the major players get to claim being in charge.”

Jessica smiled. “You don’t think forcing him to do this will make him mad at me?”

I snorted. “It might, but at least he’ll know you love him enough to make the effort to give him a special day.”

“Will Dad come, do you think?”

“Of course he will,” I said with far more confidence than I truly felt. I would have to approach it right. I had until January. That was three months to try to work it out. Hopefully that would be enough time to soften him.

“It’s just that after what happened at the wedding . . .”

“That was almost four years ago.” I almost added that Kohl had been a hotheaded teen at the time, but it hadn’t been Kohl’s fault. He’d just tried to keep Nick from walking out on the wedding, and they’d argued. Kohl hadn’t been wrong to try to get Nick to stay at Jessica’s wedding. Nick had been wrong to leave. They hadn’t talked since—not even when Kohl had graduated from high school. Nick had planned a business trip that weekend on purpose so he had an excuse not to be there.

I patted Jessica’s hand. “He’ll come,” I assured her again.

He’ll come if I have to hit him over the head and drag him there unconscious. He owes it to me after ruining our anniversary.

Jessica smiled and nodded again, her face clear and relaxed with the relief she must have felt to have someone to help make a special day for her brother.

“Hey, Livvy,” Jessica called as I turned to leave.

I turned back.

She broke a Kit Kat bar in half and held one of the halves out to me. “I always need chocolate when I leave Nan’s house too.”