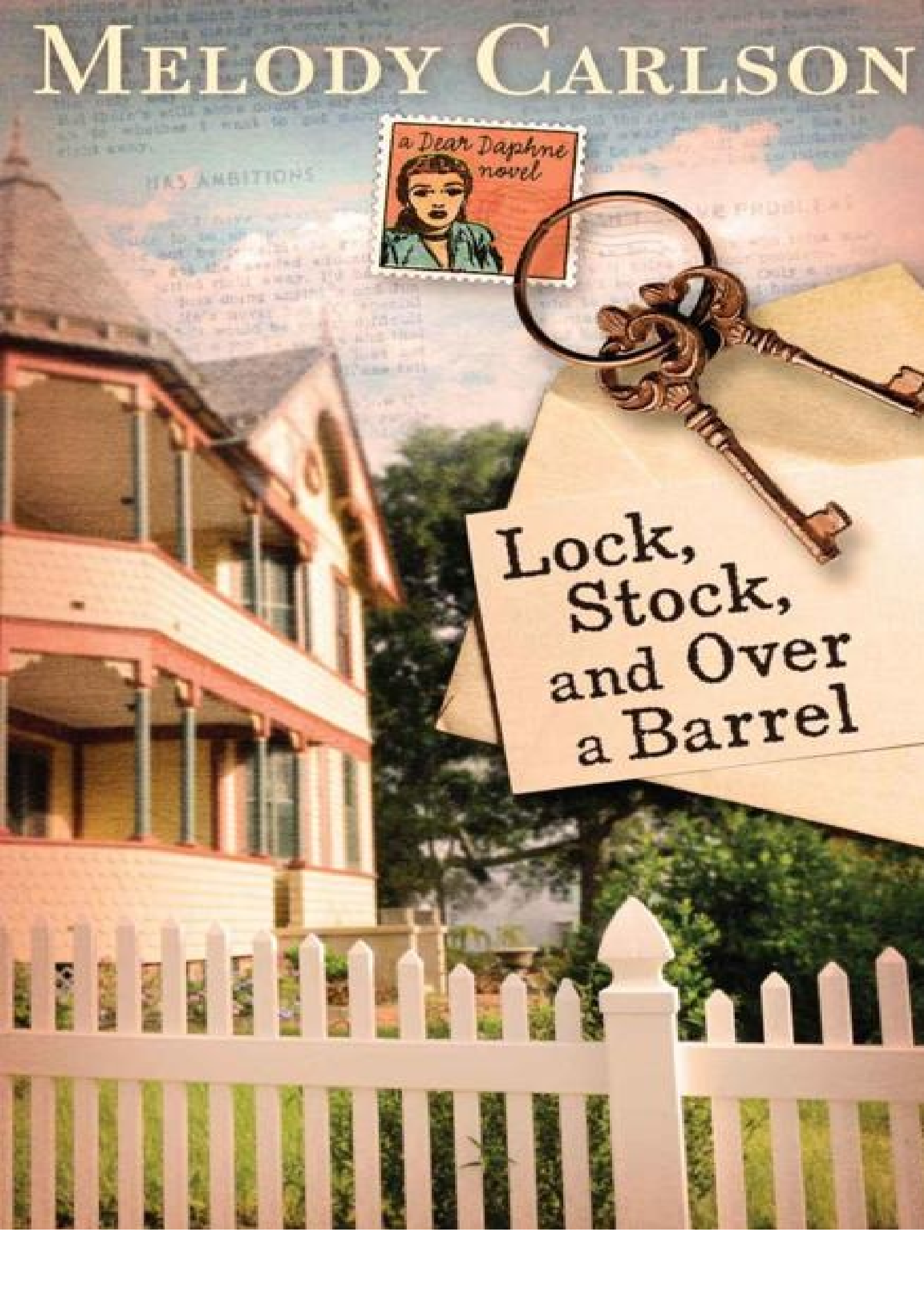


MELODY CARLSON



Lock,
Stock,
and Over
a Barrel



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Lock, Stock, and Over a Barrel, Digital Edition

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Chapter 1



When Daphne Ballinger graduated top of her class with her degree in journalism, in the memorable year of 2000, she had promptly moved to the city to launch her illustrious career writing for *The New York Times*. And why not dream big? Because really, how many grads landed such an impressive job straight out of college?

Her plan had been to work hard and quickly scale the ladder to success. By thirty she would have a corner office with a window overlooking the river as well as an apartment on the west side. By her midthirties, she would have published her first book. But similar to the plans of mice and men, Daphne's best-laid schemes had gone awry.

She stuffed a worn pair of brown Prada pumps into her Hermès bag (splurges she'd indulged in back when she still believed you should dress for the job/life you wanted). Then she sat down to put on her comfy-yet-unfashionable white sneakers. After tying the first shoe, she sat up straight and looked around the messy apartment.

Daphne knew it was cliché but, on gloomy days like today, it truly did feel like the walls were closing in on her. Most of the time, she could overlook the crowded space. She could walk right past piles of papers and miscellaneous pieces of clothing and empty take-out boxes . . . and not even notice. But this morning, the apartment actually seemed to stink. When was the last time they'd really cleaned this place?

She shared this three-bedroom apartment with Greta and Shelby. And in previous years Greta, the lease owner, had always proclaimed April as spring-cleaning month. But it was already mid-May and no one had lifted a finger. And Greta, obsessed with a new job promotion, hadn't complained once. Daphne's gaze skimmed over gritty windows, dingy curtains, dust-covered surfaces, piles of clutter, sun-faded carpet. . . . How had she stayed here so long?

"I can't promise to be here more than a year," Daphne had informed Greta Phillips when she first moved to the city right after graduation.

A coworker at *The Times* had tipped off Daphne about a friend looking for a third roommate for an apartment in Brooklyn. And although the location was lackluster, it was near the subway and the rent was affordable. Besides, it would just be a temporary stop—the bottom rung on her ladder to success—or so she had naively believed.

"And *after* a year?" Greta had asked Daphne with a single arched brow.

Daphne simply smiled . . . perhaps a bit smugly upon reflection. "Oh, I plan to move into my own place by then."

“Your own place?” Greta seemed humored by this declaration. “*Really?*”

“Oh yes. This is just the first step for me.”

“Well, I still need you to sign a one-year lease. After that, we’ll see.”

Daphne had hesitantly signed that “confining” lease, wondering how Greta would react if she was forced to break the contract before the year was up. Although numerous other roommates had come and gone during the next thirteen years, climbing their own ladders to success, Daphne had stayed . . . and stayed . . . and stayed. Remembering the arrogant assumptions of her youth was embarrassing.

“Hey, Daphne,” Shelby called out cheerfully. Shelby was the most recent roommate, less than six months ago she’d moved here straight from her family’s Connecticut home. “I’m heading out early this morning. So you’ll have to put Oliver in the bathroom. Okay?”

Daphne looked over to see Shelby looking sparkly and stylish as she opened a golden shoe box. After tossing the lid, tissue paper, and red shoe bags aside, Shelby extracted a dark-colored shoe with a sole that flashed like a stoplight. Shelby slipped on the first high-heeled pump, pointing her toe to admire the sleek black patent leather. “Classy, huh?”

“*Another* pair of Louboutins?” Daphne frowned, knowing she probably sounded like somebody’s mother. But really, Shelby couldn’t afford such extravagances.

“Yes. Can you believe it?” Shelby giggled. “I think I’m going to need a twelve-step program before long.”

“Or a raise.”

Shelby waved a hand, hopping on one foot as she tugged on the other shoe. “I’d rather settle for a nice, big diamond.” Shelby was obsessed with Marilyn Monroe, and sometimes Daphne worried that the pretty young woman had seen *How to Marry a Millionaire* one time too many.

“So how is that working for you?” Daphne knew Shelby had been flirting with her boss’s son for the past several weeks. She also knew the boss’s son had recently divorced his second wife.

Shelby stood up straight, pushing her short, sassy blond hair back into place with a confident-looking grin. “As it turns out, John Junior is taking me to Club 21.”

“21?” Daphne was impressed. The whole time she’d been in New York, she’d only been there once. And here Shelby was going after just a few months. This girl worked fast.

“Yes. I told John Junior that I’d been dying to go there ever since I moved to the city. And we’re going there *tonight*. Can you believe it?”

“Can you believe it” was Shelby’s favorite expression and sometimes, after hearing it a few dozen times in the course of an evening, Daphne sometimes wanted to gag the girl. “That’s wonderful, Shelby.” She stood and smiled. “I hope you and John Junior have a lovely time.” Did Shelby really call him *John Junior*—to his face?

“Oh, we will.” Shelby reached for her hot pink umbrella, holding it in front of her like a scepter. “The weatherman predicted showers this morning. So don’t forget your umbrella.”

“I hope the rain doesn’t ruin your pretty new shoes.”

“No worries.” Shelby shrugged. “John Junior is picking me up in his car this morning.”

“He’s driving you into Manhattan at this time of day?”

“No, silly, that would be insane. He’s giving me a ride out to his parents’ home in the Hamptons.

John Senior is working at home today, so I’ll be working there too.”

“Oh . . .” Daphne nodded. That explained the new shoes, stylish suit, perfect hair. Shelby was out to impress Mrs. John Senior. “Well, have a good day.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will.” Shelby opened the door to peek out. “There he is now—right on time. You should see his car, Daphne.” She stepped outside, then looked back in. “Don’t forget to put Oliver in the bathroom.”

Daphne went over to the front window, watching as Shelby skipped down the cement stairs in her new shoes, swinging her bright umbrella in time with each step. Sometimes it was as if Shelby were starring in her own movie. She paused midway down the steps, waving to the man who was just getting out of the silver Jaguar in front of their building. From her vantage point, Daphne could see the balding patch on the top of the man’s dark hair, and for some pathetic reason this comforted her.

Still, as she stepped away from her voyeurism, she didn’t wish ill for young Shelby. If John Junior was truly a nice guy, she hoped he would produce a diamond . . . in due time. Daphne hadn’t known Shelby long, but she knew the old-fashioned girl dreamed of a big white wedding and a houseful of kids. It was sweet, really.

“Oliver,” Daphne called out as she grabbed a yogurt carton from the fridge. “Here, kitty-kitty.” She reached into Greta’s bag of kitty treats, singing out enticingly. “Here’s a treat for you, Oliver. Here, kitty-kitty.”

She was not fond of Greta’s fat gray cat and, unfortunately, Oliver seemed to sense this. Still, she kept her voice sugary as she walked around calling for him, “Come on, Oliver, come get your yummy, yummy kitty treat.”

She eventually found him hunkered down in Greta’s bedroom with a guilty expression, but if he was doing something he shouldn’t, Daphne did not want to know. She had learned the hard way to keep her own bedroom door closed. For some twisted reason Oliver sometimes preferred a nice soft bed to his smelly litter box in the bathroom.

“There you are, you darling little scoundrel,” she said in a saccharine tone. As he looked up, she curled her arm around his hefty midsection. “Got you.” Then she quickly packed him off to the bathroom, tossing in the treat with him behind it. “Have a good day, you spoiled fat cat.” Daphne closed the door firmly. It wasn’t that she disliked cats in general. She just didn’t care much for Oliver.

By the time Daphne locked up the apartment and was on her way to the subway, it was already starting to rain. And despite Shelby’s reminder, Daphne had set off without her umbrella and there wasn’t time to run back and get it now. Consequently, as the clouds opened up and let loose, she got thoroughly drenched in the short distance to the subway. Waiting with the other dampened commuters, she tried to shake off some of the moisture before the train arrived, then she hurried in

with the crowd, finding a spot in the back of the car where the air was smelly and muggy and close.

Firmly planting her feet, Daphne held tightly to a pole and, shutting her eyes, attempted to imagine herself in a happier, cleaner, dryer place. Like the Grand Canyon where her dad had taken her as child one summer. She breathed deeply as she recalled the beautiful painted mountains changing hues of golds, reds, and russets at sunset.

This was a trick she'd taught herself years ago, her way to combat the claustrophobia that she sometimes suffered in the city. One would think she'd be over her dislike of tight spaces by now, but on days like today the anxiety seemed to lurk just below the surface. She remembered when she had been in love with New York. Some called it the Big Apple Honeymoon Phase, but it had lasted several years for her. However, like so many other things in her life, it had gotten a little tarnished and dull over the years. And as she emerged from the subway, back into the drizzling rain and noisy traffic, she didn't much like the city.

By the time Daphne reached her cubicle at *The Times* and peeled off her soggy jacket and slushy sneakers and stashed them in a sodden pile in the corner, her long auburn hair, which she'd spent thirty minutes straightening this morning, now resembled Bozo the Clown. Not that anyone would particularly notice or care since most of her day was spent on her own.

Daphne was a wedding writer—one of several—and she had been doing the same thing for more than ten years. She could write one of these pieces in her sleep. In fact, sometimes she did. Oh, not for the paper, but she would lie in bed writing another piece. They ran about 250 words, five or six paragraphs, all meant to impress the bride and the groom and their family and friends.

She turned on her computer and perused her e-mail, sifting through junk and flagging some, and then on to read today's assignments. This time of year was usually fairly busy, but to her surprise there was only one happy couple waiting for the spotlight, and she managed to spend two whole hours on making them seem larger than life. Hopefully they would appreciate her efforts.

Then with still an hour until lunch, she imagined what she'd write for Shelby's wedding announcement, and because she was bored and didn't like to appear idle or get caught playing Spider Solitaire, she decided to hack a phony baloney announcement for her romantic roommate.

Miss Shelby M. Monroe and John Junior Millionaire were married on Friday night in May at Club 21 in downtown Manhattan. Family friend and celebrity entrepreneur Donald Trump, who became an ordained minister for this monumental occasion, officiated the extravagant event where no expenses were spared.

The beautiful bride, twenty-three, and the prematurely balding bridegroom, of undetermined age, met at the bride's place of employment, which is also the bridegroom's father's multimillion-dollar investment corporation.

Miss Monroe, who will not be keeping her name since it's not really her name, will give up her career, which wasn't really a career, in order to raise a houseful of boisterous children. She is the daughter of a once-prestigious family who resided in Westport, Connecticut, until her

father's investment corporation was dissolved in a scandal involving insider trading. Now, despite some diminished wealth, the bride's parents are enjoying an early retirement abroad.

Mr. Millionaire, who goes by John Junior, holds some mysterious position in his father's corporation, where not much actual work is required of him. John Junior graduated from some Ivy League school, where his family probably had some really good connections.

Following an over-the-top honeymoon, which probably involved a beach in an exotic locale, the happy newlyweds will reside in a penthouse apartment on the upper west side.

The bridegroom's first two marriages ended in divorce. Hopefully the third time will be the charm.

Feeling a bit juvenile, not to mention catty, Daphne hit the select all and delete buttons. Best not to leave something like that lying around for too long. She was about to shut down and go to lunch when her cell phone rang. She got up and grabbed her bag. After digging for her elusive phone and expecting it to be Beverly since they were meeting for lunch today, she was surprised to discover it was actually her father. He rarely called her in the middle of the day. Not unless something was wrong.

"Dad?" she said with concern. "What's up?"

"Hello, Daphne. I'm afraid it's bad news."

"What?" Her throat tightened. He'd had some health issues last winter. Hopefully it wasn't worse. She'd lost her mother as a small child. Dad was all she had left of her immediate family.

"It's Aunt Dee . . . she passed away this morning. Her lawyer just called to inform me, and I thought you'd want to know."

"Aunt Dee." Daphne sank back down in her chair. "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that, Dad. I know how much you loved her. I loved her too. And I'd been hoping to get out there to visit you and her this summer. I can't believe she's gone."

Tears filled her eyes as she suddenly recalled the summers she'd spent at Aunt Dee's house as a child when Dad was busy with work. Aunt Dee had tried to make up for Daphne losing her mother. Daphne and Aunt Dee had always enjoyed a special connection and a shared name.

"If it's any consolation, she died peacefully. In her sleep."

"How old was she?" For some reason, Daphne couldn't recall her aunt's age. She knew she was older than Dad, but in a way Aunt Dee had seemed timeless. Maybe it was her youthful spirit.

"She would've been ninety-one in July."

"Ninety-one? Wow, I had no idea she was that old."

"Yes. She never really told anyone her real age. But she enjoyed a good, full life." He sighed. "Even though she never married or had children, she seemed to have a good time in whatever she did. She traveled. Had lots of friends. Dee lived life on her own terms. And she always seemed happy."

"She did—didn't she?" Daphne let out a choked sob as she reached for a Kleenex, wiping the tears now streaming down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, honey. I hate to be the bearer of sad news. But I knew you’d want to know.”

“Yes. I appreciate that. I don’t know why I’m taking this so hard.” She blew her nose.

“Will you be able to make it out here for her memorial service?”

“Yes, of course, Dad.” She reached for another tissue.

“Oh, good. I’m in charge of everything. And I could really use your help with the arrangements. I mean, if you can come out here soon enough . . . I’ll understand if you can’t drop everything.” His voice sounded tired and weak, but maybe it was just sadness.

“How are you feeling? I mean, with your heart and cholesterol and everything. Are you okay?”

“Oh, sure, honey. I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.” He sighed. “When do you think you can get away?”

“I’ll find out as soon as we hang up. And I’ll get right back to you,” she promised.

“Thanks, Daph. I can’t wait to see you.”

They said good-bye, then she grabbed her purse and hurried up to her boss’s office, feeling she’d get better results if she asked in person. Hopefully Amelia wouldn’t have left for lunch yet. However when she got up there, Daphne could tell by the darkened office that Amelia was already gone.

“Amelia left early for a lunch meeting,” her assistant told Daphne. “Want me to leave her a message for you?”

“No. I’ll come after lunch. When do you expect her back?”

Fiona shrugged. “Well, you know how those working lunches can drag on forever. I wouldn’t expect her until three or maybe even four.”

“Thanks. I’ll stop by later.” Daphne headed out to meet Beverly, calling her as she walked toward their favorite dining spot. She left a message saying she was running late. Then she called Dad and explained that her boss was out. “As soon as I know, I’ll call,” she assured him.

Fortunately, the rain had stopped and the clouds had cleared and the city, now scrubbed fresh and clean, should be shimmering in the sunshine. And yet, as Daphne hurried down the street, everything around her still felt dull and gray and dismal.

Chapter 2



Beverly already had a table when Daphne arrived at the busy restaurant, and after their preliminary greetings were over, Daphne explained about her aunt and her dad and why she was late.

“I’m so sorry.” Beverly reached over and put her hand on Daphne’s. “I’ve heard you mention her before. Didn’t she help you get your job at *The Times*?”

“Yes. Strangely enough, Aunt Dee knew someone there back then. I’m not even sure who it was or what the connection was . . . but she did put in a good word for me when I graduated college.”

“And wasn’t she a writer too?”

“Yes. But you know, I’ve never actually read a thing she’s written. I think she did some kind of technical writing. Like manuals or textbooks or something pretty dull. When I was a kid staying with her, she’d hole up in her study for several hours in the afternoon, pounding away on her old electric typewriter.” She shook her head. “Can you imagine writing a textbook on a typewriter?”

“No way.”

“She had a fear of computers and I suppose they were a little hard to use back then. But sometime I’d sneak in and ask her if I could read what she was working on. But she’d just laugh and say something like, ‘Oh, it’s so doggone boring, darling, it would put you to sleep faster than a glass of warm milk on a cold winter’s night.’”

They both laughed.

“And then as if to make up for it, she’d find me some wonderful classic book to read. Aunt Dee’s the reason I learned to love reading. She started me out on *Little House on the Prairie* and *Anne of Green Gables*. Then she introduced me to Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters later. And she made me keep a journal while I was at her house. I learned to love writing because of her.”

Beverly smiled. “It sounds like she was a wonderful influence on your life.”

“She was. Everyone in her town loved her. I’m sure she will be missed a lot.” Daphne explained her plan to go back to help her father with the funeral plans. “I just hope Amelia doesn’t mind.”

“Well, she shouldn’t mind,” Beverly declared a bit hotly. On a regular basis, Beverly told her that Amelia took unfair advantage of Daphne’s loyalty. “You work harder than any of her staff. And you never take sick days. You must have plenty of vacation time coming.”

Daphne nodded. “I do.”

“Then take them. And I know I’ve said this before, but I’m sure it’s because of Amelia that you never get promoted.” Beverly rolled her eyes. “But don’t get me going on that.”

“Trust me, I won’t.”

Ever since Beverly had quit working for the paper more than five years ago, back when she married their friend Robert and started freelancing from home, she had gotten quite comfortable at taking potshots at certain department heads, including Amelia. In an effort to preserve their friendship, Daphne had proclaimed discussions on the paper to be off-limits—it was a no-fly zone. And most of the time, Beverly respected it.

“Okay, you’re right. Let’s change the subject.” Beverly’s tone turned cheerful. “I was going to tell you something . . . although in light of your bad news, I suddenly feel a little guilty. Maybe I should ___”

“What is it? *Tell me*,” Daphne demanded. “And really, it’s okay. Did you sell your book?”

Beverly giggled. “No, no. I wish . . . I mean that would be really good news. But this is actually much better . . . in a different sort of way.” Her eyes twinkled.

Daphne studied her. Something seemed different about her friend. “Is it . . . I mean are you . . . Beverly, are you expecting?”

With an ear-to-ear grin, Beverly nodded eagerly. “It caught me by total surprise. You know how we’d been trying . . . and how my biological time clock was ticking. . . . But I’d gotten so caught up in the feature I was writing this spring. And it kept taking longer than I expected, it’s like I lost track of my own body. And last month I realized that I was late. I mean very, very late.”

“And you didn’t even tell me then?” Daphne felt slightly hurt.

“No way. I didn’t tell anyone. Not even Robert.” Beverly took in a deep breath. “You remember when I lost the other baby after only two months and we were all so devastated? Well, I was determined to make it three months before I told anyone.” She beamed at Daphne. “And I did that last week. And the doctor says everything looks really good. I should go full term.”

“I’m so happy for you. You’ve waited so long. You really deserve this. Both of you.” More tears filled Daphne’s eyes. But these were tears of joy . . . at least that’s what she told herself. The truth was, she didn’t know for sure. Her best friend was married and soon to have children . . . they would undoubtedly drift apart.

“As you can imagine, Robert is over the moon,” Beverly said. “He’s already looking for houses, if you can imagine.”

“Houses?”

Beverly waved her hand. “Oh, you know Robert. He’s a country boy at heart. He’s certain we can’t raise normal, healthy children in the city.”

“So you’re really going to move?” Daphne tried not to imagine what it would be like living in the city without her best friend nearby.

“Oh, not right away. Unless Robert finds something too great to pass up.”

“Well, it is a buyer’s market.”

“That’s what Robert keeps telling me. He keeps saying things like we have to strike while the

iron's hot." Now Beverly described some of the charming properties Robert had found, some that actually had white picket fences, explaining how Robert might start working from home part-time to help her with the baby. It sounded like they were about to become such a delightfully happy little family that it took all of Daphne's self-control not to burst into uncontrollable full-blown sobbing.

She nodded and smiled as she picked away at her flat-tasting chicken salad, trying to act supportive and interested in her best friend's perfect life. How was it possible that in just one day, one's entire life could turn upside down and sideways while the rest of the world just kept chugging merrily along?

Amelia had been surprisingly agreeable to Daphne's sudden need for time off from work. "Take as long as you need," she told Daphne. "No problem."

Daphne should've felt relieved as she buckled her seat belt on the plane the next day. Instead she felt dispensable. Of course, *The Times* could get by without her. They'd gotten by without her for over 150 years. They wouldn't even notice she was gone now. Beverly was right—Amelia did take Daphne for granted.

As she looked out the window, staring blankly at the clouds, Daphne decided that when she returned to New York, she would confront Amelia and insist on discussing a promotion. Beverly had been telling Daphne to do that for years now. It was high time Daphne grew a backbone and did it.

She thought about Aunt Dee. Wasn't that what she would tell Daphne? Grab life by the horns and live it fully? And truly, that was what Daphne had thought she was doing back in 2000 when she'd first come to New York. She had felt like she was reaching for the stars and dreaming big. But somewhere down the line, she'd given up . . . but why?

The sun broke through the clouds with blindingly bright light, and Daphne quickly slid down the window covering, and leaning back she sighed. She knew exactly why . . . as well as when and where and how and who.

She'd given up on her dreams after Ryan broke her heart.

Although he was seven years her senior, Ryan Holloway had come to work at *The Times* a couple years after Daphne—shortly after she'd been promoted to writing engagement pieces and was just starting to feel more confident. Previous to *The Times*, Ryan had been the sports editor for a small newspaper out west, but he'd showed enough promise and potential to secure an impressive job as a sports writer for *The Times*. And to Daphne's amazement, she was the girl who had caught his eye. Ryan didn't know about her ugly duckling past. He'd never seen the gawky, skinny, redheaded girl who never fit in—the girl with freckles and braces and eventually zits.

Instead, he looked at her with hungry eyes. He was the first man—the only man besides her father—who told her she was beautiful. "Who can resist a long-legged beauty?" he'd say as he dropped a long-stemmed red rose on her desk. "Here's one hot number for another," he'd say as he unexpectedly delivered a cup of steaming mocha. It wasn't long before they were dating—steadily. And right from the start, the relationship had been magical, wonderful, amazing.

In some ways it had probably appeared similar to Shelby's seemingly charmed life now. There had been many incredible moments when Daphne and Ryan, feeling young and in love and invincible, ran around the city with abandon. It had felt like she was starring in her own wonderful movie. A romantic love story that was so totally unlike her previous life—the life where she'd taken everything far too seriously and made all her choices much too carefully. But with Ryan by her side, she threw caution to the wind. She dove into romance, and the water was fine. Sometimes it all seemed too good to be real. Unfortunately it was.

Everything came to a screeching halt when Daphne discovered Ryan was already married. They'd been dating for a year and the whole time she had absolutely no idea, not an inkling, that Ryan had a wife waiting for him back in Idaho. And not just a wife. Two small children as well.

Because he traveled a lot for sports events, she had never questioned his absences. And when he returned to New York, he always seemed as thrilled to see her as she was to see him. Really, if not for that one unforgettable phone call, they could've gone on like that for ages.

Ryan had left his cell phone on the table while they were having a late dinner one night. He'd been paying close attention to his phone because he was waiting to hear about a big assignment from his boss. So when the phone rang, thinking it was Rich at *The Times*, Daphne answered. In retrospect, she wondered why she hadn't let it just go to voice mail . . . but perhaps she'd intuited something. Maybe somewhere deep inside she had known that something was amiss . . . too good to be true. But sitting in the plane, thirty-five thousand feet over the Midwest, Daphne still remembered the phone call like it was yesterday.

"Who is this?" a female voice demanded. "I'm trying to reach Ryan Holloway and I know this is his number."

"I'm sorry," Daphne said. "This is Ryan's phone, but he's in the restroom at the moment, so I answered for him. Is this Rich's assistant?"

"No, this is *not* Rich's assistant. This is Ryan's *wife*. Who is *this*?"

"I—uh—I—uh . . ." Daphne felt like someone had just pushed a diabolical button causing the floor beneath her to vanish, like she was tumbling down into some deep, dark bottomless abyss. "Pardon me?" she said meekly, hoping she'd heard this angry-sounding woman incorrectly.

"I said this is Ryan's wife. Belinda Holloway. What I want to know is *who are you*? I know Ryan's been seeing someone. And since it's nighttime, I'll bet that makes you that someone. Tell me, are you the other woman? The one who's been stealing my husband's affections? The home wrecker who doesn't even care that Ryan has two young children? Tell me the truth!"

Without saying another word, Daphne closed Ryan's phone, set it back down on the table, and slowly stood. She gathered her bag and jacket and, on shaking legs, walked out of the restaurant, got on the subway, and went home.

Ryan had called her again and again, but she didn't answer her phone. And she didn't go into work either. Not for three days. Then following a weekend intervention from Beverly and Greta and their

other roommate at the time, Daphne returned to work the following Monday. Humbly going to Amelia, who was threatening to fire her, Daphne groveled and apologized, promising to do whatever it took to make it up to her, including bringing her coffee, taking the worst assignments—kissing her feet whenever she walked by. Daphne managed to keep her job. And, indeed, she had been making it up to Amelia ever since.

Because he'd been out on assignment and Daphne had become quite adept at making herself nearly invisible—which wasn't easy for a tall redhead—their paths didn't cross for nearly two weeks. And naturally, by then he had put two and two together and concluded his wife had figured him out.

"Our marriage was already over," he told Daphne after he coerced her into meeting him at Central Park—he'd told her it was either there or the workplace, and Daphne couldn't risk her job.

"If it's over, why are you still married?" she frostily demanded.

"Because it was just a matter of time."

She was avoiding looking at him, worried he would soften her resolve to never speak to him again—after this meeting.

"Honestly, I don't love Belinda anymore. I planned on telling her it was over."

She turned and glared at him. "And your two children? Is it over for them too?"

He groaned. "I know, I know . . . it's not fair to them. But is it fair for me to remain in a loveless marriage?"

"Was it fair to me for you to pretend you were single and hurt me like this?"

"I know I've made a mess of everything. But I love you, Daphne. I really do."

"I don't want to hear it." She stood. "You are married, Ryan. No matter how I feel about you, I refuse to be involved with a married man."

"But I'll divorce her. I promise I will."

She took in an angry breath, controlling herself from pummeling his chest and screaming. "Do you really think that's what I want? To think I'm the reason you left your wife and young children? Do you really think I can live with that? Do you?" She turned and walked away.

Less than a month later, she learned that Ryan had taken a job with another newspaper on the other side of the country. As much as she appreciated that, she was so deeply wounded that it took years for her to get over him.

Even now, replaying all this in her head, she wasn't completely sure that she was. Because as much as she hated him for deceiving her, a small part of her still had feelings for him. And that just made her feel angry.

At Beverly's recommendation, Daphne had attended a group-therapy session for a year or so after the breakup. It was kind of like a twelve-step group for the "brokenhearted." The sad little band of lonely hearts met in a church in Brooklyn, sharing their problems and praying for each other. And finally after nearly a year, Daphne felt she was ready to move on from the group. The best thing she learned from her brokenhearted friends was that she needed to forgive Ryan, as well as his angry wife.

And equally important, she needed to forgive herself.

So whenever thoughts of Ryan came up after that, sometimes not for weeks or even months at a time and sometimes right out of the blue, she'd promised herself she would pray for him and his children, who were probably teenagers by now. And that was just what she was doing as the flight attendant announced it was time to prepare for landing. And just like always, that did the trick. Somehow just praying for him and his kids seemed to make the pain and heartache go away and she was able to move forward again . . . one step at a time.

Chapter 3



Even though she had assured her dad that she could get a taxi to take her the twenty miles to Appleton, Daphne was very glad to see him waiting for her in baggage claim.

She hugged him tightly then stepped back to give him a good, long look. He seemed to have aged a lot since she'd last seen him nearly two years ago.

"You look as pretty as ever," Dad said as he reached for her bag. She started to protest that he might strain himself but stopped, knowing that would hurt his feelings.

"Thanks, Dad. You're looking good too." She looped a strap of her carry-on over her shoulder.

He patted his flattened midsection. "The doctor made me lose some weight."

"Good for you."

"And my cholesterol has gone down some too."

"Even better."

"I thought maybe you'd want to stay at Dee's house," he said as they walked through the parking lot.

"Not with you?"

He shrugged. "Well sure, you can stay with me if you want, but the place is a mess."

"A mess?" That didn't sound like her neatnik father.

"Truth is, I've been going through some old stuff—you know, getting rid of junk."

"Junk?"

"Oh, just the stuff that piles up over the years. Worthless things you wouldn't want, Daphne. The Realtor suggested I thin things out."

"The Realtor?"

Dad opened the trunk of his old blue sedan, set her bag inside, then closed it. He turned and gave her a sheepish smile. "I plan to move into a condo. At Green Trees."

"A condo?" She frowned. "Really?"

They got in the car. "I'm not getting any younger, and that house needs a lot of upkeep. The roof will need replacing in a few years. The gutters always need cleaning out. The deck and fence are getting old. And the grass—did you know that grass needs cutting two times a week in the summer?"

"You could get a landscaping service," she suggested.

"I'll have landscaping service at Green Trees."

"So your mind's made up?"

"Yep. I've got an offer on a unit right now. I made it just last week . . . before Dee passed away."

Karen, she's my Realtor, is certain she can find a buyer for me. She plans to have an open house as soon as I get it cleared out a little. I've gotten a little distracted . . . you know, because of Dee's death. But I plan to have the house listed by early June."

"Wow." Daphne just nodded, taking all this in. "I had no idea."

"I know, honey, but it just seemed to make sense. As you know, I'll retire this fall on my seventy-second birthday." He chuckled. "Some people, the ones who want my job, say I should've retired a long time ago. I thought why not make a fresh start? And there are a lot of retired folks living at Greentrees. Although Karen lives there and she's not even sixty. But she loves it too."

That was the second time he'd mentioned this Karen person, and something about the way he said her name made Daphne curious. Still, she didn't want to be too nosy. Not yet anyway.

"There's a pool and a game room and some other amenities. Plus the country club is less than half a mile away. Some of the condo people own golf carts and take a little trail over there to play golf or tennis or just have lunch."

"That sounds like fun."

He nodded. "Yeah, it sure does. And the old neighborhood has changed so much over the years, Daphne. You'd hardly know it anymore. None of the old neighbors live there now. Young families have moved in, and they've all remodeled or built additions onto their houses. It kind of makes our house look like it's stuck in a time warp. But Karen thinks that's a good thing. You never want to have the nicest house in the neighborhood."

There he was talking about this Karen again. "Well, it sounds like you've given it plenty of thought, Dad."

"I sure have. I just had no idea I'd accumulated so much junk over the years. And now that you're here, you might want to go through some things too. I started a pile for you." He stopped for a traffic light, then turned to look at her. "Sorry to break it on you like this, honey. I was going to talk it over with you first, but I know how you're so busy with your big New York City life. Working for *The New York Times*." He grinned. "It's always fun telling my friends about my daughter the famous journalist. Anyway, I didn't think you'd care too much one way or another about our little old house."

She didn't bother to correct his perception of her illustrious career—why burst his bubble? "Well, it sounds like a smart move for you." But even as she said this, she felt incredibly sad. First losing Aunt Dee . . . and then hearing Dad was selling the house she'd grown up in. It all felt so final, like she was being neatly dissected from her childhood and past. And what did she really have to replace it with? As Dad pulled through the intersection, the lump in her throat grew hard as a rock and she dug around her purse for a tissue, quietly wiping the tears slipping down again.

At the next stoplight, Dad looked over at her. "Oh, Daphne, are you missing Aunt Dee too?"

She sniffed and blew her nose. Although that was only one part of her sadness, she had no intention of going into all that right now. "Yes . . . I wish I could've spent more time with her. Sometimes it seems like things change so quickly."

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, Aunt Dee was very proud of you. Do you know she actually got *The New York Times* on the Internet? I think she read almost everything you wrote.”

“Seriously?” She tucked the used tissue back into her purse. Her aunt must’ve been awfully bored.

“She said you were doing a fine job.”

Daphne shrugged. “I only write wedding announcements. It’s no big deal.”

Of course, this only invited her father to sing her praises. She let him go on for a bit before she changed the subject. “Will you miss working at the bank, Dad?”

He laughed. “Just like you’d miss a bad headache after it went away.”

“Really? You used to love running the bank.”

“Banking has gotten more and more challenging, Daphne. Certainly, the sluggish economy hasn’t helped. But honestly, it seems like every time I turn around, we’re being inspected or audited or scrutinized. It’s like no one trusts banks anymore.” He let out a long sigh. “Take it from me, no one will be happier than me when I hit seventy-two and call it quits for good.”

“Will you be in your condo by then?”

“I hope to close the deal within a month. I’ve got some financing lined up in case the house doesn’t sell right out of the gate. And Karen says it’ll be easier to show the house if I’m not living in it. She has this friend with a business—where they bring fancy new furnishings and lamps and paintings to make the house look like a model home. I think she called it ‘staging.’ You ever heard of that?”

“Yes, I know exactly what staging is and it really does work to sell houses.”

Daphne had never admitted to all the hours she’d spent watching home improvement shows on HGTV. Sometimes she’d spent whole weekends vegetating in front of the little TV in her bedroom. She secretly rationalized it was her way to “vicariously nest” while stuck in the Brooklyn apartment. Especially since she’d learned long ago that Greta wanted everything to remain the same. Besides her ten-by-ten bedroom, Daphne had no control over the depressing decor of the shabby flat, nor did she particularly care to.

Before long, they were in Appleton and Dad was turning onto Huckleberry Lane, entering the neighborhood where Aunt Dee had resided for as long as Daphne could remember. “I always loved this part of town.” She admired the maple trees lining the street. “All these old houses are so unique and beautiful.” She pointed at a recently painted Victorian. “Look at how they fixed that one up. The plum-colored gingerbread is so perfect against the olive and sage greens. How fun.”

“It must’ve been a bear to paint.” Dad shook his head. “Makes my little ranch house look pretty low maintenance.”

He pulled up in front of Aunt Dee’s Queen Anne Victorian now. “Here we are.”

“Oh, it’s exactly the same as I remember.” She smiled up at the gracious white house with its front bay window and rounded turret on the second floor. Pink roses were already climbing prettily over the arbor that linked the kitchen to the carriage house that served as a single-car garage. Daphne gazed fondly at the overflowing flower beds. “And her yard looks gorgeous. How did she manage that at her

age?”

“She hired a yard man about ten years ago. Although she still kept her finger in it—I should say her green thumb. But the yard man did the heavy work. And Dee had been planning to have the house painted again this summer. She’d even been considering using a color besides white this time, if you can imagine.”

“I cannot imagine. It’s always been white . . . and white just seems right.”

He turned off the car’s engine and sighed. “I still can’t believe she’s gone.”

“I know.” Daphne got out of the car, and as she caught a whiff of the blooming jasmine and lilacs growing along the sides of the house, she was immediately transported to another era . . . a happier time. As much as she loved her dad and the house she’d grown up in on the other side of town, it always felt like coming home when she arrived at Aunt Dee’s.

“You sure you don’t mind staying here on your own, because I can still carve a place for you at home if you want. Your room’s piled high right now, but the guest room isn’t really too bad, if you don’t mind making a trail through the boxes.”

“No, Dad. It’s okay, I want to be here. It’s perfect, really. And it’ll allow me to remember Aunt Dee . . . and to say good-bye.” She felt the lump again.

He wheeled her bag up the walk and onto the porch, then unlocked the door. “I cleaned things a little,” he said as he opened the massive door. “Not that it needed much. Despite her age, your aunt was a good housekeeper. But there were some dirty dishes in the sink . . . some laundry in the hamper . . . that sort of thing. And Mrs. Terwilliger has been seeing to the cats.”

“Dee still has Ethel and Lucy?”

“Yes. But they must be getting up in years.”

As she looked around for the cats, Daphne remembered when she’d gone with Aunt Dee to get the pair of kittens at the animal shelter. Her aunt had claimed that she was getting them to take Daphne’s place since she was going away to college.

“They must be about sixteen years old,” she told her dad. And just then an orange cat, followed by a stripy gray cat came around the corner from the kitchen.

“Hello, girls.” Daphne knelt down, waiting as Lucy, the orange cat, cautiously approached her. “I’m sorry for your loss,” she said as she scratched Lucy’s head. “I know you will miss her.” Now Ethel joined her, rubbing against her legs and insisting on being petted too. “What will become of these sweet kitties?” she asked Dad as she stood.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. But Green Trees doesn’t allow pets.” He chuckled. “Which is just one more thing I like about the place. My neighbor’s terrier thinks my front yard is his personal restroom. It gets old after a while.”

“I suppose I could take the cats back to New York with me. But I doubt they’d like being cooped up in the apartment all day. Plus Greta has a mean old cat that would probably make these sweet girls miserable.” She walked through the front room, pausing to open the drapes as well as a window.

“Everything looks clean, but I think the house could use some air.”

“Good idea.” He went to the other side of the room and opened another window to create a breezeway. “We’ve had good weather this spring—everything is in bloom.”

She glanced over to the closed bedroom door, suddenly feeling like an interloper, as if Aunt Dee might suddenly appear and be surprised by this unexpected intrusion. “You say she died in her sleep?”

He rubbed his chin as he studied the tall paneled door. “Yes. Mrs. Terwilliger found her on Tuesday morning. She said she was worried when Dee didn’t put her trash out for pick up. She called to remind her it was garbage day, and when Dee didn’t answer the phone or the door, Mrs. Terwilliger got worried. She used the key under the flowerpot and let herself in and found Dee in bed. She said Dee looked so peaceful that she thought she was asleep and almost left. But then she realized something wasn’t right . . . and that’s when she called me.”

Daphne pressed her lips together. “I’m glad she died peacefully.”

Dad put an arm around her. “Yeah . . . me too.”

Daphne got her things settled in the front bedroom upstairs, the one with the turret and the place she’d always claimed as her own as a child. To her relief not much had changed up there either. She ran her hand along the smooth cherry banister as she came down the stairs. How many times had she slid down that?

They took a little tour of the backyard that, like the front, looked better than ever. And then Dad insisted on taking her to dinner. “Anywhere you want to go,” he told her as they went around to the front. As they stood by the car, he listed all the restaurant options and many were places she’d never even heard of before.

“Sounds like the town has grown.”

“Oh, yeah. We had that building boom shortly after you moved to New York.” He unlocked the car. “But it’s been a lot quieter these past few years.”

“You know what I’d like to do?”

“What?” He opened the car door for her.

“I’d like to walk downtown and eat at Midge’s Diner. Just like I used to do with Aunt Dee sometimes.”

He grinned as he closed the car door. “Sounds good to me. Let’s do it.”

Before they left, Mrs. Terwilliger hurried out, expressing her sympathy to Daphne and asking Dad about the upcoming memorial service.

“I’ve scheduled the church for Monday morning at ten,” Dad told her.

“And will you need help with a meal afterward?” she asked hopefully.

“Maybe so. We’ll let you know as soon as we get all the details figured out.” He tipped his head to Daphne. “She’s going to help me get organized.”

“And I’ll be staying here at Aunt Dee’s,” Daphne assured her. “So I’ll take care of the cats.”

Mrs. Terwilliger nodded. “Oh, good. I know they’ve been lonely. And maybe you can come over

for coffee or tea tomorrow.” She made a sad smile. “I’m sure going to miss Dee. She was my favorite neighbor.”

Daphne reached over and grasped Mrs. Terwilliger’s hand. “I’m sorry for your loss too. I know you were a good friend to Aunt Dee.”

“And she was a good friend to me . . .” She sniffed, retrieving a hanky from her pocket. “Sometimes I forget . . . we’re all getting older . . .”

As Daphne and her dad walked toward town, she admired the old houses along the side street, commenting on how their homeowners were keeping them up. “It looks even nicer than it did when I was a kid. It’s like people have realized the value of these sweet, old houses and decided to invest in them.”

Downtown looked pretty much the same, although there were a number of new businesses. Midge Diner had big flower boxes by the door as well as some outdoor seating. But they went inside and Daphne was surprised to see it wasn’t very busy, but then it was just a bit past five and a little early for dinner. To her relief everything looked exactly the same inside—only better. From the gleaming black-and-white floor tiles to the chrome-trimmed tables and bar stools to the shiny fire-engine red upholstery—it still looked straight out of the fifties and just as Daphne remembered it. The only thing missing was Midge. But then she’d retired when Daphne was a teen.

“Who owns this place now?” she asked her dad after a waitress seated them in a booth by the front window.

“Ricardo Martoni. Didn’t you go to school with him?”

“Sure. I remember Ricardo.” Daphne didn’t admit that she used to have a huge crush on the handsome boy. Naturally, he probably didn’t even know she existed. Why would he? Back then she thought he resembled Charlie Sheen. What did he look like now?

“Speak of the devil.” Dad pointed to a dark-haired man coming into the restaurant. “Hello, Ricardo.”

Smiling, Ricardo came over to their table and shook Dad’s hand. “Good to see you, Mr. Ballinger. He was dressed casually in neat-looking jeans and a blue plaid shirt. And although he didn’t look as much like Charlie Sheen as she remembered, he was definitely attractive in that dark Italian way.

“Remember I told you to call me Don.” Dad nodded to Daphne. “And you remember my daughter Daphne, don’t you?”

“Oh, he probably doesn’t. I was a couple years younger and—”

“Sure I remember you.” Ricardo smiled and reached over to shake her hand. “Daphne Ballinger. Your aunt lived a couple houses down from us and you used to spend a lot of time there. In fact, did I just hear she passed away?” His smile faded.

They filled him in and he expressed his sympathy and then, to change to a happier subject, Daphne complimented him on the fine condition of his restaurant. “It looks like you’ve made a lot of nice improvements. And yet you’ve kept things the same too.”

“Oh yeah, you can’t mess with a classic. Even though I’ve renovated, I’ve tried to stay true to its history. I loved this place when I was growing up.”

“Well, it’s very nice. It feels like coming home.”

“And the food’s better than ever,” Dad told her. “And healthier too.”

“We try to offer a heart-healthy menu.” Ricardo released a sheepish smile. “Although we still have to offer the old burgers, shakes, and fries.” He lowered his voice. “But we try to use healthier ingredients.”

The restaurant was getting busier now and Ricardo excused himself, going over to play host by the front door. Everyone seemed to know everyone by first name here. And as they came in and were seated, the restaurant felt more like a private home having a social gathering than a place of business. It felt comforting.

“That Ricardo is a good businessman,” Dad said quietly. “He came in for a loan and I was very impressed. Good head on his shoulders.”

“He always seemed smart in school.” Daphne opened her menu.

“And he’s *still single*.”

She glanced up. The way Dad said the words *still single* was obviously some kind of insinuation. But not wanting to go there, she turned her attention back to the menu. “How’s the meatloaf?”

“It’s delicious. Ricardo makes it himself.”

Dad was grinning, like he was enjoying a private joke.

“Maybe I’ll try it.” She closed the menu.

“The meatloaf or Ricardo?” Dad chuckled like this was hilarious.

“*Dad*.” She scolded him, shaking her head.

He made an innocent look. “Hey, you can’t blame an old guy for trying. After all, Ricardo’s a respectable, hard-working young man. I’m surprised some smart young lady hasn’t snatched him up by now.” He shrugged. “Besides, you could do worse.”

She gave him a tolerant smile. “I guess I should be thankful we don’t live in the same town, or I’d probably have to put up with this all the time.”

His lower lip protruded as if her words had cut him deeply, although she knew better. She and her dad had always enjoyed a little good-natured teasing—especially when it came to her marital status. “Somebody’s got to look out for your interests,” he said. “You heard Mrs. Terwilliger’s insinuation. None of us are getting any younger. And just so you know, some of us are hoping to get some grandchildren before he’s too old to enjoy them or remember their names.”

Daphne suppressed the childish urge to smack her father over the head with her menu. But she didn’t want to create a spectacle or disrupt their fellow diners. Sometimes, just sometimes, she was tempted to enroll her father in a sensitivity training seminar—the remedial class!

Chapter 4



It was a lot to take on, but Daphne insisted on hosting a luncheon in the house following the funeral service. So many friends and neighbors and family members had offered to bring food, and it just seemed fitting to celebrate Aunt Dee's life in the home she had loved. Of course, Daphne hadn't realized what a chore it would be to get everything organized and ready for so many guests.

"That was a lovely service," Aunt Louisa said to Daphne as they strolled through the backyard, admiring the flower beds together. "And a very nice luncheon too." Louisa Ballinger, in her late eighties, was Aunt Dee's sister-in-law. She'd been residing in an assisted-living facility since her husband, Uncle Dennis, had passed away several years ago.

But their two children, Martin and Marlene, as well as their spouses and children and their children's spouses and grandchildren—numbering more than twenty—had all shown up to show their respect to Aunt Dee. Combined with friends and neighbors, Daphne estimated there were more than a hundred coming and going through the house throughout the afternoon. Still, it was worth the effort. Daphne imagined her aunt smiling down on all the people milling about, visiting, reminiscing, and enjoying a big reunion in her honor.

After several hours, and after all the neighbors and friends had gone their separate ways, Daphne was a bit surprised to see all the family members seemed to be lingering. It was touching to think that they loved Aunt Dee so much that they didn't want to leave, but some of the small children seemed to be getting tired—and getting into things. Daphne had already hidden the terrorized Ethel and Lucy in an upstairs bedroom. And now some of her cousins' older kids were taking a toll on the flowers as they improvised a game of soccer in the backyard.

"Why are they staying so long?" Daphne whispered to her dad as they cleaned up in the kitchen.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?"

"Tell me?" She rinsed a platter and set it in the dishwasher.

"Dee's attorney is coming at four."

Daphne looked at the kitchen clock. "Well, it's nearly four now. What is the attorney going to do?"

"The reading of the will."

"Oh . . ." Daphne closed the dishwasher. "And everyone is staying for it?"

"Yes." He frowned. "Martin asked that it be read with everyone present."

"I see . . ." Martin was Louisa's oldest son, and although he was an attorney, he had not been Aunt Dee's attorney. Daphne knew this because she'd heard him complaining about it earlier.

“Did you notice that Ricardo Martoni and his mother came by to pay their respects?” Dad hung up a dish towel.

“Yes. I had a nice little chat with Maria. I didn’t realize she was widowed.” She elbowed her Dad in a teasing way. “Pretty good-looking too for being in her midsixties. Maybe you should give her a call.”

Dad looked embarrassed. “Well, you did meet Karen, didn’t you? I thought I saw you two talking.

“Oh?” She tilted her head to one side. “Does that mean you and Karen are getting serious?”

Unless she was mistaken, her dad was blushing.

“Sorry. It’s really none of my business.”

He nodded. “But I’m curious . . . what did you think of her?”

Daphne thought about the energetic blonde Realtor who had chatted with enthusiasm about what kind of price Aunt Dee’s house might fetch in today’s market. “Sure, I liked her. She seems intelligent and motivated and interesting.”

Dad smiled. “Yes, she is, isn’t she?”

“Hello?” called a male voice. “Don, are you in there?”

Dad called back, and now a man wearing a dark gray suit came into the kitchen. He had thick, dark hair with a speckling of gray. “Oh, you must be Daphne.” He reached out for her hand, firmly shaking it. “I’m Jake McPheeters.”

“Aunt Dee’s attorney,” Dad explained.

“I would know you anywhere.” Jake released her hand.

“Really?” She was surprised.

“Absolutely. Dee told me you looked like Lucille Ball in her younger years. And I must agree with her.”

Daphne felt her own cheeks flushing now. “Well, that’s flattering, but I don’t know . . .”

“Speaking of that, how are Lucy and Ethel faring?”

“They’re okay,” she told him. “I tucked them into a quiet bedroom for safekeeping.”

“So, want to round up the relatives?” Jake held up his briefcase. “This really shouldn’t take long.”

“Sure.” Dad nodded. “I’ll go tell everyone to gather in the front room.”

“You ready for this?” Jake asked Daphne.

“Sure.” She turned on the dishwasher, then gave the counter a swipe. “Let’s get it over with.”

Before long, all of the adults and many of the children were crowded into the front room. Some were sitting on chairs, some on the floor, and a few of the younger ones were standing. Jake went over to the foot of the staircase. He had a buttoned-down look, like he belonged in Manhattan or GQ. He opened his briefcase, slid out a file, and removed a single piece of paper.

“As I just told Don and Daphne in the kitchen, this shouldn’t take long. In fact, I wouldn’t have bothered to gather everyone together like this, but Don told me it was the family’s request.” He held up the page. “As you can see there’s not much to read. And interestingly, as much as Daphne Balling

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