

CHAPTER ONE

DESPITE THE OUTDATED DENVER POST REVIEW that called it the “crowning jewel of downtown urban living”, the only thing that Fiona Graves found even remotely appealing about the Corona Heights apartment complex was the price. The fact that the one hundred-unit high rise had over two dozen rentals available for immediate move-in was also a plus, though if she’d had the luxury of considering other options, this would have raised enough of a red-flag to keep her looking. As it stood, Fiona was Corona Heights’ newest resident as of yesterday afternoon, a mere seventy-two hours after a spontaneous drive due west brought her thirteen hundred long, lonely miles from the rim of the Pacific Northwest to the base of the Rocky Mountains.

The perfect storm of dirt-cheap rent and a building manager desperate for tenants undoubtedly contributed to the lightning fast move-in. But Fiona also held to the idea that something else was at work, feverishly aligning the stars to ensure that this critically important phase of her new life had gotten off to the smoothest start possible. She didn’t quite know what to call this something. She stopped short of calling it a guardian angel (after all, if such a being existed, why had it been so conspicuously absent for such a large chunk of her life?). But she did consider it to be an intelligence capable of discerning between her fierce desire to right the wrongs of her life and the disease that up until now had prevented her from doing so.

The apartment itself was a five-hundred square foot one bedroom, complete with outdated appliances, dingy carpets, a bedroom window that didn’t quite close all the way, and walls that were about as insulated as wet toilet paper. With a monthly rent obligation of less than a thousand dollars, a paltry savings, terrible credit score and no job prospects on the immediate horizon, Fiona didn’t have any room to complain. She was lucky to be here and she knew it.

But that didn’t mean that the torrent of loud music coming from the apartment adjacent to hers would be tolerated for much longer than the five hours she had already endured it for.

It began late last night, just as Fiona had begun unpacking the last of six boxes that contained the entirety of her life. She couldn’t pinpoint the genre of music, other than to call it a soulless mish-mash of techno synthesizers, computer-generated vocals, and a thick, distorted bass line that rattled the pictures she had hung on the wall. She had considered calling the manager – a man who less than twenty-four hours earlier had assured her that the building was as solidly constructed as a World War II bunker – but decided to let it go. It was Saturday night after all, and she couldn’t begrudge anyone’s need to blow off a little weekend steam. *Let the youngsters have their fun*, Fiona thought with a smile, as if her

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impending thirty-fourth birthday had somehow relegated her to a life of Lawrence Welk records on the phonograph and Matlock reruns on television. Exhaustion from the move brought on a deep sleep that night, so if the party had continued beyond her eleven P.M. bedtime, she was oblivious to it.

Unfortunately, she was all too aware of the noise that woke her early this morning and kept intruding on her as the day wore on. The music was back, same shitty electro-garbage as before. But this time it was accompanied by something else. It started as a persistently heated conversation between a man and a woman that quickly escalated into an all-out screaming match. She couldn't make out what was being said over the den of music. She only knew that neither participant was very happy. And as she heard the first door slammed shut, then the second, followed by the thumps that she guessed were objects being thrown against the wall, Fiona feared that someone was going to get hurt.

She knew from personal experience that it was all-too-easy to get hurt in such a circumstance.

But she also had no interest in involving herself in someone else's domestic situation. Whatever was going on behind those paper-thin walls was ultimately none of her business. Besides, she didn't know anyone here, and no one knew her.

"Hi there. My name is Fiona Graves, and I just moved in next door. Pleasure to meet you. Now would you please be so kind as to shut the hell up?"

For as badly as she wanted to have that conversation, Fiona conceded that it probably wouldn't make the best first impression, even as it had become clear that her neighbors weren't the least bit concerned with the first impression they were making. The vortex of sound was only increasing, now becoming a white-noise blend of screeching guitar riffs, angry demands, and pounding on the walls. Since the offending noise was coming from behind HER bedroom wall, Fiona had hoped that closing the door would be enough to stem the tide. Those hopes were quickly dashed. The doors around here were unfortunately just as well built as the walls.

She had thought that another neighbor, or perhaps even the manager, would have intervened by now. But as the fifth hour rolled into the sixth, and it had become apparent that no other intervention was coming, Fiona decided she needed to do something. By the time she walked into her bedroom, her hand was already balled up in a tight fist. She knew she would have to pound like hell in order to be heard, and had the handle end of her hammer at the ready just in case her hand wasn't enough.

After summoning as much arm strength as she could, she picked her spot on the wall, raised her fist, and brought her arm back as if she were winding up for a pitch. She was inches away from impact when something stopped her cold. It was as if the music, the yelling, and the pounding had instantly faded into the background.

All she could hear now was the crying.

If she hadn't still heard the woman's frenzied voice in the background she would have assumed that her prediction about someone getting hurt had come true. But this

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wasn't the tearful aftermath of an argument gone too far. This was something else. Fiona put her ear to the wall.

She instinctively knew that the cries were coming from a little girl.

Based on what she had heard, she pictured the child curled up with her back against the wall, perhaps with a pillow between her knees and mouth in an effort to stifle her sadness. Fiona lowered herself until she was on the floor. She could hear the child clearly now, as if they were facing one another. After a few moments the quiet sobbing subsided, replaced with snuffles and deep breaths. The girl was trying to compose herself, even as the chaos around her persisted.

There was a light thump followed by a long sliding sound. The girl was apparently now standing up, keeping her back pressed against the wall as she did.

Trapped. Afraid of being heard.

Fiona rose with her, still keeping an ear tuned to the pulse of the girl's heavy breathing.

Suddenly, there was total silence. No music, no arguing, no crying. With her own breathing howling like a gale-force wind against the stillness, Fiona held it in her chest.

Her ear perked at the sound of a door opening. Floorboards buckled under the weight of heavy footfalls. Fiona heard labored breathing again, but couldn't tell if it was the girl's or her own. The footsteps were closer, slow and searching.

"Get the hell out of there Noah! We're not finished yet!"

The woman's voice tore through the air like a sonic boom, forcing Fiona to pull her ear away from the wall. By the time she put it back the footsteps had stopped.

"Noah, get your ass back in here!"

"Shut up," the man replied in a voice that was only slightly above a whisper.

"You've got no business in there." The woman wasn't screaming anymore, but her tone was no less cutting.

"I pay rent here just like you do, so everything in this motherfucker is my business."

The man's voice was close, as if he had been standing in the exact spot where Fiona had heard the girl.

Footsteps from the distance quickly padded into the room.

"I said get out!"

The woman was now in the room too. A quick scuffle ensued as the man uttered something that sounded like *bitch*. Fading footsteps then led to the sound of a door being slammed shut.

Fiona kept her breath in her chest and her ear against the wall. There was nothing in the room now. She pressed her ear closer in search of even the slightest hint of the girl's presence, but it was as if she were never there.

Perplexed, Fiona knelt down to the spot where she had first heard her.

"Hello?" The word came out before Fiona even realized she had moved her lips. "Are you still there?"

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The only sound she heard was her own voice bouncing off the wall and back into her ear. Just as she had prepared to call out again the music returned, this time louder than before. Her original frustration quickly returning, Fiona slapped the wall with an open hand, but it registered as little more than a tap against the symphony of noise that once again filled her bedroom.

She turned away from the wall and out of the bedroom, her anger mounting with each brisk step. To hell with first impressions. These assholes were going to feel every ounce of a wrath that had been brewing for the last six hours – a wrath that had indeed been brewing for the last six months; long before she had ever stepped foot in Corona Heights or been subjected to the hellions who would become her next door neighbors.

Fiona opened the front door and had taken her first step into the hallway before she realized that her cell phone was ringing. If it were any other circumstance at any other time, she would have ignored the call and continued out the door. But her current circumstances dictated that she answered that phone, no matter where she was, no matter what she was doing.

She quickly closed the door and ran to the kitchen counter where she had left the phone, picking it up before the fifth ring that would have sent the call to voicemail.

“This is Fiona,” she answered, feigning composure as best she could.

“Good afternoon, Fiona. This is Paul Riley.”

Fiona knew exactly who it was, but she still couldn’t prevent the exhale of relief that came with the sound of his voice. “Good afternoon Mr. Riley. How are you?”

“What did I tell you about that Mr. Riley stuff? I work for you, remember? Paul will suffice.”

Fiona could sense his smile over the phone.

“Right. I’ll try to remember that.”

“I appreciate that. So how are things? Have you settled into the new digs yet?”

“Settled is not the word I would use.”

“What do you mean?”

Fiona held the phone up in the air. After a few seconds she spoke again. “That’s what I mean.”

“Sounds like you’ve got one hell of a housewarming going on over there. Better be careful that the neighbors don’t complain.”

“Not funny.”

Paul snickered. “Sorry. I’ve been told my humor is an acquired taste, and seeing as we’ve only just met, it’s probably best if I save myself the embarrassment. At least for now.”

Even though Fiona couldn’t remember the last time she found the humor in anything, she appreciated the gesture. “No worries.”

“Sorry about the neighbors. Hopefully that situation takes care of itself. In the meantime, I have some news.”

“I’m listening.”

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"I spoke with Kirk's lawyer this morning and they've agreed to a meeting."

Fiona gripped her chest in an effort to stall the emotion that was threatening to overwhelm her. "That's great," she answered, her voice cracking under the pressure.

"I realize it's Sunday, but I'd like to devise a game plan. Do you think you could meet at my office sometime this –"

Fiona cut him off. "Name the time and I'll be there."

"I'm here now, so why don't you stop by as soon as you can."

"Twenty minutes."

Fiona already had on her shoes and coat, gathered her purse, and made her way out the door by the time the call was finished.

It wasn't until she was in the hallway that she noticed the music was still playing. It was twice as loud out here and she was stunned that no one else on the floor had put an end to it. She hadn't noticed any other tenants milling about during her move-in. No one curiously peeking out of their doors to check out the new neighbor; no one offering to help. Come to think of it, she hadn't noticed anyone else in the building at all. Not that she was paying attention. She had more substantial things on her mind then, as she did now. She could investigate the building's occupancy rate later. Right now she had a meeting with a lawyer that held the promise of changing her entire life; a meeting that could help her finally begin the process of righting all of those wrongs.

Still, she struggled against the temptation to pound on the door. In the ideal scenario, she would march inside – forgoing pleasantries and formal introductions – find something very heavy, and smash that stereo into microscopic pieces. It was this image that caused her to linger in front of the door longer than she had intended to, her hand raised.

"Let it go," she said aloud, even though she had trouble hearing the words. "Bigger fish to fry."

With that, she allowed herself to step away from the door, down the hall, and into the waiting elevator.

Before she could press the lobby button she heard a door opening. The elevator's placement did not allow for a view of the apartment, but based on the loud music now filling the hallway, she knew exactly which apartment it was.

Fiona tensed; her hand hovering above the lobby button. Despite the vigilante scenario that had played out in her mind, the thought of coming face to face with whoever was in that apartment made her nervous. What if they saw her standing in front of their door? What if they came out to confront her? But she hadn't done anything wrong. If anything, she was the victim here. And if a confrontation was in the cards, she wouldn't hesitate to let them know that.

Fiona held the elevator door open; anxious, waiting. What she heard next caused her blood to run cold and made her wish that she had pressed the lobby button the moment she got in.

"You can't do anything now, Hannah. She's gone. Close the goddamn door."

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It was the same angry male voice she had heard on the other side of her bedroom wall.

Fiona immediately pushed the lobby button and watched the elevator doors slide closed. But before they could close all the way, she was rocked by the sound of the apartment door being slammed shut, instantly silencing the music, along with her vigilante spirit.

And suddenly, Corona Heights' dirt cheap rent wasn't all that appealing anymore.

CHAPTER TWO

“HOW DO YOU KNOW THEY WERE TALKING about you, Fiona?”

Dressed in an Under Armor warm-up fleece and faded Levi jeans, Paul Riley looked out of place sitting in the high back leather chair behind his mahogany executive desk. The only hints of warmth in his minimalist office space were the pictures on the wall behind him of his wife and three adolescent sons. The placement was odd, and Fiona couldn't escape the feeling that it was strategic. His family was beautiful – the perfect depiction of love and stability – and it was all she could do not to stare at them as Paul spoke. Perhaps that was the strategy.

“If they knew you were standing outside their door, wouldn't they have come out when they first saw you?”

“I can't pretend to know what they were thinking. But I do know they were talking about me. I was the only one in the hallway, Paul. Who else would they have been talking about?”

“It could have been anyone. From the sound of it, they were probably on some kind of bender, taking God knows what, and they were completely paranoid. For all they know you could have been the Blessed Virgin Mary herself.” His wide smile revealed a set of the whitest, straightest teeth Fiona had ever seen. But his sharp good looks did little to quell her irritation at his second failed attempt at humor. Paul, to his credit, picked up on the cue immediately. “Oh-for-two on the jokes, huh?”

Fiona nodded, hopeful that he would spare himself the indignity of a third awkward exchange.

“The remainder of this meeting will be joyless and humor-free,” he mused. “Scout's honor.”

The irony of that statement bringing a smile to Fiona's face was not lost on her. She suppressed it as thoroughly as she could.

“And what was it you were saying about the little girl?” Paul continued.

“I thought I heard her crying,” Fiona answered, though as she reflected on the incident in its entirety, she could not be entirely certain of anything she heard.

“Did she say anything when the parents came into her room?”

“No, and they didn't say anything to her.”

“That's odd.”

A fact that Fiona was all too aware of. “Honestly, I'm just glad it's over.”

“No kidding. Let's hope they got it all out of their system.”

Fiona found herself staring at Paul's perfect family again. “Let's hope so.”

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After a long moment of silence, Paul reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a thin manila envelope. "I suppose we should get down to business."

Fiona straightened up in her chair, her full attention now on Paul.

"First off, I want to thank you for coming in on such short notice," he continued. "I realize that it may be a bit unusual meeting like this, especially on a Sunday, but we have to be as prepared as possible for what's coming."

"I understand."

"And part of that preparedness is letting you know just how difficult this fight is going to be. If I'm being honest, 'difficult' may not be a strong enough word to describe what we are actually up against."

Fiona had trouble swallowing the large knot that had suddenly formed in her throat. "I've never been under any illusions that it was going to be easy."

"I'm glad to hear that. It's like I told you during our initial consultation. My job is to represent you and your interests to the best of my ability, and I plan to do just that. But I'm not here to sugarcoat the situation in any way. The fact of the matter is that you are one of the small handful of female clients I've ever represented who were on the wrong end of a child custody decision. It's quite rare in divorce proceedings that mothers end up losing parental rights to the extent that you have. The Washington state courts were firm in their ruling, and the stipulations for amending that ruling were explicit. The burden of proof to show that those stipulations have been met is squarely on you, and regardless of the outcome of this meeting with your ex, the court's decision is binding. I just don't want you to go into this with any false hopes."

"It's been a year since that decision, Paul. I've done everything asked of me in that time to prove that I'm fit to be a mother. I've completed treatment, stayed active in a program, taking all their classes and their weekly UAs. I've been a walking public service announcement for what not to do if you ever have designs on being a good parent. I've met their stipulations and then some. So I don't think I'm coming into this with any false hopes. I'm coming into this knowing that I'm finally ready to be a full-time presence in my son's life again."

It was a speech that Fiona had been prepared to give ever since she made the decision to pack up what remained of her existence and follow her ex-husband Kirk and eight-year-old son Jacob to a new state, and what Kirk had undoubtedly hoped would be a new life. As the primary guardian, he was fully within his rights to move Jacob wherever he wanted, without so much as a whisper to Fiona of his intentions. As it turned out, Kirk did inform her of his intentions – through a letter sent to the facility where she was carrying out her second stint of court-ordered alcohol rehabilitation. By the time she completed the sixty days, Jacob and Kirk were gone.

This meeting would mark the first time that she had seen her ex-husband in over ten months. Nothing in their recent history suggested that Fiona should feel anything

approaching optimism about what could come from such a meeting, but optimism was the only thing that she had to hold on to. Paul had referred to it as false hope.

"I completely understand that, Fiona. And on the surface I agree with you. But let me play devil's advocate for a moment."

Fiona didn't like the sound of that. "Okay."

"What if I told you that this may not be the best course of action for you right now?"

Her eyes grew wide with surprise and disappointment. The knot in her throat expanded. "What do you mean?"

"I'm sure you probably heard the same thing from your lawyer in Seattle."

It suddenly dawned on her. "She said I shouldn't come here."

Paul nodded. "And did you at least consider taking her advice?"

"I'll tell you the same thing I told her. America, at least the last time I checked, is a free country. I can go anywhere I damn well want."

"That's not what I'm saying," Paul took a breath to measure himself. "Obviously you can go wherever you want. I'm just not sure about the timing of your coming here. It's been nearly eleven months since Kirk was awarded custody. Before that, the two of you were tied up in divorce proceedings for the better part of a year. The court was very explicit about visitation and the level of contact you were to have with Jacob."

Paul began reading from a copy of a summary judgment he pulled from the manila envelope. "You are to have no contact with him unless and until you receive written approval and have shown sufficient progress in your –"

Fiona cut him off. "I'm fully aware of the ruling, and I know what is required of me. And as I've already told you, I've spent the better part of a year in compliance." She didn't need a mirror to know that her cheeks had turned bright red. It happened every time she got angry or embarrassed. Right now she was both.

"Why not initiate proceedings from Seattle? Why come here? Your son has only been in Denver a short time. The school year is just beginning. He's probably still adjusting." Paul paused, empathy, or at least what looked like empathy, showing on his face. "Granted, I don't know the entire situation, but I can imagine that the move was difficult for him. Regardless of how difficult it was, he is here now, adjusting to a new normal, and your sudden appearance could bring the unintended consequence of thrusting him back into another battle between you and your ex-husband. I'm assuming you didn't inform Kirk before you decided to come."

"No I didn't," Fiona answered, knowing it probably wasn't the answer Paul wanted to hear.

"I'm sure he wasn't happy about that."

"Who gives a damn if he's happy?" Fiona snapped in an involuntary outburst that surprised her.

A long silence.

"I'm sorry."

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"That's alright," Paul offered with a thin smile.

"I'm just so frustrated. Everything has been about him. Kirk is the fit parent. I'm the alcoholic degenerate. Kirk is the victim. How wonderful it is that he is willing to step up." The sarcasm in Fiona's voice filled the room. "What about me? I'm Jacob's mother. He needs me just as much as he needs Kirk." She reached for the box of tissue on Paul's desk. "I've thought about this for a long time, okay? I didn't just drive out here on a whim. I wouldn't be pursuing this if I wasn't one hundred percent committed."

"Okay, you've convinced me," Paul said. "I had to ask those questions because they are the same ones that Kirk and his lawyer are likely to ask. This meeting will be informal, so you won't be cross-examined, but in some ways it may feel like it. I wanted to see how you would hold up under that kind of pressure."

Fiona's nerves began to settle and the burning in her cheeks subsided. "So did I pass?"

"We still need to smooth out the edges a bit, but it's a good start. I truly appreciate your passion, and in the long-run it will serve you well. But the name of the game here is diplomacy. At the end of the day, you and Kirk want the same thing. The question is how you both can best achieve that goal."

"We have to work as a team," Fiona declared, not sure if such a thing were even possible.

Paul smiled. "Now you're getting it."

"It's a two-way street though. I can't be the only one willing to play ball."

"Exactly, and we'll work on that. For now, we are going to keep the focus on you. As I said, my plan is to get you as prepared for this as humanly possible."

Fiona felt as ready as she was ever going to be. "So where do we begin?"

"Well, you've already gotten things rolling by getting in an apartment so quickly. I'm still not sure how you scored such a great deal in this crazy rental market, but hats off."

Based on what she had experienced in her first few hours there, Fiona would be hard-pressed to call Corona Heights a great deal. "Sure beats sleeping in my car."

"Indeed. Any movement on the job front?"

"No. I'd hoped to get something in place before I moved here, but so far the pickings have been pretty slim."

"What are you doing for money?"

"The trust from my parent's estate is providing enough of a cushion for six months of rent, as well as your fee. I've got a little savings beyond that, but nothing that will sustain me long-term."

"All the more reason to get moving on that job search. Six months will go by much faster than you realize."

"I know," Fiona answered, bracing for the inevitable lecture that was to follow.

"And what about a program?"

"Haven't found one yet."

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“That should be your top priority right now. Your ability to commit to a twelve-step support group, especially when you do so under your own initiative, will speak volumes to the court, and your ex-husband.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Let’s try and get something lined up before we meet with Kirk. Do you think that will be possible?”

The burning in Fiona’s cheeks returned. This time it was fueled more by embarrassment than anger. “I’ll do my best.”

“Good. And one more thing.”

Fiona was almost afraid to ask. “What?”

“No contact with Kirk or Jacob before the meeting.”

Fiona feigned outrage at the suggestion. “I’m not that stupid.”

“It’s not about being stupid. It’s about fighting an urge that has fueled your every action for the past year. It’s about being patient in a situation where patience seems like the most absurd practice imaginable. It’s about not sabotaging your progress by letting instinct cloud your judgement.”

“I have no desire to sabotage anything I’ve worked for,” Fiona answered resolutely.

“Do you promise? No Kirk and most especially no Jacob?”

Fiona leaned forward in her chair, looking Paul square in his eye. “Scout’s honor.”

It was the first time that she lied to him in the short time they had known one another. She waited patiently for at least a twinge of guilt to rise up in her chest, but it never came.

CHAPTER THREE

THANKS TO SOME RUDIMENTARY ONLINE detective work, Fiona had Kirk's address before she ever set foot in Denver. And despite her scout's honor pledge to Paul, she had the directions to Kirk's house plugged into her cell phone before she left his office. Confident that he hadn't yet changed his phone number (Kirk was a creature of habit much like she was), Fiona had considered calling him ahead of her visit; a whimsical notion that she thought better of almost immediately. She then considered the more direct approach of ringing the doorbell of his newly constructed townhouse and hoping for the best. She dismissed that idea even faster than the phone call.

That left her with only one viable option: good old fashioned stalking.

For the duration of her thirty-minute drive from Paul Riley's downtown office to Kirk's Northeast Denver address, Fiona had considered the range of scenarios that she could encounter and the outcomes inherent in each. Aside from the heartfelt, tear-filled reunion that was the stuff of her fantasies, not one of those outcomes was good.

Yet she made the drive anyway, fueled as much by the sense of empowerment that such a subversive act gave her as the idea of seeing the two people she loved the most in the world.

Despite everything, she did still love Kirk. She loved him for the man she met twelve years ago when she was a happy, idealistic journalism school graduate in awe of his prodigious success as a Seattle Seahawks beat reporter. She loved him for being the man who stuck by her through those early years when denial of her drinking problem slowly gave way to acceptance and confidence that she would beat it. She loved him for being the man who stepped up as the singular face of stability in Jacob's life when Fiona could no longer do her part. The ticket on their marriage had been stamped long ago, but some small, untapped part of her was still naïve enough to believe that civility could exist between them. Showing up on his doorstep out of the blue, however, was not going to aid in that cause.

Instead, she parked at what she considered to be a safe distance from his house and waited. For what, she wasn't sure. Perhaps it was for a glimpse of what their new life looked like; perhaps a sign that Jacob wasn't happy with that new life; perhaps confirmation that her coming here was the absolute right thing to do despite everyone else's opinion to the contrary. Perhaps it was a combination of everything.

What she wanted most was to see her son.

Most of the scenarios that Fiona imagined during the drive here involved him. What would the first words spoken between them sound like? Would Jacob even recognize her? Things change so quickly in a child's life. He could have already adjusted to an existence

without a mother, his mind able – out of will or necessity – to push away all memories of the previous eight years. She knew that wouldn't be a bad thing. Jacob had experienced things, in the past year especially, that no child should ever have to endure. But the thought of her own son not remembering her was a wretched one, sending shockwaves of pain and nausea throughout her body.

Stop being ridiculous Fiona. You are his mother. You gave birth to him. Of course he remembers you.

She kept her eye trained on the front door for the better part of an hour before resigning herself to the fact that the glimpse she was hoping to catch was not going to happen.

Spurred on by an overwhelming embarrassment that masked itself as disappointment, Fiona started her car and pulled away from the curb. She drove slowly as she passed Kirk's townhouse, looking for any signs of activity. There were none.

She let out a deep sigh of relief at the prospect that no one was there to see her making such a desperate fool of herself. *Dodged your first bullet, Fiona. Now go home, get your mind straight, and do this thing the right way.*

She was prepared to do just that when something in the rearview mirror caught her attention. Though it was still some distance away, Fiona recognized Kirk's candy-apple red Jeep Cherokee the instant she saw it. A glance at the front Washington state license plate confirmed it.

Shit.

Resisting the urge to speed away, Fiona idled at the end of the block, watching through the rearview mirror as Kirk pulled into a spot in front of his house. He emerged from the driver's side and walked around to retrieve something out of the back. Her vision momentarily obscured, Fiona backed her car up a few feet. She knew she ran the risk of being spotted but she didn't care. From her new vantage point, she could now see Kirk picking up bags of groceries, a deep smile on his face. He was engaged in an animated conversation with someone. Fiona had assumed it was Jacob and she held her breath as she searched for him.

She let out an audible gasp as he emerged from the passenger's side door, a smile equal in depth to his father's on his bright, handsome face. He had grown an inch or two in the time since Fiona had last seen him; tall for his age, much as she imagined Kirk had been. His sandy brown hair had grown a few inches longer. It framed a thin, freckled face and deep, cavernous dimples – the same dimples that made her fall in love with Kirk. His frame was a little sturdier, as if he had put on weight – still perfectly normal, but she noticed it nonetheless.

Fiona noticed everything about him, most notably how happy he looked. The thought stirred something unexpected in her. For the first time, she wondered if she was doing the right thing by coming here. Despite her self-reassurance, maybe Jacob had moved on; forgotten her completely. Children could be very resilient, their defense mechanisms

much more powerful than an adults'. Maybe Jacob had grown to accept that his mother was a worthless drunk, incapable of taking care of herself, much less her own son, and he had made peace with that. Fiona was positive that he had asked Kirk questions, and she was equally positive that Kirk had very little to say about her that was good. Coming back now, as Paul had warned, might only upset the balance in Jacob's life that had surely been restored.

Fiona had no doubts as she packed away her life in Washington to make the two-day drive here, bringing nothing with her except pictures of Jacob, a ten-day wardrobe, and a whole lot of hope. But now doubt was beginning to settle in. She did her best to push it back.

There's no room for second-guessing now. Remember the promise you made to yourself. It's all about him. Despite what some judge, even his father, says about it. Jacob needs you in his life. And you need him in yours. Badly.

As Kirk and Jacob made their way to the front door, Fiona made a move to get out of her car. She wanted nothing more than to grab him, squeeze him, and never let go. She wanted to imagine the excitement on Jacob's face when he saw her, and the thrill both of them would feel as she told him that instead of going inside and putting away groceries with his father, the two of them would spend the day together, drinking hot chocolate and eating sausage and mushroom pizza, Jacob's favorite. He would fill Fiona in on his new school and the scores of friends he had already made; they would talk about soccer or baseball or whatever newfound interest he had picked up, and all would instantly be right in both of their worlds. Like the last year and a half never happened.

But Fiona knew that was nothing more than the fantasy scenario she had concocted on the ride over here. The reality, she knew in her heart of hearts, would be much different.

She drew a quick, deep breath, bit her lip to keep from crying, and looked away. Her attention fell on a group of teenagers crossing the street in front of her. They glanced in the car as they passed. One of them, a long-legged boy with equally long dreadlocks, looked at Fiona with a hint of concern. Despite her best efforts, she was crying uncontrollably.

By the time she had gathered herself enough to look back in the rearview mirror, Jacob and Kirk were gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

FIONA WAS MET WITH DEAD SILENCE as she exited the elevator and stepped into the sixth-floor hallway that led to her apartment. Her pace slowed as she approached unit 607, the one next door to hers. She would not admit to the fear that her normally heavy gait would be enough to alert the neighbors to her presence, opting instead for the more acceptable reasoning that the light footsteps would allow her to hear any noise that she would have to bring to the manager's attention before she had been lulled into her apartment. Thankfully, she heard nothing as she walked past.

Party's over. Drugs have worn off. Enough offending the world for one day. Fiona glanced at her watch. Three twenty-six P.M. She could only pray that the hellions were not resting up for a fresh round tonight.

The quiet would be necessary if she was going to plot out a successful course for her continued sobriety, find gainful employment, and acquire the thus far elusive skill of diplomacy, all in the eighteen hours before her scheduled meeting with Kirk. If her ill-advised detour to his house was any indication, she was going to have to address her chronic lack of judgment as well.

Fiona was under no illusions that this was going to be easy. At least that was her line to Paul Riley. But for the first time, she was beginning to feel the weight of the work that lie ahead. The road to redemption, she had already come to realize, was full of twists and turns, red lights, potholes, and traffic jams. Now came the truly difficult part. After what felt like millions of miles logged, the destination was finally in sight.

This was the home stretch, the last leg of the race. If she didn't get this part right, all of the work done up until now would amount to nothing. There could be no more improvised trips to Kirk's house or emotional outbursts. She had to operate with precision. Cool and calm. Stability personified. Just the way a mother is supposed to be.

With her marching orders in place and her plan thoroughly diagrammed, Fiona felt a surge of adrenaline as she reached for her keys. But before she could put them in the door, they fell out of her hands and onto the ground, hitting with a clang that reverberated through the tight hallway corridor. Just as she bent over to pick them up, she heard the slow creak of a door opening.

Obviously, they've been waiting for me.

Fiona closed her eyes, bracing for the worst.

"Oh, hello there."

Not the voice she was expecting.

"I've been wondering about my new neighbor."

The voice was calm, comforting, motherly.

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She opened her eyes and looked up. The woman staring down at her was smiling. Warm. Welcoming.

Fiona hadn't felt genuinely welcomed anywhere in a long time. "Sorry, I'm a bit of a klutz," she said as she stood up. "I hope I didn't startle you."

"Not at all, sweetheart. I suffer from an over-active hearing problem. An unfortunate side effect of being a single old woman in modern America. You have to know what's going on around you at all times. And there is usually a lot going on around here."

Fiona nodded. "It certainly has been active the past few hours."

"Entirely too active if you ask me. That racket was getting ridiculous. I was going to have my son go over there and tell them to turn it down – he's visiting me from Portland. But before he could make it, the music stopped."

"They must have sensed he was coming."

Her gentle smile grew wider. "Perhaps. Anyway, I'm Iris. Iris Matheson." She extended her hand.

"Fiona Graves. Nice to meet you."

"You as well. You just moved in, right?"

"Yes, a couple of days ago."

"I've been meaning to stop by and officially welcome you. Most people don't have the manners to do that kind of thing anymore, especially around here."

Fiona looked around the empty hallway in what seemed like an empty complex. Iris had been the first tenant she had seen here, let alone met. "I've noticed."

"Don't get me wrong, there are some very nice people here. You just have to strain a bit to find them."

Fiona smiled. Iris seemed nice enough. She was a slightly chubby woman with a round face and long gray hair that she wore in a ponytail. Her ocean blue eyes were fixed on Fiona, as if she were doing her best to get a read.

"Well, speaking of manners, would you like to come in for a cup of coffee? Just brewed a fresh pot."

The offer was tempting, but Fiona had marching orders to carry out. "No thank you. Definitely another time though."

"Okay, well, feel free to stop by anytime you'd like. My thirty-seven year teaching career came to a long-overdue end recently and I suddenly have lots of time on my hands. Company is always nice. Besides, I have the lowdown on almost everyone on this floor. I'd be more than happy to get you up to speed."

Iris had the twinkle in her eye of someone sitting on juicy gossip that she desperately wanted to dish out, and Fiona could not deny that the possibility of learning more about the people here was intriguing.

"I'll most certainly take you up on that."

Iris placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Oh good. Well, I guess I'll get back and straighten up the mess that my wonderful son left behind. He was helping me get rid of

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some things. Not much, just a small bureau, some old clothes and a footlocker. But it apparently entitled him to every morsel of food in my refrigerator, leaving me with a kiss on the cheek and a sink full of dirty dishes. He damn near killed himself trying to drag that footlocker to the elevator, so I guess allowing him to eat me out of house and home was the least I could do." Iris smiled again, the thought of her son clearly warming her. "Anywho, it was certainly nice meeting you, Fiona. Sorry it didn't happen sooner."

"Nice meeting you too, Iris. I look forward to that coffee."

With one last smile, Iris walked into her apartment and closed the door. Three lock clicks later, she was securely inside, leaving Fiona alone in the hallway.

The sudden quiet was unsettling. She turned to unlock her door, but as she did, she noticed something on the floor in front of unit 607. Two red splotches that clearly stood out against the light gray carpet. She bent down for a closer inspection.

The splotches were dry-soaked into the fiber. She immediately looked around for more, but could not find any.

Odd.

Bleak stillness hung heavy in the air. Why hadn't she noticed this before? Had they even been there before?

Her thoughts were spitting out endless possibilities, none of which she wanted to give voice to. The dark red stains looked like blood.

Blood?

There of course had to be a perfectly reasonable explanation for its existence aside from the one in her mind. Iris's son must have cut his finger carrying that footlocker.

That was it. Freak accident. It seemed a suitable answer. Perfectly logical.

And Fiona desperately wanted to believe it.

Her growing unease did not subside as she entered her apartment. If anything, it only increased. The space suddenly felt alien to her, cold and uninviting, just as it was when she had entered it for the very first time two days ago. Her furnishings were sparse – a futon couch, two nightstands, and a folding card table that doubled as a dinette – but they were hers, and as such should have provided at least the illusion of familiarity. Instead she felt like an intruder, forcing her way into a space that did not belong to her with the misguided notion of claiming it as her own.

She sat her coat and purse on the kitchen counter and made her way to the refrigerator. The bottle of Dasani water that she had opened the night before was still on the shelf exactly where she had left it. *See Fiona, you do live here.* She opened the bottle and took a drink. The cold soothed her warm throat. A familiar thirst had settled in since she left Kirk's and it felt good to quench it with something so benign.

It hadn't always been this easy.

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After finishing her water she walked over to the card table – which in addition to the dinette had also functioned as her work desk – turned on her laptop and opened a blank Word document. She titled it *Operation Jacob*. She planned to begin with a To-Do list, which would undoubtedly be extensive, followed by a brainstorming session that would include potential job avenues, twelve-step meeting sites, and a script of what she would say when she first saw Kirk (as there was no way that her spontaneous emotion could be trusted).

Before she sat down, she thought it best to change out of her blouse and jeans and into a pair of yoga pants and a t-shirt. She may have been a wreck mentally, but at least she could be comfortable physically.

Fiona knew something was wrong the instant she walked into her bedroom.

The picture was of Jacob dressed in a Darth Vader costume, holding court during the celebration of his sixth birthday. It was Fiona's absolute favorite; the one she made sure to secure with extra bubble wrap for the move; the very first one she hung on the wall.

Now it was face-down on the floor, next to the nail that she thought she had secured it to. A tiny hole in the wall was the only thing left where the picture had once been. As Fiona inched closer, she noticed something else: the paint around the nail hole was peeled, like an adhesive had carelessly been ripped away from the wall. But there was no adhesive, not that Fiona had seen anyway. And if she recalled correctly, the paint was not chipped when she hung the picture. At least, she didn't think it was. Prone to a chronic lack of focus on most everything unrelated to Jacob, Fiona had stopped trusting her memory long ago.

It stood to reason then that the wall blemish could have been there all along. But what about the picture? The two-inch nail she'd hammered into the wall was secure, that much she knew. Whenever she had decided on a new spot to hang a picture that she had previously put up, she needed the hammer to pull the nail out, and on a few occasions there was some major effort involved in extracting it, so it should not have simply come out on its own.

But apparently that was exactly what happened.

Her mind suddenly fixated on the condition of the picture, Fiona picked it up. A close inspection revealed no damage. Jacob had handpicked the black wood frame; the words *Best Mom Ever* inscribed on the front. Much like the photo, it held extraordinary sentimental value and she was relieved there was no damage.

Who's to say that the laws of physics can't be broken from time to time, she thought as she put the picture on the end table next to her bed. *Accidents happen. No harm, no foul.*

If it were merely an accident, why did she suddenly feel so nervous?

The question would haunt her for the rest of the day and into the night. There would be no work on *Operation Jacob*; no marching orders carried out. There were only thoughts about the falling picture and the blood stains and the apartment that suddenly felt as foreign and lifeless as the jail cell that had been home for the longest night of her life.

After a light dinner and a couple of fruitless hours staring at her computer, she re-hung the picture (making sure it was extra secure this time), settled into the uncomfortable

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air mattress that she hoped would be temporary, and fell into a restless, agitated sleep. Her dreams were scattered, dark. A car accident. Jacob in the back with no seatbelt. No survivors. Iris Matheson in a hospital gown serving her coffee. Kirk in the shower with a woman she didn't recognize.

Mostly, there was crying. Distant, pleading crying. Images of Jacob in pain. Fiona reached out, hugged him, and the pain on his face instantly went away, replaced with that patented dimple-filled smile.

But the crying persisted. So close now that Fiona could feel it. She woke up with a start, clutching her chest, realizing that the emotion had been hers. Tears clouded her vision as she sat up.

After allowing herself to adjust to the darkness of her bedroom, Fiona made her way off the air mattress and into the bathroom where she splashed cold water on her face. The dark circles that she took great care to conceal during the day were on full display, the result of a year's worth of stress and worry and lack of sleep. A tousled mess of dark brown hair fell over a pair of even darker brown eyes that were stained red with the lingering emotion of her dream. She tugged at her cheeks, stretching the taut skin as far as it would go. It snapped back into place with barely a thought. "No wrinkles at least," she said aloud, though that fact currently offered little solace.

Having seen enough of her two A.M. self, Fiona turned off the bathroom light and made her way back into the bedroom. The air mattress was just as uncomfortable as when she left it, but her eyes were heavy and she felt sleep coming on quickly.

The first thud of something hitting the floor caused her eyes to snap open. The second caused her to sit up. The third caused her to leap out of bed.

Through the dim filter of moonlight from her bedroom window, Fiona could clearly see the objects on the floor, but she still hoped that the late hour was somehow playing tricks on her mind. When she turned on the lamp beside her bed, she realized that what she was seeing was no trick.

Jacob's birthday picture had fallen to the ground again, in nearly the same spot as it had before. The two pictures hanging on either side of it had also fallen. Just like before, the nails used to hang them up had come out of the wall and were resting on the ground next to the frames. As Fiona inched toward the wall, she saw another familiar sight: peeled paint where the other two pictures had been.

Unconcerned with the laws of physics or logical explanations or the condition of the pictures, Fiona left the bedroom, closed the door behind her, and spent the rest of that endlessly long night on the futon.

She didn't sleep a wink.