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CHRISTINA  
S U Z A N N  
N E L S O N

Swimming  
in the  
Deep  
End

*Swimming in the Deep End*

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This book is dedicated to the women  
who chose to mother me,  
and to the women  
who chose me to be a mother.



## Chapter 1

JILLIAN CLINE

*FRIDAY, MARCH 9*

The air in the spectator area of Brownsburg High's swimming pool is nothing short of heavy, but there's a safety in the thickness. An illusion in the midst of the humidity lulls me into a belief that my daughter is safe, protected from the evil in the world. Maybe that's why I push her to compete. Maybe that's why I can breathe in the moisture-rich environment other mothers dread.

Izzy stands on the dive block, her toes curled over the edge, her arms wrapped around her middle as if she's cold. The horn blows and with a fraction of hesitation, she dives.

And the race begins.

The first in weeks, a postseason meet, and for some reason veiled to me, she didn't want to participate.

Five rows of girls stretch, skimming through the water toward the wall to make their final turn. A swimmer in the lane closest to me botches her flip, a beginner's mistake. Water splashes me, tickling through my hair and down my scalp. It's the kind of flaw Izzy conquered in elementary school. At the flash of memory, an ache settles over my heart. Where has my little girl gone? In a little more than a year, she'll be off to college.

I can't help it. My legs lift me from the bench, and I lean toward the bar separating the fans from the racers.

After ten laps, they're all tired, but this is the point my daughter is famous for, the moment Izzy stands out above the other athletes. Any

second she'll burst forward with an explosion of power like a dolphin racing a school of tuna, and she'll leave the competition in her wake.

But Izzy doesn't make her move.

"Come on." I lean farther over the rail, my words echoing around my head.

One swimmer, then another, slip ahead of my daughter, the reigning state champion and future Olympian. A hand slaps the wall, and a second, then Izzy's.

Third.

Stepping back, I extend my fingers now aching from the tense way I've gripped the bar. I'd been a fool to think this bug Izzy's been fighting would run its course. I should have taken her to see Dr. Wheaton weeks ago. What if something is seriously wrong? A girl in the middle school has leukemia, and another child was recently diagnosed with diabetes. The blanket of muggy air can't push away the cold shiver that comes with a mother's worried heart.

Izzy bobs in the water as the other swimmers hop out of the pool and chatter with teammates. Her pain is mine. A possession I can't give away even if I want to.

I collect my jacket, phone, and the romance novel I've been reading during every event my daughter didn't race. The book fits perfectly into the pocket along the side of my purse. With everything collected, and the strap flung over my shoulder, I wipe at the moisture on my forehead and move toward the door alongside fifty other parents.

"Can't win them all, I guess."

I don't have to look to recognize Jasmine Monk's screeching voice.

A knot tightens in my stomach, pressing up against my diaphragm. No, Izzy can't win them all, but she didn't have to lose against certain people's daughters. I paste on a smile, force my shoulders into a non-defensive position, and twist to meet my rival face-to-face. "I suppose you can't. Joanna swam well today. It's good to see her improving."

"Improving?" Jasmine plants one bony hand on her hip. "She beat Izzy.



That's a first. No offense, but Izzy probably needed a loss more than a win anyhow. We wouldn't want her thinking she's perfect." Her serpent's tongue sticks on the last word.

Why do so many people preface insults with phrases like *no offense*? My cheeks burn with the effort required to maintain a pleasant exterior. "No one ever said Izzy was perfect." I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek to stop the next words from pushing their way free. There's no sense irritating Jasmine. It's not like she's someone who can be ignored. Not only do we have daughters the same age, but Jasmine's son is one of my son Zachary's best friends. Jasmine may lack compassion and tact, but she does a wonderful job managing the women's ministry at church.

Reasoning my way through all the consequences of giving Jasmine the tongue-lashing I long to give her isn't enough to settle my heart rate. "I'm afraid I've got to run. There's dinner to get on the table as soon as Izzy's ready to go." I turn, pointing my mouth safely away from her.

"I'll be at the church in the morning. I assume you have those flyers all printed."

My spine shoots ramrod straight. Without looking, I can imagine Jasmine's right eyebrow cocking up in the way it does when she feels she has me under her thumb. I swallow another line of ill-chosen words. No way I'll fess up to not having Jasmine's request completed.

Cold slams me as I swing open the door and step into the crisp wind. Winter held on for an encore this year. I duck my head and walk the ten steps to the school's back door.

A group of swimmers dressed in warm clothes, their hair still hanging in wet mats, come from the locker room.

Echoing clicks accompany my heels along the blue and yellow linoleum tiles, a tacky choice even if they are the school colors. I hesitate at the display cases filled with trophies and plaques, some of which are engraved with my daughter's name, Isabella Cline. My gaze drifts along the metallic shine of past victories and lands on a framed newspaper article. Only a

junior and Izzy has won the state championship in not just one, but *three* events. She's in line to be valedictorian next year, and she's been given the opportunity to train with an Olympic-level coach for the summer. Maybe she isn't perfect, but my daughter is close.

I lean against the wall, my lower back aching for the day to be over and my mind begging for just one more chapter. Parents greet athletes with congratulatory hugs or sympathetic pats on the back. One of Izzy's classmates, a new driver, twirls a key ring around her finger.

The baseball team bursts through the steel doors at the end of the hall. Chunks of sloppy mud fling free from caked cleats and splatter the tiles. The pungent scent of wet earth mixed with teenage boy takes the pleasant feel from the moment and replaces it with dread.

There in the middle of the group, strutting as though he is more than he ever could be, is Travis—star baseball player with more than just a few problems at home. He flicks his head, throwing his almost black hair away from dark eyes. For a girl with such great grades, Izzy isn't too smart when it comes to choosing boys. While I admit he's a great deal better than his parents, he's still not the hero in my Izzy's story.

Familiar tension squeezes my muscles. When will she listen to me?

I tug the cell phone from my pocket and check the time. Four more swimmers exit the building as the baseball team disappears into the boy's locker room, their smell lingering behind.

The hallway transforms in the silence, leaving my skin chilled. I run my arms into my coat sleeves and shove my cell phone into the pocket on the outside of my purse. Could Izzy have gone by while I was lost in my imagination?

I push the locker-room door open and walk between institutional rows of stacked yellow lockers. The stench from the fusion of chlorine and industrial cleaners burns my nose, as water trickles across the cement floor toward the lowest point and a metal drain.

Izzy sits on a bench in the center row, head in her hands, elbows pressed into her towel-covered thighs. Her shoulder blades stand out at sharp

angles and her dark brown hair hangs in a clump of wet curls. She seems thinner, fragile.

My mother's heart melts. Sinking onto the bench, I slip my arm around my daughter.

Izzy's body flinches. Her chin shoots up, and she pulls the towel tight around her chest.

"I'm sorry, Iz. I didn't mean to startle you." I run my fingers through her wet hair, untangling a wad of curls. "It's one silly race. Nothing to worry about. There will be others."

Eyebrows pressed together, Izzy opens her mouth as if to speak, but remains silent. Her eyes are red at the rims, circles from her goggles still etched into her tender, fair skin. After a pause, she nods. "Sure. No big deal."

"Let's get home and have a yummy dinner. There's Italian chicken in the Crock-Pot, your favorite."

Color drains from Izzy's face. She turns away.

"What's the matter?" I lean forward, arms crossed on my knees. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Just tired." She stands and pulls her clothes from the locker then threads her feet into sweatpants.

"Aren't you going to take off that wet suit?"

Izzy shakes her head. At that moment, the towel slips from her grip and cascades to the wet floor. Izzy lunges for her sweatshirt.

Cold, like ice water, washes through my veins and sends a chill down my arms that leaves my fingers numb. I look away. I can't help it. Maybe it was the angle, or maybe . . . I can't even finish the thought.

No.

I must be wrong.

The change, so slight only a mother would notice.

Izzy can't be pregnant.



The Crock-Pot insert slips from my soapy hands, the first realization that I've forgotten to put on the purple latex gloves I always wear when washing dishes. It thunks into the side of the porcelain sink then settles to the bottom, and a faint break of glass is muffled by water.

Moments tick by as I procrastinate, rolling my head back and forth against the death grip my neck muscles hold on my spine. So much like what I'm doing with my daughter who picked at her dinner and now hides behind the barricade of her bedroom door. Maybe it would be better not to know what's shattered below the surface.

Zachary brushes past me and swings the refrigerator door open.

"What are you searching for?"

He doesn't look up. "I'm starved. What do we have to eat?"

Crumbs decorate the dining room table, evidence of a task I haven't yet checked off my post-dinner list. "We just ate."

He straightens, one hand on the open door, and shrugs. "I'm hungry."

"Here." I break a banana from its bunch and place it in his hand.

Lines furrow his forehead. He's disappointed in his bounty.

He complains that he's shorter than his friends, but I can see the growth spurt has begun. Soon he'll be tall and broad like his father. Too soon. Already Zachary's boyish face is transforming with the sharper features of a man.

A cold shiver freezes my blood and stops my breathing. What have I done to my children? Are they about to come face-to-face with the consequence of my sin? Why had I ever pretended I could outrun my past?

"What?" He's caught me staring.

"Have you finished your homework?"

The corner of his lip lifts into a snarl. "Math is killing my creative spirit." He sighs with a depth that reminds me of a Shakespearean play, then walks away toward the family room.

I nod and turn back to the sink. It's time to face whatever is fractured under the cloud of bubbles.

Sliding my hand through the water, I pull the plug and the soapy sur-

face slides down the sink wall, revealing the shattered edge of my favorite teacup. I don't even remember putting this prized possession into the suds.

A tear slips down my cheek, and I swallow back sobs. An overreaction, but emotion knows no rationale. I pile the broken shards on my palm. Their ragged edges mirror the condition of my heart.

Behind me, her breathing gives her away. It's the kind of slow, purposeful breaths that tell me she doesn't want me to know she's there. As if traveling a moment behind her, the coconut scent of her shampoo floats over me, but I still don't turn. Now isn't the time to face my daughter. Not with the tears cascading over my cheeks and the brokenness of my past so raw and in the open.

Her soft steps round the corner and the door to her room swishes over the carpet.

I breathe again.

Taking one last look at the hand-painted rose and gold-lined rim, I tip my palm and let the pieces drop away like dreams into the trash.

The last connection to my mother is gone. The only beautiful reminder of life before our ugly ending, destroyed. If I had it to do over again, what would I change?

Probably nothing.



Light reflects off the wet blades of grass sparkling in the glow of the streetlamp. Swaying forward and back, the hem of my purple, ankle-length robe, the one Izzy bought for me with her own money a couple Christmases ago, rubs across the tops of my feet like the edges of grabbing ocean waves. My gaze drifts away from the place where the porch light brings the night into focus and out into the darkness.

I've seen him out there before, a figure masked by darkness, sneaking to my daughter's window. And I didn't stop him because I was afraid

of how our different feelings about Travis were tearing our relationship apart. I was afraid I would be alone again, without a mother or a daughter.

Instead of dealing with the issue directly, I gave them a few minutes, then made noises in the hall. He always disappeared.

Anger licks my cheeks and lights a bonfire in my chest.

I should have slashed his tires, smashed his precious windows.

I choke on a sob and my regret.

Can't Izzy's situation be just another one of my nightmares?

These memories have been packed away and hidden in the basement of my mind. It's where I put them to rest, and where they were supposed to stay. But, like it was yesterday, the moment from twenty-three years earlier crawls out of its box and attacks.

My pain is true and real, but now, through the heart of a mother, it burns deeper, spreads wider, takes over every cell in my body. It's too late. The carefully covered wound is torn open, and my shredded heart is vulnerable to the flames.

There's no way out.

No escape.

My mother told me I had a choice, but it was a choice she made for me. It wasn't a moment of empowerment but of handing over my independence. She did this to me, and I can never forgive her.

I can tell myself lies all night, but they won't blur the pictures that scald my mind every time my eyes close. Izzy's thin figure didn't cover the telltale rounding in her abdomen, the slight curve over the tips of her hip bones. How have I missed the signs?

We taught her better than this, but what can we expect from a boy like Travis Owens, son of a drunken father, brother of a crook. And a mighty fine actor.

Biting my lower lip, I scold myself for falling for his show. I'd believed he cared for my daughter, believed he might be different.

How could he do this to my Izzy?

The light switches on behind me. Grabbing my robe, I pull it tighter around my chest.

“There you are. I’m about packed. You ready for bed?” Garrett’s duffel bag drops by the front door with an all too common thud.

Turning, I glare at the camo sack and military boots. Another of his monthly Guard weekends. They creep up and attack at the worst times.

“I know.” He pulls me into a hug, the warm scent of Irish Spring clinging to his body. “It’s only two nights, then I’ll be back. At least I’m not deployed.” His chin taps the top of my head as he nods. “Could be worse.”

I pull back. Could it really? My mouth opens and I try, really try, to tell him everything, to unload years of lies and the new sorrows, but the gentle curve of his mouth, that look of a proud father who hasn’t yet been shot with the truth . . . I can’t destroy him tonight. There’s no harm in waiting until he comes home. Until I’ve confirmed what I already know. Until I can’t shove the past into the closet any longer.

There’s no harm in a secret.

## Chapter 2

IZZY CLINE

I didn't want to swim today. Why can't I, just for once, be a normal teenager? No pressure. No expectations. Why can't everyone just back off and give me a break for a change? I never wanted to be perfect, just normal. No one ever bothers to know who I am, except Travis, and even he's been pulling away, or maybe it's me.

I sit against my bedroom door. The image won't leave my mind. Mom standing at the sink, her broken cup in her hand, her shoulders slumped.

It's only a second until tears choke my own throat, bringing with them the burn that comes from fighting to keep them back. My chin quivers and my chest tightens. I don't want to care about what this will do to her. I've got my own problems. And they're huge.

I shake my head. What's *wrong* with me? I'm not one of those girls who bawls about her troubles. But then again, maybe the girl I am now *is* that kind of girl.

The few bites of Italian chicken with thick, spicy cream cheese gravy sit like rocks at the bottom of my stomach.

It's time.

I hold my cell in shaky hands and my vision is a total blur, but I manage to type out a text to Travis. *I need to talk to you.*

In a flash, his answer pops onto my screen. *What's up?*

*I need to see you. Can you come over?* I have to talk with him before Mom starts telling me what to do.

*Now?*

*Yes. But not to the door.*



*Hmmm. What do you have in mind?*

*I just want to talk.*

*Iz, if you want to argue about that again, I'm not coming. I've already said I'm sorry. But it isn't just me.*

*We have a bigger problem.*

This time his response isn't so quick. I've shocked him, and I don't even care.

The lump in the back of my throat grows, reminding me I am still alive. For now.

*I'll be there in ten minutes. Keep the window open.*

I tap my finger on the screen, but don't reply. What can I say?

Instead, I stand and pull my favorite teddy bear off the shelf, where he's collected dust, then click off the lamp. The glow from my computer monitor and the streetlight outside my window are enough to see by. I drop onto the mattress. If only I could disappear into the blankets and never return.

The window is still closed, but I listen for his tap with a mixture of dread and anticipation. How can I ruin his life like this? How can I ruin my own?

A knock at my door freaks me out, and I breathe deep through my nose to fight away the urge to puke. Thrusting my feet under the blankets, I pull the bedding up to my chin. "Come in."

In the light of the hallway, my dad looks older, tired. And he doesn't even know yet. "Isabella, are you okay? You didn't eat much dinner."

"Yes, I'm just exhausted. Good night, Dad." My chest squeezes. Now I'm a liar too. I cover my head in the blankets with only my eyes staring out. The voice in my mind screams for him to leave, to close the door and let me be.

"All right. I'm heading out. Let's spend some time together next week. I miss my girl."

"Sounds good." I bury my head in the pillow, unable to look for another second. My own pain is enough to drown me. How can I do this to my family?

The knob clicks into place, allowing me to open my eyes.

They'll never trust me again.

The tap on the window startles me, and I jump upright, dropping my feet onto the carpet. I squat to the floor, my bent knees smashed up against the baseboard, and I push the window open.

Travis's face glows in the dim streetlight that shines across our corner lot. "I thought you were going to open the window." The harsh whispered words push me back a few inches.

"My dad was here. Wait." Crawling to the door I press my ear to the cold wood.

Nothing.

I reach up and turn the lock, something I've rarely done before now.

Back at the window we stare at each other, but I don't know how to start the conversation.

"Can I come in?"

My gaze sweeps around the room I've called my own since before my second birthday. Dolls still hang over the edge of a wicker basket on the middle shelf of my bookcase. Behind the closet door, tucked into a corner, is the trunk that holds my long-outgrown dress-up clothes. A pile of stuffed animals, a zebra and giraffe among them, look down at me from the woven hammock in the corner. "I'll come out."

Pulling the fuzzy purple blanket from my desk chair, I swing one leg, then the other, out the window and slide the three feet to the ground.

As my feet sink into the soaked bark mulch that surrounds our house, cold seeps into my slippers. A gust of wind flaps the blanket like a cape.

But I'm no hero.

I pull it tighter, forming a barrier between us. A little too late.

"Come on, Izzy. Say what you need to say. I'm cold."

A striped cat runs across the street and leaps onto the neighbor's fence. Sweeping my gaze up to Travis's eyes, I stall there for a second or two, taking in the last moment before my words change our lives forever. "I'm sorry. I'm pregnant."

A shiver begins at my spine and shakes my body. My breath forms tiny puffs in the air.

Then he touches me. First hesitant, then with both strong hands. He pulls me into himself, surrounding me with his solid arms. “We’ll be okay.” His hand rubs over my hair, squeezing me tight against his chest. The beats of his heart crash in my ear.

He pulls away and brushes at my tears with the back of his rough thumb. “In a few months, I’ll graduate.”

Light floods the yard behind him as someone inside our house flips on the porch light. We jump back into the safe shadow of an overgrown bush.

I bite my lower lip then blow out a hard breath. “I’d better go.” Holding his chilled face between my hands, I stand on my tiptoes and kiss his cold lips. How can I doubt he’s the right guy? Didn’t he just prove he is?

His gentle smile makes me want to fold back into his arms and pretend everything will be okay. That he’s really the one for me, and we’ll be happy forever.

I want to believe it.

Even if it’s just for tonight.



I wake up feeling just as tired as I was last night.

The full-length mirror hates me. I look like something between a rapper and a bum. From the pile of clean laundry in the corner, I grab Travis’s sweatshirt. Three months until summer vacation. I’ll never pull off this disguise that long.

Turning to the side, I suck in my breath. If only I wasn’t so bony thin.

Water has seeped onto the windowsill where I didn’t push it all the way shut last night. I sop up the mess with a dirty T-shirt then toss it back into the full basket. I don’t even do my own laundry. How am I supposed to care for a baby?

The sky is gray outside my window. I'm lucky. It's been a long winter. But soon the sun will come out and everyone will strip off their layers. And my body is only going to get weirder. What will I do then?

Maybe I should just give in. I can strut around in a bright-pink tutu and crop top with the words "Another Teen Statistic" printed across the chest.

Heat burns my cheeks, and my skin in the reflection changes, growing pale with red splotches. How could I let this happen?

I press my palms tight into my sides, set my jaw, and look up at the textured ceiling. And God. How could He do this to me? Isn't He supposed to be the God of forgiveness? I screwed up. It was only a few times. I knew I shouldn't do it, and I was truly sorry, but God dropped this on me. So now, instead of another chance, I have a life sentence.

The guilt is immediate. It's not the baby's fault. It's not God's. It's mine. I'm the stupid loser.

I shake my head. This can't really be happening. I need to wake up. There's no way this is my life. Maybe the girls who slink out of school at lunchtime, spending time with their rotating boyfriends. Maybe even the girls who've never been to church, who make snide comments about my Christian values. But not me.

The walls around me shrink, squeezing me in. I have to go . . . somewhere. I grab for a swimsuit, another loss.

Yesterday's meet will be my last for a long time. Maybe forever. I can't continue straining my stomach muscles to sneak quickly into the pool so a crowd can watch the girl who's surely headed to the Olympics come in third.

I lift my shirt and place my hand on the lump that seems to have popped from below my hip bones overnight. Can there really be someone in there? The thought is creepy, like one of those movies Travis loves.

Three months ago, I thought I loved Travis Owens. I thought he was the only man I could spend my life with. The true love God had planned for me. And Travis said the same things to me. Well, not the part about God,

but he said he loved me. I liked it. When we talked about the future—about me winning an Olympic medal, and Travis playing professional baseball, and us getting married—waiting didn't seem so important.

We'd never mentioned children, not then or in any other conversation. That was way too far in the future.

For that moment, nothing else mattered. We were only taking a step toward our forever.

Now it isn't a choice. We're tied together for the rest of our lives. And I'm not so sure he's the one. Somewhere along the way, my feelings for Travis started to fade.

Travis Owens is the father of my child. A baby who has no place here. A baby who should be the joy of my life somewhere far off in the future.

I pull my cell from my waistband. He still hasn't returned my text from last night.

The picture on the screen is us, arm in arm at homecoming, like two people who still have a future. All I wanted, my dreams, are slipping away. It's not fair.

Twisting my hair into a loose braid, I tie it at my shoulder, then yank at the neck of the sweatshirt. It's so hot. I can't stand it.

My friend Krista is always willing to shop. I'll pick her up and we'll go to the mall where everything is still normal.

The house is dead-silent. My brother must not be here. I step lightly through the hall and scoop up my mom's keys. Today it's better to ask forgiveness than to risk not getting permission.

"Going somewhere?"

My heart jumps into my throat as I spin around. Still dressed in her purple robe at ten in the morning, my mom grips her blue coffee mug with the snowflake prints. No steam rises from her drink. "I thought I'd go shopping with Krista." My stomach muscles shudder with the strain I automatically put them under.

"Izzy, I told you yesterday we need to talk. I meant it."

I search the room. "Where's Zachary?"

“I sent him to a friend’s house for the day.”

Tingles flash over my face.

“Sit down.” Her tone is not compassionate or angry. It’s dull. Almost empty.

“I don’t really feel like sitting.” My legs shake so hard I’m afraid I’ll fall over. I lean on the counter, gripping the edge for support.

Mom stares into her coffee, as if she’s waiting for the liquid to give her some sort of answer. Or she doesn’t want to see me. “Is there something you should tell me?”

I can’t keep looking at her. Turning away, I answer with another question. “What do you mean?” I’ve only bought myself a second or two, but I’ll take it.

“Come on.” A chair scratches along the wood floor. “This isn’t the right time to play games.”

Her hands fold over my shoulders and her cheek rests next to mine. The scent of lilacs always clings to her. When I was a child I’d wake in the middle of the night and call for her just so I could smell the flowery scent and drift back to sleep knowing she was there.

When did I stop wanting my mother’s attention?

Hot and deep, the tears gush from my eyes. My shoulders shudder with the sobs until I can get a breath. “What am I going to do?”

“I don’t have an answer for you. But we’ll figure this out, somehow.”

Turning, I stare into her eyes. Even through the blur I see the one thing I didn’t expect.

Fear.

## Chapter 3

MARGARET OWENS

The plastic bin pressed between my hip and hand bites into my flesh as I round the corner. At the table just left by three old farmers, I pocket my two-dollar tip, not even ten percent of their bill. Another reminder of my worth. Like the routine of breathing, I stack the sticky plates into a tower. My dark braid falls forward only an inch from a puddle of egg yolk from our famous and personally despised all-day breakfast. As I flip it back over my shoulder, my finger runs across some kind of cold goop. I swallow away disgust and wipe it off on my jeans. Ketchup.

Dishes crash into the tub. Returning to my home base, I heft the tub behind the counter and send it on a ride down the roller belt leading to the dish room. The coffee maker sputters with the final drop from the basket. Pulling the carafe of regular, I make my way down the line, hitting each customer's mug with a fresh shot of energy.

At the end of the row a hand slides over the cup a second before the first drop spills from my pot.

Officer Curtis Hobbs's deep-green eyes meet my gaze, and I shrink.

"How you doing, Margaret?" His round cheeks squeeze into a smile.

Without thought or sincerity, I nod. "I'm good. Is there something I can get you?" How can we possibly chitchat when it's only been two weeks since we met in front of a judge who held my oldest son's future in his hands?

He pulls his palm from the mug. "How about decaf? I've been wound kind of tight lately."

Tight? Not Hobbs. Life has a way of washing over him like rain on a

freshly waxed car. But that day in court? He'd been all business then. I can't really blame him. He was doing his job where I'd failed to do mine.

Exchanging the full-force coffee for unleaded, I fill his mug. Steam twirls up, but even the scent doesn't hold the charge of the real stuff.

"You hear much from that Marine son of yours?" He readjusts in his chair, correcting the balance of his belt hung with police equipment.

"Got an email last week. He'll know about his deployment soon."

His fingers wrap around his coffee cup. "How are you with that?"

I turn my back to him, putting a few steps between us, but the something about him I can't place does its work and melts a bit of my tension. He aggravates me that way. This same man dove onto my oldest, Kane, knocking him to the ground and breaking his nose in the process. But he is also the man who'd stopped Kane from making his next bad move.

My throat tightens like it always does when I let my guard down and think about what could have happened next. If the officer behind me hadn't done his duty, my son very well could be sitting in prison, a convicted murderer with no hope for parole. Instead he has five years for armed robbery. Maybe Kane can still get it together and have a life. I sacrificed any chance I had for one so he could live. Doesn't he owe me that?

"Margaret?"

I turn back to Curtis and balance myself with my palms on the counter. "Sorry. My mind tends to wander these days."

His hand covers one of mine for only a second, but the energy in his touch sends shock waves through my nerves. "I'm planning to make the baseball game tonight. Hope you'll be there." He slides a wad of money across the Formica. "That boy of yours is amazing. Heard he's been offered a scholarship. Is that right?"

My lips betray my mind and a grin takes over. I whip my long black braid behind my back, suddenly concerned about the few strands of white. "You heard right. Looks like Travis will be the first Owens man to graduate college."

"You should be very proud. You've done a good job." He pulls his hat



from the counter and taps it onto his head. “Hey, we’re having a lunch after church tomorrow to celebrate the first year since the big remodel. You should come.”

Tired grabs me with powerful claws. “I wish. I’m working the Sunday lunch shift just like every other time you’ve asked me to church.”

“I was hoping, I guess.”

I pull a bar towel from the shelf below the counter and wipe at a sticky area where a child ate pancakes earlier. “Why are you always inviting me to your church?”

One half of his mouth tips up. “I like seeing you. You’re fun and kind and, well”—his gaze drops to his coffee—“you’re pretty.”

My hand stops mid-swipe. Is he serious? I’m a mess. A waitress who works more than full-time only to leave this grease pit and clean other people’s houses. I have four sons and no husband, and everyone in town knows the details of that derailment. My oldest son is locked up, and my second, Kyle, would be if he hadn’t joined the Marines. The youngest hardly steps out of the cave he calls a room. If it weren’t for Travis, I’d have given up and died a long time ago. One out of four. Not good numbers in the parenting game.

I try to look into his eyes, but I can’t take the sincerity there. “Officer Hobbs, you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The door jingles. “Hobbs, you ready?” Officer Wade Denning swings a brown bag from his fingers, a bright grin on his face.

“On my way.” Hobbs looks back at me. “Newlyweds. You see what I have to put up with.” He winks. “See you tonight.” He steps from the stool and ambles toward the door.

Before I can watch his tall figure walk past the outside of our picture window, Larry Bromell shoves the door open with his hip and struts to the counter, a large cardboard box in his hands. “Where’s Carla? Shouldn’t she be out here helping you?”

“She’s in the back refilling the ketchups and mustards.” And probably talking on the phone with her boyfriend.

“Well, go get her. I’ve got something for you both.” His smile weighs heavy on me. The boss never drops good surprises in the middle of a workday. He doesn’t even know what a good surprise looks like.

“I heard you.” Carla tucks a loose strand of blond hair behind her ear and shoves her cell phone deeper into the pocket of her too-cute designer jeans. With long, carefree strides, she makes her way to the counter.

Turning my back to Larry, I flash her my best cut-the-attitude stare, but the girl tosses her hair and shrugs her thin shoulders.

Tape screeches from the top of the box, sending cardboard dust into the air and a shiver up my spine. Larry reaches in and pulls out a maroon dress with cream-colored buttons down the chest and an off-white apron.

Carla gasps.

“What do you think?” He doesn’t wait for an answer. “These beauties are just what we need to give the joint an old-time diner feel.”

An episode from the television show *Alice* flashes before me. Insult to my already injured life. Now I can not only be the source of the town’s pity and gossip but I can look the part too.

“No way.” Carla settles her fists on her hips. “I’m not wearing that.”

“If you want to keep your job, you will.” Larry’s bushy eyebrows form one long woolly bear caterpillar.

Carla cocks her head, her eyes wide. “If that’s what I have to do for this rotten job, I’d rather be unemployed.”

Spoken like a girl with no responsibilities and two parents who still pay her real bills and protect her from the world. I keep my mouth in check by tugging my braid hard enough to cause a little pain. She has no idea how lucky she is. I’ve been taking care of myself since my mother was killed before my thirteenth birthday. As it turns out, men don’t have the ability to take care of anyone.

“Your final check will be ready tomorrow.”

“Fine.” Reaching under the counter, Carla grabs her bag, flings it over her shoulder, and saunters out the door.

“Good riddance.” Larry twists, popping his back. “Get the Help Wanted sign in the window.”

The second hand ticks around the clock, my chest pounding with reality. “My shift ends in ten minutes.”

“Not today, it doesn’t.”

“But my kid has a double-header. I’m already missing the first game.”

He rakes his fingers through thinning hair. “My customers need service. And you, you need this job, so you’d better focus on prepping for the dinner crowd. Carol will be in at five. You can leave as soon as the rush ends.”

Strutting out the door, he abandons the box of outdated uniforms.

What’s the point of fighting?

♦ ♦ ♦

The door slams, rattling the thin walls of my rented double-wide and sending dust down from the ceiling. The clock says it’s past ten, but it’s really later. Every battery in this dump is drained, leaving the hands running slow.

Travis stomps into the kitchen and throws open the refrigerator. He grabs the milk and drops the jug onto the chipped counter. Mud covers one side of his blue and yellow varsity baseball jacket.

“Where’ve you been?” It’s a question I’d learned to avoid with my older sons, but Travis is different.

“With Izzy. We got a milkshake after the game.”

I slump onto our one stool. Another night with that snob of a girl. No. That’s not fair. Izzy has never been downright mean. I’m sure she thinks Travis is too good for the likes of me, a miracle in the muck, and she’s right. I can’t argue. Travis can’t stay blind forever to the horrid failure I am. Eventually, he’ll wake up and see the mess he’s come from, then walk away from it all. Walk away from me. Isn’t that what I’d tried to do? “Take off your coat and let me run it through the wash. You can’t go to school that way.”

“It’ll brush off when it’s dry.” He yanks a bowl from the cupboard and lets it clank onto the counter. He runs hot, a bit too much like his father.

“That’s no way for a college baseball star to talk.”

Travis turns, then leans back on the counter, his palms gripping the edge. “What makes you think I’m going to be a star?”

“They don’t hand those scholarships out to just everyone, Travis.”

Something in his features has changed. Maybe nerves. Maybe something deeper.

He shakes his head. “What if I want to do something else? Did you ever consider that?”

His words yank me upright, bringing me to my feet. I cock my hip and jam my fists into my sides. This will not happen. “I think about it every single day. Don’t be a fool, son. We’ve worked too hard for way too long to walk away now. You have a chance here. Do you want to live like this forever?” I lift my hands and look around the shanty that I skimp and scrape to make rent for each month. Rolled up towels are taped to the base of the back door to keep water from coming in where the seal leaks. A blanket hangs over the front room window in place of curtains. If I only had the time or money, but I have neither.

Travis can have both.

“I know, Mom.” His hand is heavy on my shoulder. “It’s just, things aren’t working out how I thought they would. And this isn’t so bad.” His mouth tips into a half smile. Travis pulls off his coat, and tosses it onto the counter. He gives my shoulder a squeeze then heads to his room with the cereal box, milk, and his bowl and spoon.

What has that girl done to make him doubt himself like this?

Holding the coat close to my chest, I breathe the earthy scent that always lingers on Travis. The smell means success.

The back door is swollen and I have to tug before it wrenches open. Outside the washer and dryer are protected from the rain, but cold weaves into the uninsulated shed. Once, when it belonged to someone else, this would have been a nice machine. The place where the knob used to be has

settings for all kinds of laundry I'll never wash. I lift the white lid edged with rough rust and pull out wet clothes so cold they're nearly frozen. The dryer starts to hum along with an occasional squeak to remind me the bearings are about to give out.

Travis's jacket makes an odd clank when I drop it into the washer. I pull it back out and run my hands into the pockets. His cell phone buzzes against my palm. That was a close call.

The screen glows in the dim light.

Izzy.

My gaze glues on the door separating me from Travis. It's secure enough. I open the text, and as I read my heart pounds. *Thank you for being so wonderful about this.*

About what? I can't help myself. I need to know what's bothering my son. Crouching in the gravel in front of the washer, I scroll through his messages. The taste in my mouth grows sour and rage burns my skin.

No.

There's no way.

Izzy Cline is not going to take Travis's future away from him. He is going to be someone.

My jaw tightens.

This is my chance to make up for what I did to his father, a man who doesn't deserve my pity. But there was a day when even that drunk had a chance. Then he threw it all away to marry me. It didn't take long before he found the bottom of a bottle a more suitable home.

Not Travis.

Whatever it takes, I'll make sure he has a future.

## Chapter 4

STACEY FREY

I should be excited. Today is the first day of our great new West Coast adventure. But it's also a Monday, and it feels like a Monday.

Keith turns the key in the lock of our new two-story Victorian. Before he can open the door, I rub my fingertips along the rough lap-board exterior, only a degree lighter than the dirt near the home we left in Tennessee. Up close, the color is darker than I first thought when we pulled up to the curb. The rich green of the yard has a way of muting the hue of the house.

For the last week, my nerves have swung from numb to tingling with pure excitement. Why does numb choose to visit me now?

The door swings open and Keith scoops me into his arms. Like the day we were married, he still steals my breath. "Whoa there." Lacing my fingers behind his neck, I offer him an approving grin, thankful I've resisted the urge to call my mama. This time is for Keith. He deserves my full attention. "We're hardly newlyweds."

"New house. New state. New job." He shrugs. "I'll call you my new wife." He steps into the living room, easing me back to my feet, his arms still circling my waist.

"Very funny." Shaking my head, I splay my fingers on the royal-blue T-shirt stretched across his chest. "You'll have to make do with your original wife."

I step back, leaving the warmth of his arms, and turn a slow circle in the stark-white room. My breath billows into the cold air.

The scent of freshly shampooed carpet and new paint punctuate the room with crisp, clean air unmarked by grief.

The house seems larger than it appeared in pictures from Keith's last of many visits to Oregon. Maybe too large. This is the home we dreamed of. But the life we're living isn't the one either of us imagined.

Stairs climb toward the vaulted ceiling, leading to a landing that looms above us like a judgment.

Three thousand square feet of empty.

Keith has done well for himself and this house is an extension of his success, while the sterility is a magnification of my failure to give him the one thing he asked of me.

I push haunting thoughts back down, refusing to ruin his moment with our reality.

We stop in the family room, Keith's hand weighing heavy on my shoulder.

Two people don't need a family room.

The cold glass chills my palms as I lean close to the French doors. Outside rain drizzles as if the sky is in mourning.

I straighten my pose, committing myself to Keith's happiness. Drop-lets roll down the climbing vines on a trellis. A garden would fill that space and bring a kind of life to our home. Bobbing my head, I start to envision the beds laid out in patterns, green sprouts bursting from the soil and producing an abundance of vegetables.

"The truck's here." Keith pulls away from me, breaking the spell of the painting in my mind. "Right on time," he calls over his shoulder.

So much for looking around. I haven't even been upstairs yet.

Keith slips out the front door, but I stay in the house, watching from the dry entryway.

Metal clanks and slams as the moving truck's back door rolls open, and three burly men begin to unload our belongings with the efficiency of ants.

Jumping back, I make room for our couch, a worn brown beast that should have been left to die in Tennessee.

"Where do you want this, ma'am?" A stocky blond man with a sticky Russian accent raises his chin to me.

I'm caught off guard with no plan for our home's layout. The rooms seemed different than in the pictures. Now that I'm standing here, I can see I need to rethink. "Y'all can put it over there." With my head, I gesture to the wall. The barren white begs to be covered by color and texture.

The scents of wet and earth and hardworking men quickly overpower the clean fragrance. Keith leads two box-toting movers up the stairs.

This house is truly beautiful. My mood takes another rapid shift, and I can't wait to see every square inch. I jog up the stairs and through the door to the master bedroom. There must be twice the space here as we had in Tennessee. The window looks down into our neighbors' yards. Evidences of children litter the grass. Trampolines and swing sets as well as a couple playhouses. This is a family neighborhood, children in every home.

Except ours.

From here I can see the bare dirt where play equipment was removed. I shiver, trying to console myself with the extra garden space.

Keith's warm hands wrap around my shoulders. His silence speaks all the answers I need to hear.

A loud sniff breaks into our quiet moment. "Which room will be the nursery?"

I whip around, something in me ready to fight.

The oldest of the three movers stands in the doorway holding a cardboard box, the edges worn from being shifted from one cubby to another, the word "baby" scrawled across the side.

"The basement. Those go in the basement."

His forehead wrinkles. "You don't have a basement, ma'am."

Keith steps in front of me, ushering the man into the hall. "The room next to ours seems logical. Let's put that stuff in there."

Wrapping my arms around my middle, I can't stop the vivid images of the way the nursery used to be. The giraffe and monkey decals bringing the room to life. The crib pushed against the sky-blue wall. The mobile spinning with bright colored frogs over the bed that should have held our baby.



Like a flood, memories sweep over me, pressing me down with their power.

The call. The baby coming. Rushing to the hospital to see our son come into the world.

His cry.

His tiny hand gripping my finger.

The pride in Keith's eyes.

And the scream.

I wipe my hands over my face. Two years. Why does it still feel so fresh?

Keith steps back into the room. He stands toe-to-toe with me, my upper arms secure in his grip. "It's time we move on."

"I can't." My lungs squeeze tight as if pressed in a vise grip.

"Can't, or won't? Stacey, you know I love you with every bit of me. This is where we start over. We can't continue living like this."

"Losing a baby is not a little thing. How am I supposed to believe it will be different this time? I don't have the capacity for that much hurt." Anger and guilt collide in my chest. How can I deny him what he wants more than anything else? But how can I take the risk again? So many things can go wrong.

"You know I don't have the answer. Please, let's give this another try." Frustration wavers on the edge of his eyes.

"I can't forget him."

"No one's asking you to. I want you to make room for someone new." His mouth quirks into a sad smile. "What do you say? Will you think about it? Pray about it even?"

The tips of our shoes touch as I drop my head onto his chest. Drawing in the warmth of his scent, I allow my body to soften into his. "I'll think about it. And I will pray God makes it obvious if you're right about this." Grabbing handfuls of his cotton shirt, I pull in tight to him, tasting the familiar saltiness of my tears.

