

“Relevant and provocative. We can each learn something about ourselves through the characters in *Afraid of the Light*.”

DEBBIE MACOMBER, #1 *New York Times* best-selling author

“Another winner by Ruchti. She never disappoints her readers.”

LAURINE SNELLING, award-winning, best-selling author
of *A Song of Joy*

“Award-winning author Cynthia Ruchti’s storytelling captured my heart from the first pages of *Afraid of the Light*. A gifted wordsmith, she’s crafted yet another story that keeps readers turning pages as they fall in love with her true-to-life characters. Exploring complicated relationships with realism and sensitivity is what Ruchti does best.”

BETH K. VOGT, Christy Award winner and author of the
Thatcher Sisters series

“*Afraid of the Light* holds surprising moments of laughter brilliantly timed to enhance rather than interfere with the moving, weighty themes of this unforgettable story. Cynthia Ruchti delivers it all in this masterful, compassionate tale of redemption. Keeping this one on my read-it-again-and-again shelf for sure.”

RHONDA RHEA, award-winning humor columnist,
TV personality, and author

“Ruchti’s book shines a light on the realities of hoarding and its impact on those around the hoarder. As protagonist Camille Brooks deals with her own hoard, I was often prompted to look around (both physically and emotionally) to see what I was stashing and where I needed to sort and toss.”

BECKY TURNER, international speaker and
nonprofit consultant

“Who knew that a novel about hoarding could hold both quirky romance and redemptive healing in equal measure? Hoarding is a deeply painful and multifaceted disorder, yet favorite author Cynthia Ruchti brings great compassion and finesse to the issue in *Afraid of the Light*. I entered a whole new world as I eagerly devoured the story of Camille and Eli reaching out in different ways (and for different reasons) to those trapped in the prison of their own accumulations. Ruchti’s extensive research gave me greater insight and empathy, and the love story is clever and utterly endearing. Ruchti is such a grand storyteller, reminding us all that there truly can be complete (albeit slow) transformation through the healing power of Jesus—the only source of Light.”

LUCINDA SECREST McDOWELL, author of *Soul Strong* and
Life-Giving Choices

“Captivating. Intriguing. Significant. In this page-turner, Cynthia Ruchti once again pulls her readers into a novel that is engaging and entertaining but also filled with personal application for all who engage in this fascinating narrative. You won’t be able to put this book down.”

CAROL KENT, speaker and author of *Staying Power*

“In her signature lyrical style, Cynthia Ruchti introduces us to multifaceted characters whose stories are refreshingly unique—yet could be our own. *Afraid of the Light* is more than a delightful read. It is a journey from fear to faith, from regret to release. Don’t be surprised if you find yourself stepping into the light right along with Camille.”

BECKY MELBY, speaker and author of *Hushed October*

“I could hardly wait to open the pages of *Afraid of the Light*. And I wasn’t disappointed. Cynthia Ruchti captivated me from the first lines and pulled me deep into the characters—each

one filled with quirks and relatable conflicts. Ruchti never disappoints.”

KAREN PORTER, award-winning author of *If You Give a Girl a Giant*

“I anxiously await every one of Cynthia Ruchti’s hemmed-in-hope novels. With wit, winsomeness, and wisdom she stitches together characters who could live in my real-world circles—folks with longings that resonate with my own heart.”

JANET HOLM MCHENRY, best-selling author of *PrayerWalk*

“She’s done it again! Cynthia Ruchti is a captivating wordsmith with a talent for telling poignant stories that wrap around your heart, mind, and life in a way that makes you a better person for picking up her books.”

PAM FARREL, best-selling author of *Men Are Like Waffles, Women Are Like Spaghetti*

afraid of
the light

a novel

CYNTHIA
RUCHTI



KREGEL
PUBLICATIONS

Afraid of the Light

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chapter one

THAT ACRID, CHOKING SMOKE SMELL. Cam caught a whiff of it—or her mind did—every time she walked a path from the curb to a client’s home. Paper, cloth, wood, shingles burning. She couldn’t let herself consider anything else beyond that.

She rechecked the address she’d been given. It wasn’t often she crossed a mowed, relatively tidy lawn when approaching a new client. The address was correct. And the drapes were drawn tight or shades pulled down on all the windows. All of them. It must be the place. Another client afraid of the light.

A frequent guest on Camille’s *Let In the Light* podcast—her producer Shyla’s favorite—Allison Chase had finally agreed to engage Dr. Brooks’s services. From their introductory phone call, Camille suspected what she’d see when Allison opened the door today. If she opened the door.

But that lawn—freshly mowed and tidy. Curious. Empty, barren window boxes hung beneath smudged windows on either side of the centered front door of the ranch-style home. The paint color, faded blue, made it look like tired, bleached

jeans. Probably built in the eighties. Probably not updated in the almost forty years since.

Camille tossed the judgmental thought and drew a steadying breath before knocking. *Here we go again.* It wasn't a prayer, exactly. More like a rallying cry. If God was listening, all the better.

She waited. Her stomach growled. She should have eaten lunch an hour ago. Now, depending on how the appointment progressed and what she found behind the door, she might not eat for hours.

The lined drape for the window on the left moved. Others might not have caught the movement. Camille knew to look for it. Her knock had been heard. She'd been observed. Steps one and two in gaining entrance. She adjusted her quilted purse—machine washable, a necessity—on her shoulder. Its bright turquoise and pink pattern should seem less threatening than a black attaché or alligator-print laptop case. It had worked to break down barriers before.

Click. Click. Click . . .

Camille counted five dead bolt clicks before the door opened an inch.

"State your name." The voice sounded more apologetic than demanding.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Chase. I'm Dr. Brooks. Camille Brooks. I'm so glad to finally meet you." *Tone down the exuberance, Camille. Too much happy can scare off a person in this woman's state of mind.*

"Allison. My first name's Allison."

"Yes, I remember. From our chats. You said I could come over today and talk with you face-to-face. Is that still okay?" Podcast listeners had described Camille's voice as soothing, comforting, that her midnight broadcasts helped them sleep, of all things. She hoped her voice came across as nonthreatening now.

"You won't stay long?"

Camille smiled. Textbook question. “Not today. Not unless you want me to.” Textbook answer.

The door swung open a little less than the width of Camille’s hips. She turned sideways and shimmied through the space. It closed quickly behind her. Five clicks.

The darkness wasn’t unexpected, deeper and thicker than merely stepping from outside to inside. The smell surprised her though. Lily of the valley. Her olfactory system had been prepped for rancid, moldy, or at best, stuffy. It wasn’t prepared for lily of the valley.

The diminutive woman stepped away from the door. “Let me turn on another light.”

Another?

Allison reached across a tower of mismatched boxes, angled her body to avoid a pile of a dozen or more blankets, and flicked on a table lamp. It stood four feet tall. Only the top of the shade was visible behind the stack.

Camille hadn’t expected lily of the valley. Or a client who looked like her mother.

Same pale eyes rimmed in darker blue, the outer corners tilted down as if already halfway to a frown. Same wispy shoulder-length blond hair that seemed unsure of its role on the woman’s head. Same—Yes. Same open button-down sweatshirt cardigan. Different shade of gray.

Allison flicked at her hair.

Camille made eye contact and reined in her renegade thoughts. “A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Chase.”

“You too.” Allison tugged her cardigan closed. “You’ll need a place to sit.” She moved through the room without waiting for an answer, surveying the stacks, rejecting several possible options, and moving to the next.

“Where do *you* usually sit, Allison?”

She brightened. “Over here. I keep all my things handy.” She pointed to an upholstered glider rocker and ottoman

surrounded on three sides by walls of magazines and books. Many of them cookbooks, Camille noted. And well-worn classics.

“You take your favorite chair then, and I’ll . . .” This next step wouldn’t be easy. She considered moving a plastic tote closer to where Allison now sat—a makeshift place to sit—but for her client’s anxiety’s sake, she couldn’t disturb the disordered order. “Would it be okay if I used this straight-backed chair? I can set these books right over here for now.”

“Can’t use that chair.”

This could get interesting.

“It only has three legs.”

“This one then?” Camille rested her hand on the back of another, not a match to the first.

“Three legs. I’m kind of partial to chairs with three legs.” Allison shrugged, as if that were all the explanation necessary.

Camille bent to look. Both chairs were propped with piles of bricks where a leg should be. “I don’t mind standing for a while.”

“That might work.” Allison’s chin quivered.

“For now.”

The woman offered a barely there smile. “For now.”

Smoke. Camille smelled smoke again. And that persistent lily of the valley. A candle burned somewhere in the room. There it was. On top of the aged television. Not safe. But a whole lot of trust building would have to come first before Allison would be ready to have Camille warn her of the danger.

Camille shifted her position so she couldn’t see the candle’s flame and the way it danced awkwardly, mocking her.

One woman’s anxieties at a time. Allison’s first.

“I suppose you want me to tell you I’m ready to get rid of this stuff,” Allison said, gaze fixed firmly on her hands in her lap.

“I’d be surprised if you *were* ready, Allison.”

Camille focused on the hands too. Pale and soft, with short, even nails. Like her mother’s. Allison’s fingernails sported

the remnants of what looked like weeks'-old pink polish. The woman picked at what little remained.

"I'm honored you invited me in, Allison."

The woman looked up. "Funny word. *Honored*. Not one I would have chosen."

"What would you have said if our roles were reversed?"

She waved off the question.

"I'd like to know."

Allison surveyed her domain. Camille watched as Allison took note of every tilting pile, every stain, every stack and bundle and nameless bag. One barely navigable path wove through the chaos, and even it was littered with remains of past days. How was there room for tears to form and stay?

"Mortified."

"What?"

The cardigan sides overlapped. "I'd be mortified to step into a place like this."

"It's your home, Allison." Camille tiptoed carefully with her words. Her work with a client like Allison hung on fragile threads of trust.

"Don't know many who would call it that. They'd call it a disgusting mess. It isn't normal."

"Is that why you listen to the podcast? Why you allowed me in? Because you're looking for normal?"

Lily of the valley fought for dominance over a rancid smell wafting from what Camille assumed was the kitchen beyond a sheet-curtained doorway. Waiting for Allison's answer would be easier if she didn't have to breathe. Outsiders assumed Camille had gone nose-blind to the odors in the homes of her hoarder clients. Desensitized, maybe. But certainly not nose-blind.

Something scritch'd across metal in a nearby room. Cam had long ago trained herself not to flinch.

"Mice," Allison said. "Not proud of that, but what's a person going to do? My cat used to take care of them."

She had to ask. "You have a cat?"

"Had a cat. She . . . disappeared."

Well practiced, Camille kept her facial expression in check. Somewhere in the rubble of a decaying life lay a decaying feline that might never be found.

"Freedom," Allison said softly. "I don't want normal. I want freedom. But . . ."

"But what?"

"No amount of letters behind your name can give me that, Dr. Brooks."

Camille would have argued. But she was right.

"Can I change my answer?" Allison's tears glistened in the underachieving light from two small lamps and one struggling candle.

"Sure."

"My children. I want my children back."



Allison would have no way of knowing why Camille paused so long before answering. No way of knowing what Camille would have given to have heard those words more than a decade ago.

"How old are your children?" she asked, deflecting her own thoughts from where they drifted.

"Mid-twenties. One is forever . . . a newborn," Allison said.

Cognitive issues? Disability?

"Lia lives in Stafford. Ryan's . . . Ryan moved. I'm not sure where. He won't give me his address. He calls at Christmas."

Did Ryan think his mom was going to drop in unexpectedly, a woman who rarely left her house? Why refuse to give his mother his address?

Camille waited again. No more information.

Forever a newborn? Oh. Allison had lost a child. Another piece of the puzzle. Camille stored the information with

well-honed memory tools. She'd watched her clients grimace when she scribbled notes as they spoke, as if every sentence were an indictment against their character. Jotting a note had completely shut down communication in the early days of her practice.

"Allison, do you want to talk about your other child?"

"No. Don't ask again." The woman flattened her palms on her chest, as if her breasts ached.

"Okay. You said you want your children back. I assume that means you haven't seen Lia or Ryan for a while. They haven't been here to visit."

"I disgust them."

"Allison . . ."

"Dr. Brooks . . ." Her voice held a tinge of impatience. "Look at me. Look at what I've become. They say I care more about my things than I do about them."

"Is that true?"

"Of course not. But they won't come back until I fix this." Her face registered crippling pain. "And I can't fix it."

"Neither can I."

Camille got the reaction she expected.

Shock replaced Allison's pained expression. "Then why are you here?"

"Because this calls for teamwork. Maybe you and I together can make some progress. That word *progress* makes you anxious, doesn't it?" *Tread carefully.* "Allison?"

"The real problem is that I just don't have enough storage space." She looked like a first grader trying to convince her teacher that a dog really did crave the taste of homework.

"You and I both know storage is a small part of what you're facing."

"I can rent another storage unit."

As she'd suspected. "Another one? How many do you rent now?"

"Four or five. Six, maybe."

Camille tilted her head. “Imagine what you could do with the money that’s now being spent on storage rental. Just imagine.”

“It’s not that much.”

“Think about it for a moment. How much per month?”

“I got a good deal because I have so many.” Allison shrank into her cardigan.

“Around here, I’d guess you’re paying somewhere around a hundred dollars a month for each unit, right?”

“Not quite that much.”

“Let’s use a hundred as a guesstimate to make the math easier on me. Five or six units means six hundred dollars a month, times twelve months equals more than seven thousand dollars a year.”

Allison shifted in her chair.

“What would you do if you had seven thousand dollars?”

“It won’t happen.”

Camille brushed a feather from her slacks. *A feather?* Maybe Allison hadn’t noticed her action. “Play along for a moment please.”

“I’m not a dreamer, Dr. Brooks.” She rubbed her jaw, as if trying to knead a knot of tension. “Not anymore.”

Ab. An opening. “When you did dream, years ago”—she slowed the pace of her sentence—“how would you have answered the question then?”

A lawn mower revved up a few houses away. Camille picked up the sound despite the extra sound insulation a hoarder’s house provided.

“Foolishness to think about it.” Allison twirled the series of rings on her right hand, two per finger. “I suppose I would have said back then that I’d visit my sister. My sister Charlotte lives in Charlotte. Always thought she moved there on purpose just so she could raise eyebrows when she was introduced at work or parties.”

“Seven thousand would allow you to do much more than that.” The childlikeness in Allison’s eyes made Camille’s heart

clench. It was as if Allison were peeking through the slats of a fence at a magical world on the other side.

“I’d . . . This is hard.”

“I know.” Cam would wait however long it took for Allison to give birth to the words.

“Okay. I’d rent a cottage on a beach somewhere warm and host my children and grandchildren for Thanksgiving. All of us together. Laughing and playing games and digging our toes in the sand. I’d watch the littlest ones while their parents took the older ones into the water. And the sky would be a color I couldn’t imagine and the sun would feel so good on my skin. Like a brush of angel wings. And the babies would let me hold them however long I wanted. And right after Thanksgiving dinner at a big long table on the patio—dinner that I made for them—with everybody there, my kids would call me Mama and it wouldn’t sound like a curse word.”

Camille shoved aside the pale statistics of hoarders who fully recover and made a mental note to do everything in her power to help Allison realize that dream.

chapter two

PLUMS. YELLOW PLUMS WITH A *rosy blush hung from the branch that arched over the narrow path. I reached to pluck one past its prime. It didn't count as stealing, though the tree and path weren't mine. Another hour or two longer and the spent plum would join those already decaying at the tree's roots.*

But few dying plums could reach the roots for all the decaying cardboard boxes littering the yard, black garbage bags bloated with rotting unknowns, Jenga stacks of damp newspapers and damper House Beautiful magazines.

I rubbed my fingers over the plum's infant-smooth skin, which gave a little under my touch. How had it survived? How had any fruit found the courage to grow in this tangle?

Still holding the plum, I picked my way up the path to the back door as I once did at the end of a school day. Not this back door. Another one, long ago reduced to ashes.

This house, this bungled bungalow on an otherwise normal street, wasn't where I grew up.

I'd had to grow up first before I could think about entering

afraid of the light

the home of a hoarder and care about who lived—or tried to live—inside.



“That’ll preach.”

“You know how I feel about preaching, Shyla.” Camille closed her iPad and pushed back from the microphone.

Camille’s engineer/producer/friend with attitude removed her headphones, drew her enviable micro-braid hair extensions in front of her shoulders from where they’d been exiled behind her ears during taping, and stared at Camille like she’d grown a third nostril.

“I meant,” Shyla said, “that’s good stuff. Fits with the ‘Embrace the poetry of living’ theme you’ve been harping on in this month’s podcasts.”

“I do not harp.”

“Camille . . .”

She mimicked her friend’s tone. “Shyla . . .”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Shyla said, using both index fingers to point to her laptop screen, “I have editing to do before this episode is ready.” She adjusted her headphones over her ears and tuned Camille out.

If she weren’t so good at her job . . .

And if Camille were paying her what she was worth . . .

And if she weren’t doing me a favor by liking me . . .

Okay, tolerating me.

Most days.

Camille waved an overexaggerated goodbye, grabbed her purse, and left Shyla’s studio apartment, making sure the woman noticed that Cam had to turn sideways to slide past the monstrous armoire on her way to the door.

As always, Shyla would fake-fume for a moment after Camille left, but nothing would change.

So like my clients.



Occupational hazard. Every home visit required a shower before Camille could call the day done.

She dressed in her standard at-home soft jeans and French terry shirt, towed her hair dry, and restored the bathroom to order before padding barefoot across the dark hardwood floor to the kitchen.

The refrigerator glowered at her. It accused her of skipping too many meals lately. So she yanked its handle open and squinted at its blue-white interior light, feigning interest. Except for the few staples on the nearly bare shelves, it could have been a display-model fridge. No leftovers. She didn't do leftovers.

In her career, Camille had seen too much of the aftermath of forgotten food.

She checked the expiration date on the small glass container of lemon velvet yogurt. Another two weeks from now. The glass felt cool in her hand, but the inky date glowed as if on fire. Two weeks? Too close. She depressed the foot pedal on the stainless-steel waste can and tossed the jar into its dark cavern.

Her stomach rumbled. *Let it complain. I'm not going out again.*

"Ever heard of takeout?" Shyla would say.

"Ever heard of takeout *wrappers*? The garbage of convenience," Camille would counter. She flicked the switch on her electric teapot and waited for the water to boil for tea.



Allison wanted her children back. Didn't they all? So many with hoarding tendencies or disorders, like Allison's, walled themselves off from their grown children without intending to. The larger the accumulation of things, the greater the distance.

Camille stared out the floor-to-ceiling window of her

eighth-floor apartment at the night-shrouded but blinking city. The bridge over the river was lit with two parallel rows of streetlights crafted to resemble the gas lamps of days gone by. The riverfront section boasted an intentional mix of modern and historic buildings and trim parks that made Camille's view as picturesque as artwork.

It *was* her artwork. The walls—each one—remained unadorned, the expanses unhindered by visual interruptions. No disruptions. As it should be.

I can help you get your children back, Allison. But you're going to have to trust me.

Their connection through the podcast had been a start. But Shyla was right. If they failed to find sponsors for the podcast, it would disappear from cyberspace. Camille couldn't afford to foot the bill forever. And the bulk of her audience wasn't in a position to donate to the cause.

If Adult Social Services got on board . . .

But they were both her supervising entity and her strongest opponents, convinced a podcast was the least effective way of addressing the issue.

If this worked with Allison, her unofficial beta tester, and if Camille could prove the podcast could form a vital trust bond with other hoarders and the people who cared about them, maybe she could make a dent. Maybe she could prevent other families from shattering like hers had.

Redemption. Maybe she could finally know what redemption felt like.

The timer on her counter dinged. The tea had steeped exactly 3.5 minutes.

Okay. So, she'd eat. She opened a single-serving can of clam chowder and poured it into another pottery mug. Two minutes in the microwave, another thirty seconds to wash out the can, dispose of the can in the recycling chute in the hall, then swipe down the interior of the microwave, and she'd be eating.

“Are you happy now?” she said to the silent refrigerator.

Apparently not. It wouldn’t stop glaring. Or humming indistinct disapproval.

Minutes later, mug and spoon thoroughly rinsed and in the dishwasher, Camille sat on the charcoal gray couch and opened her laptop.

She scrolled through comments on the podcast page of her website. Last week’s episode had touched a nerve. “How Do I Know When It’s Time to Tattle on My Parent?” had generated more responses than the previous two months’ worth of topics.

The angry comments she could ignore. Especially the ones that quoted Scriptures like “Honor your father and mother,” as if that applied to hoarding.

“Forgive me, God. You know what I mean.”

Whoa. An out-loud prayer. Bold.

The questioning commenters deserved her attention though. She took the time to give at least a short word of encouragement or a link to another resource or an expression of empathy to each one.

So many families dealing with hoarding issues—Mom, Grandma, son, daughter, friend . . . It no longer surprised her. But that didn’t stop her from feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude and the aftershocks—often through whole communities. Generations.

She ought to know.

Overwhelmed. She stuffed the emotion behind a stack of others that screamed for attention she refused to give them. That was what it took to survive.

Camille slapped her laptop shut again and circled the perimeter of her apartment, paying special attention to the kitchen. Teakettle had shut itself off. No burners on.

But she thought she’d caught a whiff of smoke.



Moving wasn't an option right now, with so much tied up in repaying school and grad school loans, endless repairs on her car, the investment in podcast marketing. But as soon as she could, Camille would definitely consider it.

For now, she'd file another complaint with the housing manager about the resident two floors down who persisted in ignoring the *no smoking on the balcony* rule.

Traffic on the street below captured her attention. Several blocks away, the flow of taillights and headlights stalled, like red and white blood cells blocked by a clot in a major artery. The vehicular version of a stroke. She was aware of all the clinical reasons why her clients would let that happen in their homes. But seeing it play out in front of her had given her a new podcast topic.

Her colleagues could rail all they wanted. Just because they hadn't thought of it first didn't mean the podcast was a bad idea. Three million hoarders in the United States, a lowball estimate. And how many specialists to address the issue? How many shattered families did each of those three million represent? Someone had to take it to the airwaves, to cyberspace. Why not her?

"You'll catch more flies with cupcakes than a power bar," Shyla had told her on more than one occasion.

"Depends on the recipient," Camille had responded. Every time. "One person's power bar is another person's guilt-free, calorie-conscious, plant-based cupcake."

Yeah. She didn't buy it either.

She checked her multifunction watch. Still time. Within seconds, she texted Shyla. "Your Cupcake Guy bring home any leftovers tonight?"

Imagine being married to a baker.

Imagine being married. Camille shivered.

"Y?"

"Cuz. What do you mean, 'Why?'"

"Lime in the Coconut w/ toasted Swiss meringue ok?"

“Be there in ten.”

Camille grabbed her keys and purse. Her phone pinged.

“Cam, bring a box of tissues, will you? We just lost another baby.”



She stopped at Walgreen’s on the way to Shyla’s townhouse. Hoarders kept a stash of one-hundred packs of tissues. Not Camille’s style. She held the box—“soft and durable,” it said—in front of her like a pan of brownies for a housewarming. She elbowed the bell and waited for the door to open.

Not soft *or* durable enough for a moment like this.

Shyla’s beautiful face glistened with tear tracks.

“I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you tell me you were pregnant?” Camille said as she scooted past the armoire in the entry.

“Because of this,” Shyla said. “Because of having to tell you that I’m not anymore.”

“I am so sorry.”

“You said that. Have a seat. Jenx is getting your cupcakes from the car.”

What kind of friend was she? She’d almost corrected Shyla for pluralizing the word *cupcake*. “How’s he taking it?”

“Like always. Sad but supportive. He’s a rock.”

Imagine being married to a rock.

“Is there anything I can do, Shyla?”

“You know the answer to that. No. Nothing. I could use a hug, but you don’t ‘do’ hugs.”

“I will tonight.” Camille felt the weight of her friend and something much heavier in the circle of her arms. “I’m just so sorry.”

Shyla pushed away. “And I’m still cramping.”

“Oh. I . . .”

“Thanks for coming, Camille, but you don’t have to stay. I’m going to bed early.”

“I understand.”

“And for the tissues.” Shyla grabbed the box and clutched it to her chest.

“Right. No problem.”

With one hand braced on the arm of the couch, Shyla stood, back arched as if she were near her delivery date. But she wasn't. And might never be.

“How . . . how far along were you this time?”

Shyla squeezed the tissue box so hard, its sides collapsed. “Do you think that matters? How long I was able to love this baby, or how short, makes a difference?” She ripped a tissue from the mangled container. “All that schooling. You don't know much about the human heart, do you? Or what it means to lose child after child after child.”

The deluxe edition of a pain response. Camille waited, resisted the urge to leave Shyla emotionally bleeding out.

“I apologize.”

“Shyla, don't. Everything you said was true. And I've already told you I had to take Compassion 101 twice and barely passed the second time around.” Camille took a step back, ready if her friend decided to hurl something her direction.

“Interesting career choice for a woman without an empathy gene.”

The falsehood of Shyla's statement didn't need correcting. Not now. Or ever.

Shyla's faint smile faded quickly but lasted long enough for Camille to know it was real. Like the too-brief life of a child.

“You know I care about you, Shyla.”

“I know.”

Jenx entered the room, a BakedStuff bag in hand. The young man needed a branding coach. The caramel-colored bag hinted at what was inside. But cupcakes had lost their appeal. She couldn't let him know that. He'd gone to extra trouble for her.

“Hey, Camille.”

“Jenx. Thanks for”—she pointed to the bag—“that. And I’m sorry about”—she pointed toward his wife—“the baby.”

He handed Camille the bag and embraced his wife. “We’ve been down this road before. It doesn’t get easier.”

He spoke so tenderly into Shyla’s hair that Camille fought back tears.

Imagine being held at a moment like that.

“I’ll call you tomorrow, Shyla.”

“Okay.”

Camille was in her car, heading home, before the embrace ended. Or that was how she pictured it in her mind.

chapter three

IT DIDN'T SURPRISE CAMILLE WHEN the alarm buzzed. She'd been staring at those red numbers most of the night, noting their periodic change but unable to make them stop taunting her with the reminder that, of all nights, she needed to sleep.

When she closed her eyes, though, she saw Shyla's pain as a roaring, seething, child-swallowing monster.

Probably a second cousin to the beast Camille saw in childhood when she dared to fall asleep under her parents' roof.

The cupcakes hadn't helped. Once she'd convinced herself it would have been cruel to ignore them after Jenx's efforts, she ate both magnificent wonders. Hence the alarm set to 5:00 a.m. She'd have to double her workout routine to cover the sugar.

An hour later, Camille had run four miles with hand weights and calculated at least two cupcakes' worth of sweat lost in the process. Shower. Dress. The endless routine before she could begin her workday.

On the day's schedule, another home visit with her client, Chester. Camille rolled the tension—or workout

remnants—from her shoulders. Chester would not have showered. He would have been happy to . . . if his house’s plumbing was in working order. An all-too-familiar scenario.

Their previous visits had often ended abruptly when Camille ventured too close to suggesting Chester consider his core values. What was more important to him—the items that filled his home or the friendships he’d lost, the freedom he’d forfeited, even the freedom to allow a plumber into the house to fix the drains on his shower and sink?

Without a breakthrough, the stalemate in their discussions would redefine the word *stale*.

As Shyla would say, “Shame is nothing to sneeze at.” In the case of Camille’s hoarder clients, though, it often was. Shame kept them chained in dusty, dank prisons that once served as homes. Sneezing was not out of the question.

“I can’t let anybody in to see this, to see what I’ve done to myself,” Chester had said on their last visit several weeks ago.

“You let *me* in,” Camille had said, her voice threaded with the practiced, even tone she used to set her clients at ease. Correction, to *attempt* to set her clients at ease.

“Rethinking the wisdom of that,” Chester had said, scratching the patchy stubble on his chin.

He’d ended the conversation moments later.

But he’d answered the phone when she called. A good sign. And he’d agreed to open the door if she showed up today.

Every visit required documentation. After two years of working with Chester—the long, slow crawl toward recovery—she hoped to have something more to write than “No progress.”



“Chester, it’s good to see you again.”

“It’s not a good day. Sorry you came all this way.” The door opening narrowed from three inches to two.

“I’m not having a great day either. Maybe we could be

miserable together.” She mentally flipped through volumes of protocol. She’d gone completely off grid.

Moments ticked by. The opening widened a fraction. Chester stepped back and dropped his arms to his sides. “As long as we stop talking when I say so.”

Camille nodded.

“Then come in, if you can get in.” He huffed. “Wonder who made up that phrase. A person like me?”

She knew better than to try to throw the door open wide. Few of her clients could throw anything wide. Camille nudged it a few more inches and slid through the narrow space, her mind on the ill effects of double cupcakes late at night.

She was greeted by a scene like so many others. A narrow, debris-strewn path through tottering stacks of debris from which the *strewn* had fallen. As always, she swallowed her initial reaction—*Oh, Chester!*

“What makes this day harder than others?” She steadied herself with her fingertips on towers of plastic totes as she navigated the path and took the office chair he’d pulled out for her.

The man shrugged, the action half smothered by the upholstered brown recliner where he’d perched. “It doesn’t take much.”

“Is it your health?”

He chuckled. “You’d think, wouldn’t you? Living in a”—his eyes surveyed the room—“mess like this. You’d think I’d be flat out with any number of gruesome diseases. No. Nothing’s threatening my health at the moment.”

She’d disagree with him, in light of his asthma-like wheeze, but how far would that dialogue go? She leaned forward. “Something else then?”

“Landlord was here.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t let him in, of course.”

“Of course.”

“But he saw enough. Had a fit loud enough to wake

Benjamin Franklin's dead ancestors. And that's saying something." Chester rubbed his palms on the arms of his recliner.

"What did your landlord say?"

"The usual. Threatened me with eviction again if I don't get the place cleaned up. Gave me a deadline this time. First of the month."

"And what did you say?"

"Told him I'm working on it."

The opening she'd been waiting for. "Are you ready, Chester? I can have a team here in two days if you're serious."

His eyes glazed over.

"Chester?"

"Yeah? I heard you. I guess so. Guess I have to be."

She might not get stronger confirmation than that. "Let's spend a little time talking through the process then."

"Okay."

"The team I work with are top-notch people, Chester. They'll respect you and your belongings."

Chester slammed his footrest closed. "With a shovel. That's respect?"

"We'll take it at the pace you need, but the first of the month is not that far away."

"I need your promise they won't throw out anything unless I've approved it. I know some of this stuff might look like garbage, but most of it has a purpose they might not know about. I don't want them hauling things away that mean something to me."

Not even these dozens of used paper plates, Chester? Not even the spoiled meat, the long-empty eggshells, the unidentifiable liquids-once-solids in plastic bags on your kitchen counters?

"We will involve you in all the decision-making. Your part will be trusting like you never have before and letting us help you make the hard decisions. But you landed on an important point. What among all this means something to you?"

"You've turned to mocking now, Dr. Brooks?"

“No.” She leaned farther forward. “No, Chester. That’s not what I meant. I sincerely want to know—need to know—what criteria you use to determine an object’s value.”

“It’s all valuable to me. Do you think I would keep it around if it wasn’t?”

Yes. “We’re looking for *your* definition of ‘important to you.’ And then, as we’ve said before, make little conscious shifts in that definition.”

He sighed. “Readjust my attachments, my emotional connections to inanimate objects.”

“Yes. You *have* been paying attention, even when you sat there week after week with a scowl on your face.” She smiled.

His lower lip quivered with the effort to squelch it, but he returned the smile.

Camille opened the notes app on her phone. “I’ll keep a record of your answers so we can communicate clearly with the—”

“The dumpster people?”

“With the organizational experts. We use trucks, not dumpsters.”

“Nice touch.”

“I’m not insensitive to how difficult this is for you, Chester. But I’m also not insensitive to its necessity. I want you to be able to stay here in the place you’ve called home. Where else would you go?” *Too much?* She held her breath.

He turned his head, as if listening to an unseen person for further directions. Camille was forced to breathe again before he spoke. “I’ve outlived my welcome with everyone else who was once in my life. They don’t want me to come near them if I’m hauling all this with me.”

“So,” Camille ventured, “you have two strong reasons to tackle the accumulation.”

“The accumulation.’ How distinguished a phrase for it.”

“Two compelling reasons. You’ll get to keep your house,

and you'll finally have a chance to start rebuilding those relationships."

Chester closed his eyes and rubbed the side of his head, as if warding off a headache.

"Would you let me start today?" Camille asked.

"What do you mean?"

Courage, Camille. But tread carefully. "Would you allow me to remove one thing, one item, whose value is no longer as strong as it once was? One item? Can you look around this room and choose one thing you can part with?"

Minutes passed as Chester pawed through the refuse near his chair. "I'm having a hard time—"

"Something broken? Beyond repair?"

"See, that's the thing. I have a particular fondness for the broken."

She risked laying her hand on his sleeve. "I understand. I do too." Something twitched in her chest. Heart. Seat of the emotions. Somehow she'd have to show she cared without . . . showing it.

His eyes fixed on her hand. She withdrew it slowly. "I have an idea," she said.

"You and your ideas."

"Near the door is a basket with dozens of umbrellas."

"For visitors, if they need one."

"How many visitors have you let into the house in the last five years?"

"Two. My brother—but he won't be back. And you."

"May I use one?"

His eyes widened.

She changed tactics. "Borrow. Let's see if you can live with one less umbrella for the next twenty-four hours."

"It's just a game, isn't it?"

"Chester, if the drapes weren't closed, you'd know it's raining out there. And I didn't bring an umbrella."

"As if you didn't already know I owned more than enough."

“What did you just say? Did I hear correctly? *More* than enough?”

“You’ve got me all twisted in my thinking. I can’t do this anymore.” He pushed on the arms of his chair and raised the footrest again. A benediction to the conversation.

She stood. “I’m going to call my team of organization experts, Chester.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It’s what you need if you want to keep living here.”

Crickets. She turned her head at the sound. Literal crickets. Somewhere in the bowels of the overflowing house.

Chester repositioned himself in his chair. “Go ahead and call.”

“I’m not going to pretend it won’t be hard. But I’ll be here with you. We’ll do it together.”

A wild chorus of crickets and nothing more from Chester.

“I’ll call you tomorrow with the arrangements and to answer any questions you might have. You’ll like the team.”

No response.

“You’re brave enough for this. I know you are. Keep reminding yourself of that. Talk to you tomorrow.”

“Dr. Brooks?” He looked up, almost making eye contact. “Grab yourself one of those umbrellas on your way out. Frail thing like you will catch her death of something if you get wet.”

“Are you sure?” Who knew an umbrella offer could lead to an adrenaline rush of hope for managing her client’s obsessions?

“Just one though.” His gaze drifted to the floor again. “I . . . I might need the others.”



Camille texted her contact at Rosies’s Refuse Removal. What an unfortunate name and typo. The company logo looked like it was refusing to remove anyone named Rosie. Or that multiple Rosies were refusing. The presence of their trucks

in a hoarder's driveway had always made her cringe. But the typo and logo remained.

The cleaning team was on board for starting in two days. But she needed the trucks and the haulers. Why wasn't someone from Rosie's—or Rosies's—responding?

Her phone dinged. *There we go.* No. A message from Shyla. Would Camille be okay postponing their appointment to record two more podcasts this week? Not only okay. It would relieve a little of the stress of pulling together the crew she needed and managing the anxieties of a man who was unlikely to let a little thing like eviction compel him to make a radical change.

Camille answered Shyla, then called the flower shop to have an arrangement sent to the grieving almost-mom and her husband. She should have thought of that yesterday. Tough break for them.

Maybe flowers was a dumb idea. A gift card to their favorite restaurant? How soon before Shyla would feel like getting out of the house? Camille should make them a meal.

But that would mess up her kitchen.