

Prologue

Fourteen years earlier

THE MAN TOWERS ABOVE ME, and I want to stand firm. I need to stand tall because he feeds on fear. He isn't that much taller, but I always feel small and insignificant in front of him. I'm not a star—I'm gangly and without the power or grace to become an Aly Raisman or a Gabby Douglas. His strength would make it too easy to snap me like a twig, a fact his swagger emphasized.

"I'll go to the police." I force the words past trembling lips. Hate he has any reason to know I quake before him, because he will file that information away and use it when it suits him.

"You can't."

"I will."

He crosses his arms over his broad chest and stares at me with eyes more dead than alive. "If you do, then I'll tell them how you helped me."

Horror rises in my chest, and I sputter. "I didn't."

I'm not part of his evil. No one would believe that. No one could. Everything I've done has been an effort to stop him.

"Every time I asked you to escort one of the gymnasts to my office . . . what do you think happened?" He speaks the words flatly, as if he couldn't be bothered by them.

Cara Putman

I swallow down bile as a sequence of images plays across my mind. “No.”

Now he smiles. “Yes. They all trusted you. Especially the younger ones. As the big sister everyone knows, you’re safe. They are so easy to manipulate.”

My hands tremble, and I hide it by placing them behind my back. Maybe I could deflect his attention. “Libby didn’t commit suicide. Everyone knows that.”

My friend would have never done that despite the vicious rumor this man, her coach, had helped circulate. She’d had hopes of capturing a college coach’s attention at junior nationals. She might not ever have made the senior national team, but there had still been doors for her to push through.

“Nobody believes your little theory. Who knows what darkness filled her head before this terrible tragedy? We’re all left with questions and can only try to comfort the family and friends left behind. You wouldn’t want to upset them more.”

I watch him carefully, trying to understand his game. Everything is an evil, twisted game to him, and I feel overwhelmed, trying to hold back the waters that threaten to crash over my head and drown us all. “I want the truth. Everyone deserves that.”

“We have to take care of those who are still here.” He moves a step toward me, and I back up. “I can’t help her, but I can make sure you, for instance, get the assistance you need.”

I edge closer to the door. The thin wood presses into my back. I raise my voice. “I have to go. Chloe needs me.”

“That’s another thing. Chloe’s asking to spend time with me.” His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “I’m thinking about taking her to a movie. Giving her some special attention.”

I freeze. I don’t want to believe him, but how can I know the truth? Fear tightens my vocal cords, but I force words out. “Stay away from my sister.” Chloe could become the star, but she has to do it without him. It isn’t worth the cost to do it with him. Nothing is worth that cost.

The Targeted

“I can’t help it if she comes to me.” He holds his arms wide. “You don’t understand how they admire me.” He cocks his head. “Or maybe you do, and you’re jealous.”

Revulsion crawls over me, but I work to keep my expression impassive. “She wouldn’t.” Chloe couldn’t. Not my little sister.

“She asked why other girls got to go do special things with me and she didn’t.” He gives me a smile coated in pure evil. “Next time I can tell her it’s because you don’t play along.”

“I don’t have time for this.” I make a show of stiffening my spine and opening the door. “You aren’t as scary as you think.”

“Really? Then go to the police with what you think you know. You won’t prove anything because you don’t know anything. But what will happen is you’ll lose your sister. One way or the other, you will.”

I make a mistake and look back. I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t stop myself. What I see on his face pierces through me. It isn’t something I could take to the police, but it is a certainty that he will destroy Chloe. Or me.

“If I leave?”

“You’d better go where I can’t find you, because I will watch you. I’ll always be watching. And when you come back, you’ll pay.”

And as I hurry from the office, God forgive me, I believe him.

It is me or Chloe.

That makes the choice easy.

I will always choose Chloe. Someone has to do that.

Even if it kills me, leaving is a trade I will make any day.

And every day.

Anything to keep my sister safe.

Chapter 1

Monday, April 6

VERY FEW DECISIONS COULD ALTER the course of your life, but Chloe Ainsworth had one staring her down. Everywhere she turned, life demanded she make a choice, and her heart adamantly refused to cooperate. Unfortunately, she'd run out of time and had to make a decision.

Accept one of her law school offers or stay stuck in Kedgewick? That choice confronted her and wouldn't leave her alone.

She had to choose, yet . . .

Everyone else had moved on and built successful lives, but she'd remained mired in a time warp that didn't vary much from the day she'd graduated from high school. Law school might be the gateway to her new life, but she couldn't force her way through the door. As she pulled into her apartment building's parking lot, she noticed a beat-up dark-blue sedan occupied her parking spot.

Really? She couldn't even use her own spot?

She wanted a do-over on life, and she'd take it now. Maybe it would help to take her pent-up frustrations out on the parking lot thief.

Instead she pulled into the far guest spot and called management. After receiving assurances someone would call a tow truck, and no, she wouldn't be towed if she parked in a visitor spot, Chloe slid out of her car and hiked across the lot and upstairs to her apartment. The paint

The Targeted

peeled away from the wood walls, and the stairs had long ago lost their non-slip substance. The whole place had a worn-down air that matched Chloe's mother, gray and slowing down even though she was barely fifty.

The thought weighted Chloe's steps even more than her fatigue had.

Some days were more of a slog than others, and this day had been an entire bog dragging at her ankles.

She pulled her apartment key free of her bag and stuck it into the doorknob, then twisted and stumbled into the apartment. The sound of voices caused her to halt as she waited to hear whether they came from the TV or another source. Mom seemed okay to leave alone, but one day that would change. Chloe couldn't survive that moment becoming today.

She needed to believe the fiction that she had a choice and some agency in her life even if all the facts told her otherwise.

It took effort, but she thrust the depressing thought away and stepped into the hallway, letting the door thud shut behind her. "Mom?"

"In here, Chloe. You won't believe who's home." Her mother's breathy voice communicated an excitement that confused Chloe. Usually an edge of ennui or depression clung to Mom's words.

"Mom?" Chloe didn't want to remind her mom again to keep strangers from the apartment—she was a grown woman after all—but she was also a woman with an initial diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's. Those three words threatened to upend their lives in dramatic fashion, but Chloe wanted a second opinion first.

"Chloe, come see. It's a miracle." A chair scraped against the tile, as if Mom was too excited to wait for Chloe to appear in the doorway.

"I'm coming."

Chloe dropped her keys into the chipped ceramic bowl on the small hall table and then dumped her bag underneath the console. She saw no need to rush for the miracles that didn't show up in her life. She slipped off her coat and hung it on the hallway hook, catching her sad expression in the reflection from the mirror over the table. Would she need to hide the keys soon? Find someone to stay with Mom? How fast would

Cara Putman

everything progress, and how would she pay for whatever care Mom needed?

The burden overwhelmed her.

She froze as she caught her thoughts. Life had been hard, but she loved her mom. She needed to remember that, even as the next stage loomed cloudy and uncertain. She couldn't let the unknowns cause her to forget the reasons to keep fighting for Mom.

"Chloe, we're waiting."

She forced a smile for the image in the mirror, then squared her shoulders. She had to be strong for whatever waited in the next room. It wouldn't be a miracle.

Only one person's return would equal that. It had been fourteen years since Ginny had left, and despite how close they'd once been when they'd shared a room and late-night conversations, Chloe's older sister had barely called. Chloe had often wondered if she was still alive. If so, there was no good reason for her to return now. Chloe walked the few steps across the living area to the kitchen. She didn't have the energy to deal with Mom's mood swings tonight.

A woman's laugh that wasn't Mom's reached Chloe's ears as she neared the doorway. She froze, mind whirling as she processed the distinctive melody she hadn't heard in years.

Ginny?

It couldn't be.

She stepped into the kitchen, and the unmistakable, but older, face of her sister, Ginny, turned toward her.

"Hi, Chloe. I'm home."

The second year of law school hadn't been the mental press Dare Shepherd had expected. He thought he'd drown like in the first year, but instead he'd flourished. Maybe because he knew what he was doing now, or maybe because in his fourth semester he'd reached the point in the curriculum where he could pick some classes. But the law finally

The Targeted

interested him. He was grateful, because days had passed in earlier semesters with him wondering what had possessed him to abandon his financial consulting role and seize this colossal challenge.

Then he'd close his eyes and the image of his sister's battered and broken body would fill his mind. Fighting for justice had consumed him almost as much as his self-hatred, and he'd been told by the lead detective to step back and let the professionals do their job. Only they'd never found the evidence to convict her killer.

When he couldn't take another minute, he applied for law school. Then he got in. Dare quit, calling it a departure for law school, while the firm's partner called it a separation.

He needed to find his place in the world of law before he graduated. It was the first step in reconstructing his life. It would help if he loved the law.

Some days he loved the intellectual stimulation.

Other days he really missed his consultant paycheck.

"So you'll need to invest at least part of your summer here if you want to be the assistant director of the clinic next year." Professor Javier Strong, the Virginia Central Law School Clinic's director, pulled Dare back to the moment with his statement.

Dare wanted the role, and not just for the résumé boost. He liked the idea of helping people with cases that mattered to them. Still, he didn't have the experience some of his classmates did. "Professor Strong, are you sure? There are better students here."

"Call me Javier. We'll work together too much this next year to focus on artificial titles. I don't require the top five percent student. I need the one who cares about the work, and that's you. You get it." Javier paused a minute as he flipped through his notes. "Usually in an interview, you're convincing me you're right for the job."

Dare had to chuckle. "I've never been typical." A statement proven by his nontraditional status as a law student who'd returned to the classroom after working for six years.

"That's part of why you're exactly who we need right now. The clinic is at a key time. We haven't convinced all faculty of the value of what we

Cara Putman

provide to students and our clients. The faculty forget that the real-world experience that comes from providing free legal services to those in the community who can't afford high-priced attorneys makes their classes even more valuable to our students. I need an assistant director who can do a lot of the work while I focus on finding a stable funding stream." He blew out a breath as he tapped the notepad in front of him. "Then the higher-ups can't challenge our existence."

"I started with the clinic this semester. I value the experience, but other students have been more involved."

"Most graduate in May. Trust me—you're the right person."

"You want me to manage the student teams?" He'd certainly led teams in pressure-packed situations during his last job. It was part of what had encouraged him to make the leap and return to school.

"Yep."

Dare leaned back and thought about the work he'd done in his short half semester with the clinic. Most of it revolved around assisting clients who couldn't afford an attorney. They needed real help to fight unwarranted evictions or employment discharges. So far he'd stayed away from family law work, but he'd listened as other students talked about the meaning they found working with those clients. "The pay?"

Javier gave a small smile. "Remember the part about acquiring funding? It's barely more than minimum wage and my undying gratitude in the form of an amazing letter of recommendation."

"That's better than nothing." Which was what he got paid now. Well, that and credits. The experience would fill a blank space on his résumé, and he excelled at managing a team. He could do it. It might help him decide what he wanted to do post-degree too. "All right."

"Great. You start now. A prospective client is coming in tomorrow night, and I can't stay."

Dare had to laugh. "I see what your grand plan was. Hook me, then make me cover for you."

"Or reschedule her."

"What's she need?"

The Targeted

“Not sure, but I believe in you. You’ll get her to share.”

“Nothing in the notes?”

“Bare bones. It’ll be in her file.” Javier checked his watch. “Gotta run.” And he left.

No wonder the clinic teetered on the edge of chaos most days. The man believed in the mission, but he wasn’t an administrator.

Dare shook his head and made for the desk where they stored the intake files. It wouldn’t take long to flip through and find the right one. Though as he sifted through the stack, he realized he needed more information, like the prospective client’s name. Fine. He’d get it tomorrow. At least he had a day to prepare for his first solo interview.

Chloe stared at the stranger sitting at the table with Mom. She was a younger version of Mom, but without the worn-down air. In fact, she appeared elegant and sophisticated, too much so to be Chloe’s missing sister, but as she blinked, Chloe knew this was Ginny.

“I’ve knocked you speechless.” Ginny’s voice matched her clothing, all Eliza Doolittle in her makeover.

Chloe swallowed, then nodded. “I guess.”

“Isn’t it the best?” Mom grinned as she gazed back and forth between them. “My two girls, both here. Together.” She reached for their hands, but Chloe couldn’t make herself come closer.

She had too many questions, but one peek at Mom’s face said this wasn’t the time. The woman was as overjoyed as Chloe had seen in a long time. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

She walked the short hallway to the T and turned right to enter her small bedroom, closing the door firmly. An oversized suitcase sat at the end of her bed, taking up too much space. Chloe dropped beside it before burying her face in her hands and mock screaming. What she would give for the space to let loose her frustration. When they were younger, Ginny was the one who had always seen Chloe and made sure she had

Cara Putman

space to speak. She'd taken her to the park when Chloe couldn't be quiet a moment longer. All the years she'd handled their mother alone had eclipsed any sweet memories.

Now Ginny came home?

What did Ginny plan to do? Move back in and share a room after fourteen years away with barely a call home? Pretend she'd never left and everything remained unchanged? In reality, nothing was the same. Chloe wanted to tell Ginny she couldn't simply smile her way back into everyone's life, but she had deeper issues to worry about, like the meeting she'd finally scheduled with the attorney tomorrow. She'd counted on tonight to get all her thoughts organized and ready.

Her story had to be flawless. Not one waver in her telling.

She'd fall apart otherwise.

This was her chance to take her stand. She'd been inspired by the former gymnasts who had spoken in courtrooms and made their victim impact statements. She prayed that by pressing forward against her abuser, she, too, could move into the future and out of the quagmire of the past.

But the telling of her experience? It would be excruciating. She needed to prepare.

Now she'd have nothing but distractions. The family variety. The kind she couldn't handle without losing her mind.

Why had Ginny come home? Why now?

There had to be a reason.

Chloe heard footsteps outside her door. This day was getting progressively worse.

Without taking the time to do the courteous thing and knock, Ginny strode into Chloe's room, just as she had when they were growing up. Ginny had never believed in boundaries. Of course, they'd shared a room, so personal space hadn't existed. Apparently nothing had changed.

Ginny glanced around the small bedroom, her nose still slightly up. "You haven't altered much."

Chloe tried to see the room through Ginny's eyes. Did her experience match her clothes? The comforter was old but clean, one she'd found at

The Targeted

a Nordstrom Rack on super-clearance five years ago and would baby for as long as she could. The soft blues and greens against a white background created an oasis of peace in her chaotic life. Then she could use her throw pillows to create a nest when she had time to read, rather than encourage others to read when she picked up shifts at the downtown bookstore. She'd slipped a small upholstered swivel chair into the corner next to the closet a couple of years ago. There hadn't been room by the window, but from where it sat, she could pretend that out the window she saw fields rather than a parking lot. Everyone who said to imagine your future and muscle your way there hadn't lived her experience. She did a lot of muscling, but mindset didn't change zip code.

"Earth to Chloe." Ginny waved her hand in front of Chloe's face. Her big sister had dropped right back into old patterns. Chloe's back stiffened, and she fought the slide in time to her fifteen-year-old self. She wasn't that person anymore.

"Why are you back?" Okay, maybe she hadn't grown as much as she'd hoped.

Ginny flopped onto the bed, causing it to bounce. "Taking the direct approach?"

"Yes."

"Alex is back."

Chloe froze as her mind flipped through the different Alexes she knew. A knowing tightened her gut. "Coach Alex?"

Ginny nodded, one word slowly following the action. "Yes."

Chloe bolted for the bathroom.

Chapter 2

Tuesday, April 7

LAST NIGHT CHLOE HAD TURNED into something she'd never believed she would: a coward. Someone who had completed a hundred backflips on beam wasn't a coward. Someone who spotted young gymnasts on new skills on beam wasn't a coward. Someone who had wrestled with God over the question of where he had disappeared on her darkest days wasn't a coward. Yet last night she had huddled in the bathroom, snuggled in with the scum growing in the grout, something she needed to bleach again when she wasn't so tired.

Ginny and Mom had laughed and talked as if they'd forgotten Chloe lived in and paid for the apartment. Eventually she'd returned to her small room, closed the door, and slid into bed. She hadn't even bothered to move the suitcase, too heartsick and worried to do anything other than hide under the covers and pray for sleep. Why was Ginny back, and what had she meant about Alex?

An hour later when Ginny had returned to the bedroom, Chloe had pretended to sleep even as her mind spun with questions. The only explanation Chloe's brain could land on for Ginny's return was that any answer wouldn't be a good one. So she'd reverted to the brokenhearted teenager she'd been when Ginny had left, and Chloe hid. While Chloe's conscious mind couldn't process why Ginny was back, her subconscious

The Targeted

mind had picked at the problem in her dreams, and she'd woken more exhausted than when she went to sleep.

That was why she was now staring at her work computer screen like she'd never written a complaint, when in reality she drafted them every week for Simmons Law Firm. Why was it so much harder to write one for herself?

It should be an easy, straightforward task.

Instead this one glared at her from the computer monitor. She had to get the content perfect or she'd ruin lives.

She stood and headed to the small kitchenette, where she brewed a cup of coffee, then stared into the fridge as if she'd find courage somewhere on the shelf between her oak milk creamer and the half-and-half her boss and friend, Janae Simmons, favored. The refrigerator beeped a warning, pulling her from her thoughts, and Chloe closed the door. If she focused, she had an hour to draft before Janae arrived. Janae always arrived at eight, rarely before, unless the day required an early court visit.

After Chloe returned to her desk, she raised the standing desk and tried to settle in again. Maybe the change in posture would help her brain.

Sometime later she heaved out a breath, and Janae chuckled.

Chloe startled from her reverie. "When did you get here?"

"About ten minutes ago. I dropped my things in my office and then came here to touch base about today's appointments. I wasn't exactly quiet, but you were lost in thought." She quirked a grin. "Until that dramatic sigh."

Chloe clicked the mouse to bring up another document. "You know me. Drama all the time." She took in what her friend wore. A suit with her heels. This was a court day. How had Chloe forgotten?

Janae rolled her eyes as she considered Chloe. "Drama. Definitely what I think of with you."

Chloe fought the desire to hide, something one click of a button easily accomplished for the screen's content. She had been reluctant to tell either of her best friends, Janae or Margeaux, about her plans to seek

help from the legal clinic, because she couldn't let them talk her out of it. She'd only mentioned it to Janae when she had no choice. While she suspected they'd lived a similar experience at the gym as teenagers, their roads had taken divergent paths until reconnecting as adults in the last couple of years. She'd never confirmed what Janae and Margeaux had endured before they'd bolted from Kedgewick via college and law school. Both had returned to Kedgewick, while Chloe's journey had consisted of staying trapped in their hometown, trying to keep her mom healthy and solvent after Ginny disappeared. Maybe Janae's and Margeaux's experiences hadn't been as horrible as hers, since they had escaped and moved on. Chloe had put her dreams and health on hold while she'd tried to survive the damage Coach Alex had wreaked in her life. It had taken years to identify that had been a key holdup for her when she'd tried to stuff it in a box and ignore it.

Survival had been enough. For years it had to be, because her options remained limited and bleak.

Each year at Christmas, Mom insisted on watching *It's a Wonderful Life*, never noticing the tears that slid down Chloe's cheeks as Jimmy Stewart's character made the decision to stay so his brother could fly. The difference was, Chloe didn't get to choose. Ginny had left, robbing Chloe of any choice.

Then, years later, Janae had returned and offered Chloe a job. In that moment, Chloe had glimpsed what could be. She wanted to craft her own version of Janae's future—all of it. The career that consisted of more than a paycheck. The opportunity to find and experience genuine love. Yet even as she watched Janae move into a beautiful future filled with promise, Chloe remained petrified, mired in some weird time warp from the past. She longed to break free but didn't know how.

So she'd given in to the pressure to apply to law school, certain nothing would come of it. What program would want an adult seven years older than the average first-year age, especially when that person had gritted her way through an undergrad degree sometimes one or two classes at a time? She'd been more of a tortoise than a hare. It hadn't

The Targeted

bothered her much, because her slow-motion degree had been the only way she could afford to graduate.

Then the first acceptance letter arrived, and she'd panicked. With the second, she'd grimaced. And then wondered . . . Did she have to deal with her past to move forward?

The idea terrified her.

It also energized her.

In January she began using each emergency-free lunch to capture her story. If she could get her story down, maybe it would loosen its hold. Then she could escape the past and move into the future that tantalized her. Each time she opened the document from the cloud and added a few words, she struggled to express what had happened and to finesse the words that already existed. She tried to find the heart of her story, even the parts she wanted to conceal. Then at home in the lonely hours of the night, she added more. Massaged the words that were there again and again, seeking freedom. When the account was perfect, would she be ready to give it a public voice? Maybe she could be like those brave souls she'd watched on TV as they stood in a courtroom and confronted the doctor who'd abused them or later testified in Congress against the organization that hadn't protected them. She hadn't joined those battles because hers was different. Smaller maybe, but the impact on her soul felt as deep and traumatic.

Her greatest fear? That her abuser would return or a new one would appear.

Even before she'd written her story, she had returned to Tuck 'n Roll, the gym where she'd tumbled and twisted as a kid and teen. Inside those same walls, she had laughed with delight after flipping and tumbling into a pit. Then her world had shattered when Libby, one of her best friends at gymnastics, had died. It got worse when people said Libby died at her own hand. The gym had hosted Chloe's highest highs, but the lows were just too low, so she'd fled.

It had stopped being her safe place in a chaotic world.

Then a year ago she'd returned.

She'd coached and stood in the breach, ever watchful and on edge. Where others would return as a way to give back or stay engaged with a childhood sport and passion, for her each moment felt like stepping onto a battlefield. Someone had to stand in the breach and protect the gymnasts.

"Have you decided about law school?"

Janae's words snapped Chloe from her thoughts. She shook her head. "I'm waiting on financial aid packages." And peace. She was desperate for peace.

Janae crossed her arms. "I wish I could help. If we had a few more clients."

"Not your job to pay for my law school, especially while you're getting established." Chloe rubbed her forehead at the thought of all the bills sitting on her desk that had to be paid for the law firm. It was nice Janae's grandma had helped pay off the last of Janae's school loans. Some people had all the luck, while Chloe constantly fended for herself. Her mom had never stayed in touch with family, leaving Chloe to provide for herself and her mom on her own.

"Doesn't mean I don't want to."

"I know." And she did.

Janae consistently urged Chloe to return to school because she'd excelled in the classroom. Maybe Chloe would, but the closer she came to making a decision, the more she didn't know that she wanted to. Shouldn't she be more excited about the opportunity? She'd fought hard to earn her undergrad degree and check all the boxes to attend law school. Did she have the same fire in her belly that Janae did for helping clients? She knew she didn't want to teach, like Margeaux Robbins, the third member of their band of sisters. While the calendar warned time would expire on the acceptance offers, Chloe continued to put off a decision.

Janae's smartwatch vibrated, and she twisted her wrist to read it. "I'd better leave for the Rawlins hearing."

"All the files are on your desk."

"Perfectly organized as always."

"I am good at what I do." A fact she could own. Currently this job fit

The Targeted

her comfortably, but that didn't mean she should stay, did it? That question plagued her, so as soon as Janae headed down the short hallway to her office, Chloe clicked back to the complaint and scanned its contents.

The door opened, the bell signaling someone had arrived, and Chloe closed the file and hid the urge to stretch. It was nearing nine and time to focus on the firm's clients, the tasks Janae paid her to do.

Chloe pasted on a smile and glanced up. "Can I help you?" Her smile froze as she took in Ginny.

"More delighted to see me this morning?" Chloe's sister spun in a sassy circle, arms wide, boho skirt billowing.

"What are you doing here?" Chloe blinked a couple of times, trying to clear her vision. She didn't need Ginny here, causing trouble, only to blink and have her sister disappear the way she had fourteen long years ago.

"I came to see my little sister." Ginny smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes, the ones they'd both inherited from their father, the man neither had seen since they were preschoolers. Then again, maybe Ginny had. It wasn't like she'd communicated much since leaving.

Chloe pushed the thoughts away. "What do you want, Ginny?"

"To reconnect."

"Really? After all this time? That's what you have for me?"

"I guess so."

"You can't waltz in the front door and expect me to say 'come on in.'"

"Why not? Mom did."

"Mom may not remember that you've been gone." Chloe didn't try to hide the heat or strain from her voice. "While you've been away doing God only knows what, I've been taking care of Mom, but I can't. Not anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"The doctors say she has early-onset dementia. Do you have any idea how terrifying that is?"

Ginny blinked a couple of times, as if trying to absorb the verbal blows Chloe threw at her. "I'm sorry."

"That doesn't cut it, Ginny." Chloe fought to keep the tears from

Cara Putman

leaking as all the stress and fear built in a stream of words she couldn't stop. "I've been doing this alone a very long time. Where have you been?"

"Here and there." Ginny swallowed convulsively, then waved her hand, as if batting away the words and serious overtone. Or maybe she was batting away tears. It was impossible to tell.

Chloe noticed the perfectly manicured nails.

Ginny blinked a couple of times. "But I'm home now."

"For how long? We haven't seen you in . . ."

"Fourteen years." Ginny didn't hesitate. Spoke the words almost proudly. Maybe she was . . . proud.

"Now you're back." Chloe swallowed back the bitterness that threatened to crawl up her throat and explode out.

"I am."

"For how long?" She knew she risked sounding like a broken record, but she needed a time frame.

"I don't know." Ginny frowned, her lips tipping down and fine lines appearing at the edges of her eyes. "I thought you'd be glad to see me. Last night's reception gave a different vibe."

Chloe didn't feel like apologizing—she hadn't done anything wrong—but she did take a deep breath and try to relax her shoulders. The tension that engulfed her had them creeping toward her ears. Poised for something bad to happen. "Mom spiraled after you left."

Chloe hadn't been sure she could save Mom, but she had.

"Mom always spiraled. It was her thing and part of why I had to leave."

"That time it was your fault, and it took a long time for her to recover."

"I guess it's good I'm back then. She'll see I'm here and fine, and all will be well."

Chloe didn't know whether to laugh or shake Ginny. Self-absorbed as ever. "Did you not hear what I just said about her health? Nothing will be fine about that again." Not without a different diagnosis.

The fast clip of heels alerted Chloe to wipe her face of emotion just in time as Janae appeared and skidded to a halt.

The Targeted

“I’m headed to Leesburg for that hearing.” Her gaze bounced between Chloe and her sister. “But I can wait a minute if you need.”

“We’re fine.”

Ginny pasted on a smile and turned her energy toward Janae. “Hi, Janae. Remember me? I’m Ginny, Chloe’s sister.”

“I do. Chloe forgot to mention you were in town.” Janae looked at Ginny, a bit down her nose, as if trying to understand something.

Join the party.

“I didn’t forget. I wasn’t sure she’d stay.”

Janae turned her attention to Chloe. “Are you okay?”

Chloe prayed she could deflect Janae’s focus. “Sure.” She forced a bright smile that had to appear fake to someone who knew her as well as Janae did. “I’m just surprised.”

“Hmm, I bet.” Janae turned back to Ginny. “It’s been what, ten, twelve years?”

“A little more.” Somehow Ginny didn’t bother with embarrassment over the extended time. She shrugged with a quirky smile. “I’ll come back later since I can tell you’re busy.”

“It’s this thing called a job, Ginny.” Chloe fought the need to roll her eyes.

“Great. That’s good. Jobs are good. I’ll spend the day with Mom. Take care of her while you”—Ginny fluttered her fingers in the air—“work.”

“Don’t do that.” That would be a disaster. “I need to prepare her first.”

“Prepare her for what? We already spent time together last night while you hid in your room.” Ginny gave a quick wave and then walked out the door.

Chloe tried to catch her breath from the verbal punches.

Janae watched her go and then turned to Chloe. “You good?”

“Sure.” Not at all, but she had to be. She clicked to the calendar. “You have twenty minutes to get to court.”

“I’ll hustle and pray no deer cross the road.”

The two-lane county road could be hazardous. “Good luck.”

Janae hitched her bag over her shoulder. “It’ll be fine. We’re ready.”

Cara Putman

She studied Chloe a minute, making her want to squirm. “I’m concerned about you.”

“You don’t need to be.”

“You can’t see your face. Are you about to pass out?”

She wobbled like she might, but that didn’t matter. She’d done hard things her whole life. That never changed. “Don’t worry about me. You’ve got a client to save.”

“I also have a friend I’m concerned about.” Janae’s watch buzzed, and she sighed. “But there is court. We’ll talk when I get back.”

Chloe knew they would. Janae wouldn’t let the matter drop. She would follow up because she cared, but that didn’t mean Chloe was ready to expose everything. Her need to know her next steps before she brought Janae into her plans had caused Chloe to delay telling Janae for as long as possible. She’d had to do that to avoid giving Janae the chance to use her powers of persuasion to derail Chloe. Then Janae had cornered her in the most loving way possible, and Chloe had shared the barest outline of her plan.

She needed to do this on her own.

It was important that she stand on her own feet.

She wanted to follow Ginny home but couldn’t because someone had to answer the phones and watch for a package from a consultant. She called Mom, but her mom didn’t answer. Chloe didn’t leave a message. What could she say? *Be careful about trusting your long-lost daughter?* She should give Ginny the benefit of the doubt, but it felt risky in ways that Chloe couldn’t fully calculate. What she did understand was the months it had taken to pull Mom from the edge of despair the last time Ginny had disappeared without explanation. How would Mom handle Ginny leaving again?

Chloe forced herself to focus on the work in front of her when her thoughts wanted to bounce between Ginny and Chloe’s appointment that evening. It had taken a bucket of courage to schedule it, so she would keep it and deal with the consequences of Ginny’s return later.