

CHAPTER 1

CELESTE

MY MOTHER USED to tell me that I can't run away from myself. At thirty-three, I still have no idea what the hell she meant. I only know that it wasn't intended as a gentle warning. It was a slap in the face.

No matter how hard or how fast you run, dear daughter, you cannot escape yourself.

The last time I heard those words, they'd dripped with smug satisfaction. Twenty-one years old, and I'd literally just escaped from a nightmare. Found a damned pay phone—the only one in the county—and, fingers shaking, dropped in the coins and dialed a number that made tears stream down my face, buttons blurring until I had to blink them back to continue.

I-I got away, Mom. I finally got away from him. Can I come home? Please?

Those words ignited the last shreds of my dignity, burning them to ash at my feet. I remembered the girl I'd been five years before, furious at a world—and a family—who blamed me for a tragedy that had nothing to do with me. I'd made mistakes, endless mistakes, but I hadn't done *that*.

He'd believed me. The boy I met online. He believed me.

Sympathized with me when I needed it, and raged with me when I needed *that*.

Come stay with me. Start over. They don't deserve you. They don't understand you. I do.

At twenty-one, I cringed at the girl who'd fallen for such obvious bullshit. At thirty-three, my anger is aimed where it belongs: at the asshole who'd targeted a desperate teenage girl. And at the mother who picked up the phone five years later.

You can't run away from yourself.

She said that and then hung up. I never contacted her again.

Today I *am* running. Not from myself. *I've* never been the problem. It's the rest of the damned world that just keeps boxing me in. This particular box was supposed to be my den, my safe hide-away. Now, once again, the comforting barriers between me and the world threaten to harden into cage bars. The urge to flee is overwhelming, but this time, I recognize that the problem isn't a place. As always, it's a person. I've finally started to realize that the answer is not *escape*.

Don't abandon my safe den. Deal with the person holding the damn keys.

Twelve years ago, I fled Aaron, and what did that get me? Twelve years of running.

Don't run from the threat. End it.

First, though, I need to keep from getting killed myself, and today the threat comes in a package as ridiculous as rust-speckled pickup trucks. Two have already spit gravel at me, their drivers honking and yelling.

They see me. They're just making a point: roads are for driving. Even when I jog on the shoulder, I swear they swerve *toward* me. At the last second, they veer and hit the gas to send black smoke billowing.

The worst, though, are the dogs. Around here, I'm jogging a gauntlet of snarling canines who've only ever seen a runner when someone's making off with the family Xbox.

I pass my neighbor's house. Kids race around the yard with toy tomahawks and six-guns. Even thirty years ago, born to parents who weren't exactly models of liberal thinking, I knew

better than to play this particular game. When the *pop-pop-pop* of gunfire sounds, I instinctively skid and drop to one knee, and the towheaded children erupt with laughter, pointing at the silly city slicker who doesn't know the difference between a handgun and a cap gun.

When I can breathe again, I squint over at the kids. There are at least four of them, all in hand-me-downs, with scraggly hair. The oldest can't be more than seven and totes an air rifle.

Dear Lord, I can hear the banjo music already.

The oldest kid—a girl, it seems—points that rifle straight at me. She fires, and the plastic pellet skids through the gravel beside me. I wheel, ready to march over and have a word with her parents. Then I see the girl's father, beer in hand, lounging on the front porch, watching everything. He lifts a hand in mock greeting.

As if on cue, the roar of a pickup sounds behind me, and I am tempted—damn tempted—to stride into the middle of the road.

I won't let you intimidate me. I'll stand my ground, and I'll make you pay . . . forced to clean my blood and bits from your front grille.

As much as I'd like to think my untimely demise would haunt my killer, there are people around here who'd only sue my estate for the vehicular damage. Not that it would do them much good. After a cheap burial, my estate would consist of a ramshackle house in rural central Florida. If someone does hit me, I almost hope they sue . . . and end up stuck with a money pit of a house, perched on land not even worth the cost of demolition.

That house might not be much, but it's more than I have ever had. A respectable job. A place to live. A piece of land. A life that is actually worth fighting for.

I resume my jog. When gravel crunches, I turn, expecting to see an asshole driving on my shoulder. Instead, this one stays on his side as he slows to pass me. I brace for what will come next—some witticism about how he can help me get my exercise . . . in the back of his pickup. That's when I recognize the vehicle and know no innuendo is forthcoming.

The truck is an antique Dodge, driven by the owner of the only

business in Fort Exile—a combination gas station, automotive garage and convenience store.

As the pickup passes, I struggle to keep my gaze forward.

Don't look. The view may be very nice, but don't . . .

I look, of course. Tom Lowe is the hottest guy in Fort Exile. Granted, it's a town of under a hundred people, half of them over fifty. Anywhere else, Tom would be a seven edging in on an eight. Dark hair, worn country-music-star long, dark-brown eyes, a crooked nose and a grin that shows off excellent dentition to full advantage. Add a scarred cheek and broad tattooed biceps and Tom's body tells the story of a guy who grew up destined to work under the chassis of a pickup, sweaty and grease stained.

The fact that one of those tats clearly comes from a prison stint should erase the appeal of the rest but . . . I call myself a reformed bad-boy-magnet. The problem is that Tom Lowe is the walking model of a reformed bad boy. Exactly the kind of man I used to fall for, with the bonus that, like me, he's past that stage of life. He seems like a genuinely sweet guy, one who pulls over for joggers, runs a legitimate business, and is a respected member of a community that grants respect as grudgingly as praise.

I know I shouldn't slow when he passes. Shouldn't look temptation in the face. Fortunately, I don't have to, because that window only goes down long enough for a friendly thumbs-up. Then, as the truck rolls past, Tom points at the sky. I squint to see dark clouds.

"Thank you!" I shout.

Tom flashes another thumbs-up and keeps going. I tell myself that's for the best. Like an alcoholic with a ninety-day pin walking past an open bar, I feel a twinge of regret but mostly a wave of relief. Tom Lowe would be my bender, sending me tumbling back to rock bottom.

I peer up at the sky again. Those clouds are rolling in fast, and storms here strike hard, especially in late August as hurricane season hits the coast. The first time I'd been caught in the rain, I'd nearly done a jig of glee, imagining the cool water sluicing the sweat from my body. Instead, the rain lashed in bruising torrents,

the humidity doubled, and the sweltering temperature didn't drop one damn degree.

I turn around to head back. I'm passing the neighbor's house when he shouts at me from the porch.

"Done already? You weren't hardly out for a minute, girl."

His laughter fades behind me as I reach the blessed quarter-mile gap between our houses. Cows graze under a moss-draped live oak. The pasture ends in a snarl of kudzu that has swallowed the fence between our properties. On the other side, my land devolves into brush and swamp. I'm passing the edge when I catch a flash of motion in my backyard.

I freeze, half hidden behind a gnarled cypress. The moment I stop moving, mosquitoes descend, and I swat two before steeling myself against the bites and peeking around the tree trunk.

The first thing I see is the house—a two-story clapboard box with peeling white paint and a crooked front porch. Whatever movement I saw, though, it wasn't at the house. It was in the backyard, which is huge. An acre, according to the local kid who cuts the grass and smirks as he overcharges me. Probably a half-acre in reality. Still huge, and it's close enough to that swampy brushland that I spotted an alligator in my yard last month, which is why I'm frozen here, peering into it.

The yard is still and empty.

What had I seen? I struggle to remember as I swat at another mosquito. It'd been well above ground level, whatever it was. Definitely not an alligator. A person? Yes, I'd had the impression of a person moving behind the shed.

I squint at the shed. It's a dilapidated wooden building that looks as if it has served time as a small barn, garden shed, chicken coop and now, in its dotage, a structural eyesore, begging me to put it out of its misery. The only saving grace is that it doesn't sit in the middle of my lawn, howling for release from its rotted bonds.

Whoever cut the lawn before had granted the shed a dignified dotage by not mowing within ten feet of it, that extra space now consumed by long grass. I can barely make out the building. Yet I know it's there, and no matter how often I tell myself it's a

charming addition to the property—the sort of rickety rural structure that photographers clamor to capture—all I see is an eyesore.

Right now, though, I see more than an eyesore. I see a place where someone could get within a hundred feet of my back door unseen. That's a chilling prospect for any woman living in the country alone. For me, it could be a death sentence. The only thing that would make my current situation worse is if my past nightmare returned.

If Aaron has finally caught up with me.

At twenty-one, even *thinking* I saw someone in my yard would have sent me running. I wouldn't even have stopped in the house to pack a bag.

By twenty-six, I'd have told myself I was seeing things. I'd have walked into the house, locked the doors, closed the blinds and pretended everything was fine, just fine . . . and then spent the next week sitting awake all night with a gun in my lap.

Thirty-three-year-old me has tasted freedom and knows it's an illusion, one that can be shattered in an instant. By a phone call. By an email. By an envelope in my mailbox holding the receipt for a headstone engraved with my name, purchased by my own credit card.

I hide behind the tree just long enough to calm my pounding heart. When I resume my jog, I try not to burst into a full-blown sprint for the door. Get into the house. Lock the door. Head upstairs. Get the gun. Two minutes later, I'm walking out the back door, gun hidden at my side as I stride toward the shed.

It's a masterful piece of theater, right up until I'm three steps from the overgrown part of the lawn. Then I'm moving a helluva lot slower as I scan for the telltale shift of the grass that says "alligator." At least the gun will help with that, too.

I pick my way through the overgrown strip until I reach the shed. I circle it once as I listen for any sign of life. None. At the door, I pause and listen again. Still silent.

The door lost its handle years ago, and now a nailed-on piece of rotted wood is all that keeps it from banging in the wind. Or the wood *was* rotted. It isn't now. Yet it's the same rusty nail and the same makeshift design.

Someone replaced the crappy wooden stopper with a slightly less crappy wooden stopper?

I snort at the idea. Clearly, I'd formed a general "rotted wood" impression of the entire shed, which extended to this scrap. It isn't as if I've been out here in the past two months. Who uses a shed surrounded by knee-high Florida swamp grass?

I swing open the makeshift stopper and yank the door. With the rusted hinges, I could barely open it the first time. When the door flies open freely, I stagger back, nearly landing on my ass.

So someone not only replaced the door stopper but oiled the hinges? Nicest hired killer ever.

I snort another laugh. That's ridiculous, of course. Aaron would never send a hired killer. That would take all the fun out of watching me plead and beg for my life. Also take all the fun out of killing me himself.

The door hinges clearly loosened up after I wrenched it open last time. Still, I bend to the ground, looking for footprints. The problem is that the ground is hard, and despite the promise of rain, it's been dry for a week. Even my own sneakers leave no marks on the dirt.

I push open the door and use my cell phone light to look inside. I don't expect to see anything. No one would be using the shed in the condition it's in, the interior filled with broken pieces of tools I couldn't even identify the last time. Rusted metal and rotting wood and—

I blink and lean in for a better look. The metal is still there, and the wood, and it's still scattered around, but it looks . . .

As if someone tidied the shed while leaving junk lying about?

I give my head a shake. No one Aaron sends is going to replace the door stopper and oil the hinges and tidy up while leaving junk artfully strewn about to make it *seem* untouched. That's the sort of hired killer Hollywood envisions. Anyone Aaron sent would just hole up in the shed until nightfall, bust in the back door and drag me back to his boss.

No one is here, and no one has been here in a very long time.

I back out, shut the door and peer up at the sky. Black clouds

creep inexorably toward me, a stealth storm hidden under cover of bright sunshine.

I peer at the shed again. Then I shake it off. No one is here. No one has been here. The only thing I need to worry about is battening the hatches before the storm strikes.

I take one last look around before heading inside.

CHAPTER 2

DAISY

SHIT, shit, shit! The words pound through my head each time my sneakers smack the road. Well, no, to be honest, it's actually *Ew! Ew! Ew!* complete with schoolgirl squeaks of disgust, but no longer being fifteen, I'll pretend it was the far more age-appropriate *shit*.

And just as I think that, what do I step in? A big ol' pile of literal shit—canine—at the side of the road, which has somehow avoided melting in the rain. So now I really do have a reason for my girlish squeaks.

I made the mistake of wearing socks in my sneakers. Both are soaked, and as I run, each foot comes down with water squishing between my toes.

I dart under a cypress and brace one hand against the trunk to pull off my socks and shoes.

Uh, tree? Lightning?

Hey, a bolt of lightning might grant me superpowers. Like the ability to grab the runaway train of my life and thrust it back on track.

I'm working on it.

I sidestep onto the grass, yank off my sneakers and stuff the

sopping-wet socks into the toes. Tie the laces. Loop them over my hand, and off I go. So much bet—

A pickup flies past, sheeting me in water, and all I can do is sputter a laugh. Typical. Fix one problem, and the world slam-soaks that split second of accomplishment. Oh well, it's not as if I wasn't drenched already.

I'm about to step back onto the road when I realize the pickup has stopped. The reverse lights flash on. Backing up to apologize? Or to soak me again? Either seems equally likely.

The pickup idles there, the reverse and brake lights candy-cane smudges through the downpour. I squint to see the truck better, but the rain's driving too hard for that. Then both sets of lights go out, and the pickup accelerates, fishtailing in the mud before roaring off.

Okay, that was weird.

I shake it off and hit my own accelerator as I break into a run. My feet crash through puddles, water spraying, rain cascading over me, and it is glorious. The skies have opened and baptized me in a Florida downpour, making me realize how much I've missed this part of the world.

I lived in Florida, once upon a time. Before a tragedy brought our family of four down to three, and then two, as Mom left for Pennsylvania with me in tow. I remember waking in the city one February morning and crying as I looked out at the gray slush. The thunder of highways. The crush of people. The stink of pollution. The endless fields of concrete where once I'd gazed out at orange trees and everglades calling me to adventure.

I swore I'd come home the moment I turned eighteen. The dream of a girl who thinks such things are simple. Then eighteen comes, and that dream bleeds away with all the other childish fantasies. I'll be a veterinarian! I'll own horses and a kennel full of dogs! I'll marry the sweet boy next door and raise children even more adorable than our puppies! By eighteen, I realized that dream was as likely as me becoming a unicorn-riding knight and marrying a handsome prince.

I could have come home to Florida sooner. I should have. This is where I belong, running along a hard-packed dirt road, hot rain

soaking my clothing as my face turns upward to meet it. My legs burn, and my pulse races, and I am ten again, running in the downpour as someone on a front porch shouts at me to get out of the rain.

When an actual voice booms, "Get out of the rain, ya damn fool!" I think it's the memory, but then I glance to see a skinny guy on a porch, beer can in hand, a passel of blond children craning to watch the storm.

I wave, and he laughs, and I run faster, and I am home. God, I am finally home.

Tears mingle with the rain. I should have caught that bus at eighteen. Emptied my bank account, bought a ticket and come home. So what if I had an invalid mother counting on me, all her burdens heaped on my shoulders?

My back eventually broke under those burdens. *I* broke. And for what? An obligation I did not owe. But at eighteen, you're in such a damn hurry to grow up that when your mother leans on you for support, it makes you feel strong, mature, recognized. The truth is that it meant nothing except that I was young, naive, malleable.

I veer onto the property. Through the trees, I see the two-story white-clapboard house and imagine it through the eyes of old friends from my suburban life. I haven't seen any of them in a decade, but I still drive by their social-media pages. They're unrecognizable to me now, those girls who'd snickered at their mothers' ordinary lives. They've inherited those lives, their wild dreams corralled by homeowner associations and corporate-cubicle careers.

Those drive-by viewings always leave me unsettled. I could sneer at those old friends trapped in the very lives their teenage selves had railed against. Yet their desperately happy updates cast me into uncomfortable quicksand bordered by relief and sadness and something like longing. I tell myself I don't want their lives . . . but I'm never completely sure I believe it.

If they saw this house, their minds would flip the channel to one of those destroy-and-decorate shows, with rangy men wielding quips and sledgehammers, knocking down walls and

ripping out floors, telling themselves they're "fixing it up" when, really, they might as well take a wrecking ball and start anew.

This house doesn't need that. It requires the deft lover's touch of a carpenter who sees the beauty in its craggy old face. Each time I look at it, my fingers twitch like a pianist spotting a grand piano. The keys beneath *my* fingers are sandpaper and sawdust. Not a pianist, then. A plastic surgeon, gazing on this weathered and sagging face and thinking, "I could make you beautiful again."

It looks as if the woman who lives here is already planning a little cosmetic repair, with cheap vinyl siding resting along one wall. I shudder at that—it's the renovation equivalent of plastering on an inch of makeup over bad skin. Address the structural concerns first, and then worry about the cosmetics.

As I circle through the shrubby wetland to the shed, I keep an eye out for anything slithering through the foliage. I follow the path, mud squelching between my toes. It feels like childhood, playing in puddles and mud. I splash through a few patches of both. When a light flicks on upstairs, I duck behind the shed and watch the window. The curtains open, and the woman peers out.

She seems to be looking right at the shed. Did she spot me? Huh. That would be a problem if I were just a squatter in need of shelter. In this situation, though . . . ?

No, this situation is very different, and I won't accomplish my goal by hiding in this shed forever. Time to step from the shadows and say hello.

Soon. Not quite yet. But soon.

CELESTE

The storm didn't strike for nearly two hours after I came inside. I had been working in my second-story office with the window open. Yes, having the window open and the AC blasting is money flapping out the window, threatening an electric bill I cannot afford. I'm watching the shed, though, and the open window lets me listen, too.

At first, the black clouds had seemed to move on, clear skies

chiding me for pouncing on the excuse to abort my run. The sky had been bright blue and cloudless, the sun ruthless. Then, before I could blink, dark clouds blew through like the wake of a passing jet.

Now rain smacks the old siding, rat-a-tatting like machine-gun fire. I make the mistake of reaching through the open window, and rain hits my wrist so hard it bends backward. I yank my hand in. It's dripping wet. No sign of hail pellets. Just rain.

I peer out as I close the window. The shed squats there, peeling white paint seeming to glow in the darkness.

There's no one in the damned shed. That's what I have been telling myself ever since I came inside. I'm being paranoid. Hell, the entire reason I'm trapped in this "arrangement" is for protection from Aaron. That was the devil's bargain I made with Liam.

Let me take care of you. Aaron will never find you here. I'll give you whatever you need to be comfortable. And you'll have me. That's not such a hardship, is it?

It *hadn't* been a hardship . . . until I realized our arrangement wasn't a decent man protecting his lover. It was a calculating bastard doing what he did best. Controlling and manipulating. Putting me securely under his thumb.

You don't like our arrangement anymore? All right. I won't make you stay. I'm not that kind of guy. Go on. Just run fast. Run fast enough that Aaron won't catch you once I set him on your trail.

The shed is empty. I already established that.

What about the door stopper? The hinges? The tidy interior?

My memory had overexaggerated the poor condition of the shed, that's all.

I'm about to turn back to my laptop when light flickers inside the shed. Breath stops as my chest seizes.

I sit paralyzed in the crosshairs of that open window. Everything in me screams to move. Drop to the floor. Lunge from my chair. Get the hell away from the window. But I cannot move. I don't dare.

It only takes a few heartbeats for the panic to subside under the cold anger of that internal voice telling me to stop being so silly. I thought I saw a light coming through the cracks between

boards, but now I see nothing except the pale shape of the shed itself.

Still, when I do move, it is excruciatingly slowly, inching my rolling desk chair to the side until I am behind the faded brown drapes.

Deep breaths. No one is there. Everything is fine. When the rain stops, I'll go out and nail the door shut to be sure I never need to worry about this again.

More deep breaths. I eye my laptop on the desk. I have work to do, but I cannot bring myself to cross in front of that window again.

At least twenty minutes pass before I've chastised myself enough to make the journey back to my desk. Inch by inch again, even as that internal voice sighs and grumbles at me for being such a child.

It's even darker outside now, the storm turning the late afternoon to night. I focus on the pounding of the rain as I move back in front of the window and—

And there is a light in the shed. There is *undeniably* a light.

I stumble and fall on my ass, pain slamming up my tailbone. When I can blink back the pain, I creep to the desk and take the gun I left beside my laptop. Then I rise on my knees just enough to see out the bottom of the window.

Light glimmers through the cracks in the shed, and there is absolutely no mistaking it for anything else.

Someone is in my shed.

I reach to pull my phone from the desk. Then I scuttle until my back is against the wall. I lift the phone and stop, fingers poised over the numeric pad.

Who am I calling? The police?

It's Celeste. Maeve Turner's granddaughter? I inherited her house a few months ago? Right. Well, um, I hate to bother you, but there's someone in my shed. Could you, um, swing by when you have a chance? Talk to them?

Normally, I would be more direct, but I've learned to dial it down in Fort Exile, where I'm an outsider. Even caring for Maeve on her deathbed hasn't earned me any credit with the locals.

I know how that call will go. They'll point out that it's a storm. Someone probably needed to take shelter for a few hours, and am I really going to roust them out into the rain?

Folks around here are a bit more hospitable, Miz Turner.

Even if I could trust them to help, do I *dare* summon the police? Dare call attention to myself? Dare suggest that there's a reason I'm freaking out over someone "taking shelter" in my shed?

My fingers move to the contact list. To Liam's name.

I pull back as if burned.

Hell, no. This is just what he needs—another excuse to lock my cage even tighter. He's already hinted at having me move in with him. This arrangement suited him fine at first, but I'm becoming a bit too . . . What's the word? Independent. Can't have that, can we?

I don't dare do anything that gives him an excuse to push harder, to exert real pressure, the kind that comes with the vise grip of threat.

I will not call the police, and I absolutely will not call Liam. I'm trying to find a way out of this trap, not ensnare myself more.

I can handle this. I'm not the sixteen-year-old girl who left one nightmare to tumble into another. I'm not the twenty-one-year-old who fled Aaron and cowered in corners for years. I'm the woman who thought I was in control of this situation and, yep, found out otherwise in one hell of a hurry, but I'm also the woman who learns from every mistake and gets better, gets stronger.

I crawl from the window and then march downstairs, where I double-check every lock and close every drape and blind. Then I make a pot of coffee, fill the biggest mug I have and sit on the sofa, gun in hand.

It is going to be a long night.

CHAPTER 3

DAISY

THIS IS MORE than a summer rain. It's been raining for hours, with no signs of letting up. There must be a hurricane or tropical storm closer to shore, and we're getting steady rain accompanied by a wind that threatens to send the shed Dorothy-express to Kansas.

I pull a finishing nail from between my teeth and use a rock to pound it in. Then I squint up at the roof. One never truly appreciates the phrase "leaking like a sieve" until one experiences it. I'd done a cursory examination of the roof when I arrived, and it had seemed solid enough, but it seems I missed half a dozen small holes. No matter. I can fix them.

I've been a carpenter since I was seventeen, conned into a Habitat for Humanity project by my suburban friends. They'd quit after a week. I was the one who stayed and discovered a passion.

It wasn't veterinary school, but by then, I knew just how foolish a dream that was for a girl who struggled to get Bs in science. After my mother got sick, those grades plummeted. When graduation came, I clutched my diploma the way others might clutch a doctorate degree.

No veterinary school for me. No college at all. I needed a job

that let me care for my mother as cancer dug in its claws and we ran out of belongings to pawn.

Discovering both a talent and a passion for a trade was like fate handing me a gift, more precious even than I realized at the time. No matter what fresh hell life dumped on me, there was always work for a carpenter. Even here in this shed.

I paw through my box of scraps and tools. The wood and nails come from a collapsed tree fort two properties over. A city dweller might have looked at that heap of half-rotted wood and declared it free for the taking. They might even tell themselves they were doing a good deed, hauling off a mess that the owner couldn't be bothered clearing away. Knowing better, I'd assessed the value of the scrap and tucked ten dollars into the owner's mailbox. Those people were not the woman in this house. *They* deserved to be treated fairly.

I select two more rusty finishing nails and give them a quick sanding. Then I use a small hatchet to chop a shingle-sized piece of wood from a chunk of lumber. The hatchet—along with a few other decrepit tools—came from a property where someone had been repairing a fence and left the tools out. They'd been there for years, half-sunk into the earth, which convinced me I could safely borrow them.

I've been fixing leaks all day in hopes of a semidry sleep. Night's falling, and I'm finishing up by the sickly glow of my flashlight. At least I don't need to hide it anymore. The woman knows I'm here. Knows and doesn't give a shit.

That's good, right?

Sure.

Don't tell me you're actually annoyed because she's ignoring you.

Part of me is thrilled that she isn't alarmed enough to even call the police. It is the best possible response, and I will take full advantage of it. As soon as this rain stops, I'll move faster.

I'm about to tap in another nail when something crackles outside the shed. Even as I go still, logic demands I ignore the noise. It's a storm. Of course things are crackling. Lightning. Broken branches. We even had hail earlier.

Still, something about that particular crack isn't right. It

sounds like something moving through the undergrowth, twigs cracking in its wake. Except, well, after hours of rain, nothing's dry enough to crackle like that.

There's a rotted spot along one wall, big enough to put my fist through. I have only loosely covered it to leave a peephole. I lift the board and peer out.

Something passes in front of the hole, and I fall back, stifling a yelp. I strain to listen, but all I hear is the pound of rain. I inch back, lift a floorboard and pull out my gun as I keep my gaze trained on the door. Then I crawl back and lift the board again.

Nothing.

I can't see—

Someone steps right in front of the hole. My breath stops, and all I see is denim. One leg of worn blue jeans. Then the squelch of mud under shoes as the leg moves. I side-creep to the door and rise until I'm standing.

Silence.

I glance at the open hole. Through it, I see only the hazy green of distant ferns. Another squelch. Then a creak, and the door moves, boards creaking inward. I hold my breath, gun in both hands. The door moves again. This time, it hits the makeshift stopper I've set up so no one can enter without me knowing it. A solid shove, though, and it'll pop open.

The door creaks. Whoever's out there is testing it. I brace for the slam that'll send it flying open, but all that comes is that creak. Silence. Then the squelch of retreating footsteps.

I count to ten and then ease open the door just enough to see footprints in the mud. Men's prints, at least a size ten. A heavy work boot tread. I slip out to get a better look, only to have them disappear before my eyes, washed away by the rain.

CELESTE

It's dawn, and I have drunk enough coffee that if one of Aaron's goons came crashing through my window, I doubt I could shoot straight enough to even hit him. I've been on this sofa all night, waiting for the doorknob to turn, a window to shatter, even a call

on my cell, Aaron's deceptively soft voice telling me to look out my back window. Instead, I've heard nothing but the steady pound of rain and that relentless voice telling me I'm being silly, being *stupid*.

You never were the brightest bulb, were you?

Whose voice is that? Aaron's? Or my mother's? In my memory, the two swim together in a single current that washes over me on nights like this.

Stupid. Weak. Silly. Worthless. Pointless.

Were we wrong? Look at yourself. Spending all night on the couch with a gun because you saw someone taking shelter in your shed during a storm. Because you're convinced that a guy you left twelve years ago still cares enough to want you back.

Pathetic.

No, I'm not deluded enough to think Aaron wants me back. He wants to punish me. I humiliated him, stole from him, and he's killed people for a hell of a lot less.

I have reason to fear, and I need to stifle that voice that says I'm being silly and weak.

I remember those early days with Aaron, when he was still playing savior. Okay, so he wasn't eighteen, as he'd claimed online. Wasn't in college, as he'd also claimed. And his money sure as hell didn't come from rich parents. But he *was* handsome and charming, and he owned his own business . . . if one called drug-dealing a business, which he certainly did, and I did, too, in those early days.

I remember late nights at the kitchen table, helping him with his accounting books—I was always good at math. If I made a mistake, even one I caught myself, I'd fall over myself apologizing, and he'd rub my back and tell me I was doing great.

I'm not your mother, baby girl. I think you're brilliant. Brilliant, gorgeous, and tough as nails.

All the right things to say, at least for a little while. He used to laugh about my mother, ask what she did for a living. High-powered defense attorney, right? Or former military? Maybe a CEO? Some profession that had turned her into such a battle ax. That made me laugh. My mother was what they'd called, at that

time, a homemaker. Gave up her career for her family. Whatever that career had been. I didn't know, but she'd never let me forget that she'd given it up, and for what? A daughter like me? Spoiled and silly and stupid?

But I proved her wrong in the end, didn't I? I did something that made my mother long for that spoiled, silly, stupid girl. I helped kill a girl. That was the story anyway.

I banish the voices that tell me I'm being ridiculous, sitting with this gun on my lap, jittery from mainlining caffeine all night. There'd been a time, maybe five years ago, with a little extra cash in the bank, that I'd invested in something that would have horrified my mother. I'd gone to therapy.

I'd only been able to afford a few sessions, but I'd found gold there in the kindness of a stranger who, yes, was being paid to be kind, but sometimes, that is still a nugget of gold, sparkling in the dirt.

You know that it was in Aaron's best interests to make you feel small and insignificant. To convince you that you couldn't survive without him. Is it possible your mother did the same? That she needed you to need her? That they both taught you not to trust your own instincts, because it benefited them?

Who did it hurt for me to sit here with a gun on my lap? To stay up all night? I was self-employed as a graphic designer—I didn't have a job to get to in the morning. How much worse would it be if I listened to that mocking voice, went to bed and woke up to one of Aaron's goons looming over my bed *after* I already realized someone was in my shed?

Soon I make breakfast, keeping the gun within reach. It takes another cup of coffee before I work up the nerve to go into the screened back porch and look out. I can see the white shed through the rain, which has let up a little. As I watch, the shed door opens. I snatch up the gun so fast I fumble and drop to one knee catching it.

The shed door stays open, as if someone is looking out, and I bend the other knee until I'm low enough not to be spotted. A head appears. Then a figure holding a partial sheet of plywood up as a makeshift umbrella. For a moment, I have to blink, certain I'm

seeing wrong. Knowing Aaron's taste in evil goons, I'm expecting a hulking behemoth, and with that in mind, this figure looks like a child.

It's not a child, though. It's a woman. A young woman, slightly built, wearing a T-shirt and shorts, her feet bare.

The young woman slips out and behind the shed, only to return a few moments later. A bathroom break. In moments, she's back in the shed.

Once that shed door is closed, I rise and head inside to think about what I saw.

I've been working for a couple of hours when the phone rings.

"Hey," Liam says when I answer. "Just checking to see how you're holding up. Storm hitting hard there?"

I answer in kind, playing the role of girlfriend, even with no one around to observe the performance. That's what men like Liam expect. He's not some lowlife drug dealer. He's a lawyer, damn it. A respected and respectable member of the community. If he's inclined to treat me like a real girlfriend, then I'd damn well better appreciate that and respond accordingly.

The worst of it is that Liam isn't just expecting me to play a role. He really does consider me his girlfriend. He takes me to work functions, sends me flowers, acts as if it's a normal relationship. That's how he sucked me in at first. Compared to what I was used to, it seemed normal. *He* seemed normal.

"How about I come by after work?" he says. "Bring dinner. We can hang out, watch a movie, weather the storm together."

It sounds like a suggestion rather than a demand. I know better, but as long as he's phrasing it as optional . . .

"Another time?" I say. "It sounds awesome, but I had a rough night, and I'm running on half power today. I expect to be hanging out with my laptop into the wee hours."

"Then we'll just make it dinner."

Dinner and sex, he means. Also, a movie and sleepover, if he decides that's what he wants. Normally, I'd give in. This isn't worth the fight. But if he comes over, he could see the girl in the shed, and he's not going to just ignore her. He might invite her in for dinner because it would amuse him.

"I wish I could," I say, managing something akin to genuine regret. "But I'm really feeling off. I don't think I could stomach dinner."

"It's ten in the morning. You can't possibly know how you'll feel by dinnertime."

"I just—"

"I want to come over. Tonight."

"I just—"

"Is this really the choice you want to make today, Celeste? Think about it. I'll give you a minute."

"Yes, it's the choice I want to make, Liam. Not tonight."

"You have a headache?"

His tone has changed. It's deceptively light, almost teasing.

"Yes, actually, I do have a headache, but that's not why I'm saying no. I'm tired and under deadline, and I'm asking for a night to myself. I'll make it up to you."

"I know you will."

I try not to grind my teeth. "May I have the evening off, Liam? Please?"

"You may, Celeste. I need to head to Miami for a couple of days next week. I was going to invite you along, but you're obviously busy."

"Miami?"

He laughs, pleased by my feigned dismay. I roll my eyes. I have no interest in going to Miami. I'll appreciate the time to myself so much more. But I know how to play this game.

"Too late," he says cheerfully. "You missed your chance. I'll see you when I get back."

"All right," I say with an audible sigh. "I really do need to work, so I suppose it's for the best."

"And you'll make it up to me next weekend."

"I will."

"Oh, that wasn't a question, Celeste. Not a question at all."

He hangs up, and I'm left looking down at my phone. The urge to run slams through me, but I stifle it.

No more running. This is my home. My house. My job. I could finally have a place in the world, and the only thing standing in

my way is Liam, holding a guillotine blade over my head. He is the keeper of my secrets—all my secrets. He *owns* me.

I have two options. Run from the threat or eliminate it. I am tired of running.

I sit at the window, watching the shed and thinking. After about a half hour, the door opens again. The girl taking another bathroom break.

The more I think about the girl, the more I have to wonder what prompts a young woman to sleep in a shed. She looked like a backpacker. A modern-day hippie. What would make someone decide to backpack by herself through rural central Florida? Is it a choice? Or one of those situations where you pretend it's a choice to hide the truth that you've run out of choices, that you're alone and desperate.

How desperate might this girl be? How *alone*?

An idea plants itself in my brain. It is a grublike thing, barely pushing from the earth. It needs more to grow. More time. More data.

It is possible, just possible, that this girl is a gift from an indifferent god. An answer to my prayers. I need to get free from Liam, and this girl might be my way to do it.