

# 1

*Friday, November 11*

You know how it feels when you've been caught? Everybody does. Sweat on your forehead when flashing lights appear in your rear-view mirror? Palpable dread when the teacher taps you on the shoulder? The sinking feeling when you hear Mom or Dad holler from the porch?

As I crossed my threshold that night, nothing in my home felt level or square. The parallel and perpendicular lines of tables and picture frames, of banisters and stair treads, all felt askew. The dogs didn't meet me at the door. The light was all wrong, and my vision wavered at the periphery. Sleet pelted against the window, yet the room felt silent.

And there he was, with my laptop open, the screen facing me. Henry sat motionless, facing away.

"Where have you been?" he rasped without turning around.

"The storm, traffic," I mumbled. The drive back from Chicago had taken more than three hours—a distance that rarely takes a third of that in good weather.

He looked my way. His eyes were dead and forlorn. "Mandelyn, where have you been? Come and tell me," he said, patting the cushion beside him.

I shed my long black parka over the railing and my bags at the foot of the steps; then I circled the sofa to sit beside him. "Where are Frank and Lloyd?" I asked, but as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I remembered. "Oh, shit. Day care."

Unfazed, he continued. "I had to use your computer. I caught an early train to avoid the crowds. I didn't want to haul an ice-crusting backpack through the train station. I needed to work, but I couldn't find the tablet."

## RELEASE

“I have it,” I said, beginning to rise, but he stopped me with his right hand over mine.

“What is CVC, who is Morgan, and, one more time, *Where. Have. You. Been?*”

My eardrums began to vibrate as if a church bell had been struck inside my head. My hands felt icy, and my knees started to shudder. My intestines filled with sand, and my jaw locked. As much as I wanted to look away, I stared into Henry’s dilated pupils.

“You know what I found, obviously,” he continued. “I still want your answer.”

“CVC is Chevalier Virtual Counseling,” I managed to say, finally. “Morgan is the screen name of a CVC counselor. I started the program a month ago. I write to Morgan, and Morgan writes back with questions. No advice, just questions.”

“Enlightening,” he answered in the same detached tone. “Tell me more about Morgan.”

“I know nothing about Morgan,” I stammered. “It’s not even a single person. It’s a gender-neutral screen name that’s used by whoever’s on duty when my message arrives.”

“A stranger—actually a team of strangers—knows more about you than you have allowed me to know for nearly four years. Fascinating,” he droned.

I began to say, “Please don’t think of it that way...”

“*Don’t you dare,*” he said without raising his voice, yet each word abraded his throat so coarsely that I grasped my own in sympathetic pain. He coughed to regain his composure. “I will not be told what to say, what to do, or how to feel about this.”

I was silent, so he continued.

“I read, online, that my wife—for whom I would do anything, for whom I have been patiently present and available as you meander through near-clinical mania and depression, even as you cast off every offer of kindness and support—that my wife has maligned and rejected me, preferring to pore over the memories of a gay high school boyfriend’s best friend and a college hook-up, instead of living in the present. Then, I learn that your pen pal is an androgynous internet avatar. How do you think I feel, Mandelyn?”

That's when I said the thing I shouldn't have said. "You'd be right at home feeling like a martyr, I think."

He deserved to be furious. He deserved to be wrathful. I wanted him to be. That, I could handle. I knew how to respond to rage. All he did was purse his lips, exhale, take a slow sip of his Koval white rye, and set it on the table. He wasn't using a coaster.

"Why do you hate me so much?" he finally continued. "What have I done to deserve this much loathing? Not take Frank and Lloyd to the vet when I work downtown and you work five minutes away? Clean up after you? Handle the finances? Build you a house?"

"This house has been here since 1856," I argued.

This flustered him. "You're right, Mandelyn. I didn't build you a house. I made this house our home. We came here to be a family. Children, no children—we came here to move forward together. I thought that's what you wanted. What we wanted. What we planned for."

"What you planned for, Henry. Where was I while you were making plans, when you were holed away in your office fussing with magazine clippings, architectural drawings, budgets, and to-do lists?"

"That's what I'm asking you, Mandelyn. *Where have you been?* You checked out almost four years ago. It will be four whole years in February. I understand why. I grieve our loss, too. The way I grieve doesn't look like your way, but I lost Theodore that day, too."

That took me aback a bit. I couldn't remember the last time I had heard Henry say our son's name.

"How could you possibly know how I feel, Henry?" I asked, "Mine is real, actual loss, for which I am solely responsible. I'm so sorry that your charts and your graphs didn't give you a son. I really am.

"I should really give you credit, in fact. There isn't anything else you could have done. You did everything right. But what about me, Henry? How would you feel if you could have read some article, or if you could have analyzed some report that would have kept your son from dying inside me?"

Henry rose and walked into the kitchen with his glass. I thought he was going to refill it; instead, he threw it against what sounded like the stainless steel refrigerator. Shards of glass and cubes of ice skittered across the tiled floor. With perfect calm, Henry returned.

## RELEASE

“Thank you, Mandelyn. For so long, I’ve wondered whether it was me you couldn’t stand, or yourself. Thank you for solving that mystery.”

“How do you expect me to respond to a statement like that?”

“God forbid that you—the preeminent public relations professional who knows exactly what to tell the world on behalf of anyone else, no matter how complex the issue or dreadful the circumstance—that you respond with a simple statement about yourself. I really used to admire your courage, Mandelyn. I adored how fearlessly you stood up to injustice. How you would conceive an idea and run with it. Commit to it. Sell it. Persuade the most obstinate, set-in-their-ways, sticks in the mud of—the power of dreams. The power of passion. You set your intentions and pursued them against all odds. Where did she go, Mandelyn? Because she isn’t here, and she hasn’t been for a long damn time. I miss her so much, I ache. What can I do to bring her back?”

“I don’t know,” I said, choking up. “I’m not entirely sure she exists anymore.”

“No. That’s not true. I... I don’t think I can live in a world where that’s possible. You still have ideas and dreams inside you, waiting to be discovered. You have great things yet to accomplish if you could only believe in yourself again. I won’t be a party to a waste of so much potential.

“I don’t know where you’ve been or where you are,” he continued, “but I can own my part of the responsibility for you being lost. I sat back and watched this to happen, letting you subsist on routine and complacency. We’re partners. No matter what happens, I’m always going to be a partner to you. From the moment we met, you challenged me to get outside of my comfort zone. You taught me that it is okay to imagine, and to build my reality from the products of that imagination. I’ve always wondered what you saw in me. I was just happy that you let me stand in your sunshine.”

He turned away, addressing empty space, speaking to himself.

“The underpinning that my care and devotion were supposed to provide hasn’t been enough to bolster you. I don’t think that where we’ve found ourselves has much to do with Theodore, even. He isn’t the reason I have failed you. Our losing him just brought that failure into stark relief. I don’t know if I have it in me to give you what you need.

God knows I've tried.

"I've made a decision. I have to release you, Mandelyn. I have to let you go."

My muscles ached from how stiffly I had held myself upright as Henry poured himself out before me. My circulation had stopped, my breath was shallow, and my core temperature was, I was sure, five degrees below normal. I opened my mouth to speak, but there was no sound. I cleared my throat and finally managed to say, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," he said.

"How many entries did you read? Did you read them all?"

"I stopped after you finished mooning over your first time with Sam. You have a real penchant for detail, Mandelyn. I have to hand it to you. It felt like I was there.

"In all honesty—and I can't believe I'm saying this," he continued, "I think that this virtual counseling may actually be doing you some good. I could tell that you had begun to sort some things out for yourself. But here's the thing, Mand. I don't want to read those things about you. I want you to tell me yourself. If you're not able to give that part of yourself to me, I think we may be through. If you can't be your genuine self with me, then nothing else can really follow.

"I release you. Go. Find yourself. See if something or someone—in your past or in your future—holds the keys to your happiness. Maybe you'll find that you have what you need somewhere inside you. If you don't live this life fully, Mandelyn, it won't be on my account. I think you know I love you, but if the character of my love doesn't fulfill you, I don't have anything else to offer.

"I am going to bed. Think about what I've said. Stay here tonight, of course, but I don't think it's a good idea for you to remain for very long. You have a lot of work to do, and I will just get in the way."

As he left, I sat statue-still. Looking at my reflection in the picture window, I could see that my hair was limp, my face was gaunt, my eyes were haunted, and my shoulders were stooped. I didn't look like a person with potential for anything but mediocrity. I sure as hell didn't look like someone who'd inspire people to pursue dreams of their own.

## R E L E A S E

Henry was right. I was lost. Adrift. And the last mooring in my life had just been taken away.

I wanted to cry. For all the fits and episodes of the last several weeks, when tears had come without warning, why couldn't I cry now? I needed a release. Henry was right about that, but I didn't need it in the way he had given it to me. I needed to escape the walls that I had built around myself and stop behaving like a defenseless coward. Not tonight, however. I laid myself down, reaching for the oatmeal wool blanket across the back of the couch, and, in a fetal ball, rested my eyes and willed sleep to come.