

PROLOGUE

“You have no idea what my life is like.”

“And you don’t have a clue what it’s like to be me.”

They glared defiantly at one another.

He, the son, was on one side of the table.

She, the mother, sat across from him.

He was smoking a Marlboro, she had a Yellow Blend. The clock on the wall behind her ticked quietly.

He took a deep drag, exhaled the smoke through his nostrils, stubbed out the cigarette in his coffee cup.

She looked him over. Took her time, noted every detail. Hair trimmed into an aggressive crewcut, that was new. Or had she just not noticed? When was her last visit? Three months ago? Had it really been that long?

She had a momentary vision of him as a little boy. It shimmered and then disappeared.

He’d been lonely.

And she’d never been there for him.

Her throat ached. A sharp hot pain, like the feeling you get after vomiting. She swallowed hard, trying to get down the uncomfortable lump that represented her whole life. Trying to ignore the guilty conscience hovering in her head like a flock of circling vultures.

She hadn’t loved him.

The man across from her had been only a boy, and she’d felt nothing for him. She should’ve tried just a little harder. If somehow she had, maybe he wouldn’t be sitting here now.

The sound of his voice startled her.

“I don’t understand why you’re here. Just being related doesn’t mean you’re obliged to take responsibility. Only fools think that. You’re not responsible for me any more. I’m an adult, and I don’t need you. Got that? I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“Please, Toby, just —“

“Tobias.”

His contemptuous tone stopped her cold. She blinked several times and then nodded.

“All right. Tobias. Don’t be so hard on me. That does neither of us any good. Don’t you see it’s just the two of us now? All we have is one another.”

“You know, a long time ago I really wanted you to be there for me. I wanted to *have* you there, and I reached out to you, but you didn’t want anything to do with me. And now I don’t care. Get that into your head. I never want to see you again.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

She took two quick drags, then stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray. Live ashes spilled out onto the table, and she used both hands to sweep them off onto the floor. She rubbed her palms together and crossed her arms across her chest.

Made no effort to wipe away the tears running down her cheeks.

Swallowed.

Tobias looked at her.

“Just go away.”