

CHAPTER 1

It was late, already dark outside, and Stella almost missed her exit. She had hoped to get to Bozeman, Montana, before dinner, but an accident on the interstate just east of the state line stole hours of her time and meant another drive-thru meal in the car. It was close to ten o'clock on Sunday night when she finally saw the exit ramp at the last minute—*the only exit*, she thought wryly, *this is a small town*—and pulled off the highway.

At twenty-two, her college diploma still hot off the press, Stella was ready—ready for life, ready for adventure. She stifled a yawn. Actually, after driving for three days, she was exhausted and ready for bed. But she rubbed her bleary eyes and sat up a little straighter in the bench seat of her old, grey Plymouth Reliant. She pointed her car in the opposite direction of the hotel, a knot of excitement building in her stomach as she wound her way through town.

She navigated a few turns and stoplights, then looked at her map to check the address. She slowly pulled into a parking lot and cut the engine, squinting through her dusty windshield to get a better look at the building in front of her.

The TV station was dark, closed for business at this hour, but there was still a lot to see. She unconsciously leaned forward and stared, hardly blinking for a good five minutes as she took it all in. Her expression darkened by the minute. Rusty roof, half-lit sign, dirty windows—nothing escaped her attention. She finally sat back in her seat with a thud and considered starting the engine up and heading back to Cleveland. This was... a strip mall. It was across the street

from the bus station. It looked like an outpost for the people a bigger newsroom was trying to get rid of.

She shook her head and took another deep breath, determined to make the best of her situation. Because this was it—her only shot. She'd sent out more than 200 résumés to TV stations all over the country, trying to get a job as a reporter. Paul McGeorge here at the tiny FOX affiliate in Bozeman was the only one to call with an offer. So she couldn't go back home. After months of job-hunting, it was clear that no one else would hire her.

She blew out a breath she didn't realize she was holding, and stepped out of her car to get a better look. She sighed in relief as she stretched out all 5'9" of her slim but athletic body, and worked the stiffness out of her limbs from sitting all day. Even though it was August, the evening air was cool. She pulled her long, auburn hair out of its ponytail, and let it fall around her shoulders.

As Stella looked around, she realized that the night seemed darker here, the stars overhead brighter. She couldn't see them, but she knew, by the blackest parts of the sky, where the mountains must be towering over the town.

What kind of crazy person drives across the country for a job without first seeing the office, meeting the boss, and checking out the town? Stella sighed, and reminded herself, once again—and more sternly this time—that this was her only shot.

"I can *do* this!" she said forcefully.

"Amen!" came a deep voice to her left.

Stella jumped and turned toward the sound. A bent, withered man was getting out of his perfectly maintained, glossy white Lincoln Continental. A wisp of silvery white hair blew around his face as he stood. She hadn't even noticed him park, she'd been so engrossed in her own thoughts. His car looked to be from the sixties, as long as two compact cars end-to-end. Not a blemish marked the perfect, metal body. Stella looked back at her own car, built a mere decade ago, and wished she'd had the front bumper fixed last year after a small run-in with a concrete barrier. Her eyes moved back to his car and she noted that even the whitewall tires were sparkling.

The old man took his cane out of the backseat and looked at Stella. “No one else will believe you can do it if *you* don’t.” She felt her mouth turn up at the corners and a laugh burbled out. He glanced at her license plate and said with a wink, “Welcome to town, Ohio. I think you’re going to like it here.”

Without another look her way, he walked towards the convenience store located next to the TV station, his extra-wide, white stability sneakers cutting a slow but steady path through the parking lot.

Stella’s smile faded as her eyes shifted back to the dilapidated building in front of her.

“I hope so,” she muttered, unconvinced. She glared one more time at the shabby structure and folded herself back into the driver’s seat of her car. She headed north, slowly making her way through town. It was so dark she couldn’t see anything of Bozeman that wasn’t illuminated by her headlights.

After about ten minutes, Stella pulled into the hotel parking lot. She eased into a space and trudged into the lobby. She made eye contact with the employee working the front desk and opened her mouth to say hello. Instead she squeaked out a small yelp, and nearly tripped over her own feet in her haste to stop short. She barely avoided colliding with a full-grown man as he ran through the lobby, completely naked.

“What the...” she trailed off, and stared in shock as the man zipped over to a couch, did a shimmy-shake, and yipped like a hyena.

“ROOM 346, I WILL NOT WARN YOU AGAIN!” the employee shouted at the streaker. “NEXT TIME YOU ARE OUT!” But halfway through the threat, the streaker had already disappeared through a door to the stairwell.

Next time? Stella stared wide-eyed at the door as it swung closed.

“I am so sorry. The college kids are just getting back to town, but that was unacceptable, obviously, Miss...” He looked questioningly at Stella, but she was still staring, nose wrinkled at the stairwell door.

“Wow. That was a big... tattoo.” She wondered what kind of bet that guy had lost to get a full color buffalo inked on his butt. Then she shook herself and turned to the clerk. “I’m Stella Reynolds, checking

in.” Her suitcase trailed behind her as she walked toward the desk. She rested an elbow on the scuffed countertop while he pulled up her information on his computer.

“Ah, yes, Ms. Reynolds, I have FOX14 down as paying for your stay with us for the next two weeks.” He tapped in a few keys and said, “Looks like you’ll be in room 224—” he cut off abruptly, and scratched his head. “Hmm, it must be a full house tonight.” After another hesitation he said, “OK, room 224 it is.” He handed Stella some forms, then pointed to two lines, “Sign and date here, please.”

“What’s the date today?” After the long drive, her days were starting to bleed together.

“Today is Sunday, August 15, 2004.”

She filled in the forms, and handed the papers back over the desk.

“My name is Eric, please don’t hesitate to call if there are any problems.” He directed her to the elevator, and she rode up with a nagging feeling that there was something he wasn’t telling her about her room. She rubbed her eyes, and rolled the tension out of her shoulders, finally shrugging them in resignation. No doubt she’d figure it out, eventually.

The Economy Lodge was an extended-stay hotel, and her room had a mini kitchen, small sitting area and bed. She tossed her purse on the table, and walked straight to the window to close the blinds. Stifling another yawn, she opened her suitcase and rummaged around until she found her pajamas.

Just as she finished rinsing off her toothbrush at the bathroom sink, she felt the pounding bass of a song as it started beating through the wall of her room. She poked her head out of the bathroom and glanced at the wall clock hanging over the kitchenette. 11:17 p.m.

She waited a few minutes for the person next door to adjust the volume, but the song, something by Sarah McLachlan, kept blaring away. Stella was too drained to be diplomatic. She marched over to the phone on the bedside table and rang the front desk.

When Eric answered, she stuck a finger in one ear to try and muffle the notes demanding to be heard from the room next door. “Listen, I don’t want to be the problem guest on my first night, but there is

a music situation going on up here, Eric. Like, a rock concert next door.” Stella took a deep breath and rubbed her neck with her free hand. “I really need to get some sleep tonight. Can you help me out here? Please?”

“Ms. Reynolds, I’m so sorry. Janet should know better than to play her music so late. She’s a long-term guest of ours, and I will absolutely speak with her immediately.”

She hung up and paced around her room, waiting for the music to quiet. After five minutes and twenty-eight seconds, the song cut off mid-lyric. Stella nodded in satisfaction, then turned off the lights in her room and climbed, exhausted, into bed. *Things will seem better in the morning*, she thought to herself as she drifted off to sleep. *I just know it.*

A loud noise woke her from a sound sleep. In the pitch black of the room, it took Stella a few seconds to remember where she was. As objects began to take shape in the dim light snaking through the cheap cotton curtains, she remembered the plain bedside table next to her and the utilitarian bedspread covering her legs. The Economy Lodge definitely valued thrift over style.

Fumbling in the dark for her phone, Stella pushed a button that lit up the room. It was 3:07 in the morning. Monday, technically speaking, and she was scheduled to start her new job in just a few hours. She clicked her phone off and rubbed her eyes as she heard a woman’s raspy voice yell angry sounding words in the hallway. She sighed into the darkness. She knew this hotel was trouble when she’d checked in.

A minute later she heard more pounding and froze—finally awake enough to recognize the sound. She sat up in bed and stared, astonished, at her door, now pulsing with each blow. Her forehead wrinkled in confusion. She didn’t know anyone in the entire state—no one could possibly be angry with her. Yet.

She crept out of bed and tied her hair into a knot on top of her head, then skirted around the kitchenette. Like a combat soldier prepared

for an ambush, she folded herself into a low crouch, and made her way to the front of her room.

The yelling was getting louder. She put a hand to her chest and felt her heart thundering away—almost drowning out the actual noises from the hallway. With all the chaos, she hadn't noticed until just then that a Sarah McLachlan song was blasting from the stereo next door at full volume.

Now closer to her door, Stella could make out parts of the venom being spewed in the hallway.

“Stupid bitch.... Talk about ME to my FRIENDS?” Then there were some slurred words Stella couldn't quite make out, before the woman blurted out, “You oughta say it to MY FACE.”

She leaned over the doorframe, careful that her feet didn't make a shadow beneath the metal door, and stretched out so she could look through the peephole into the hallway. Much to her surprise, she came eye-to-eye with an angry woman, standing inches away! She was holding a forty-ounce can of Natural Light beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Through the fish-eye lens, Stella could make out smudged makeup and bloodshot eyes. She smelled nicotine and alcohol through the cheap metal door.

Holy shit.

“I know you're in there, bitch!” *Bang, bang, bang!* Stella's door shook each time the woman's fist made contact. “Talking to Eric about my music. I'll play it as damn loud as I want to” *bang*, “when I want to” *bang*, “WHERE I want to.” *Bang* “OPEN THIS DOOR and talk to me woman-to-woman!!”

Stella leapt back against the wall of her hotel room and clapped her hand to her chest in surprise. After a quick check that the deadbolt and chain lock were in place, she slid down to a sitting position. She'd assumed last night that Eric would take care of the music situation diplomatically. Obviously that hadn't happened.

She flinched as the door rattled again. *This drunk woman is going to break into my hotel room!* She grasped her cell phone tighter. Who could she call? Stella's mind raced. Eric at the front desk had sold her

out already, so he was out. She had a friend from high school who lived in Seattle. That's only what? Ten hours away? The police?

Stella caught snatches of Janet's litany of complaints—"Some musicians really know what I'm feeling and I need to FEEL what I'm feeling and there's no reason for you to get in the way OF MY FEELINGS"—but her mind was working overtime trying to find a way out of this mess. The banging and yelling continued, and so did the song, on repeat.

She wasn't usually a combative person, but between sad verses of a song she had grown to hate and an obnoxiously loud burp from dear Janet, she decided maybe it was time to try a new approach. New job, new state—why not a new way of dealing with annoying people?

Flipping on the lights, Stella grabbed a robe out of her suitcase and threw it on. She took a deep breath, then unlocked her door and flung it open. Before Janet could react, Stella grabbed her arm mid-door-bang, pulled her inside the room, and slammed the door shut behind them.

Janet was 'medium' everything. Medium height, with medium brown hair, it was cut to a medium length between her shoulders and shoulder blades, even her eyes were medium—right in between brown and green.

"Janet," Stella said, briskly, "is that your name? It sounds like you need to get something off your chest—but I'm looking at the clock, thinking this probably isn't the right time." She gestured to the clock on the wall over the mini fridge across the room. "It's after three in the morning, I'm starting my *dream* job in just a few hours, it took me *months* to find a news director willing to hire me. I've spent the last three days driving across the country to get here, for this job that, by the way, is only paying me—"

Stella realized she was over-sharing. She took in Janet's glazed expression, her dirty, grey robe hanging open, the ties dragging on the ground, and decided she didn't need to know Stella would only be making \$12,500 a year. Instead, she said, "Well, and *you* probably have somewhere important to be tomorrow morning, too... or, I mean, maybe at some point... over the next few days? Anyway, what

I'm trying to say is that women like us have a full load—we need our rest, am I right?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

Janet, blinking in the sudden brightness of the room, looked around slowly before finally closing one eye, and using the other to focus on Stella. The music from next door kept thumping. "Um-mmm..." she trailed off.

"Right." Stella nodded crisply. She pulled the door open, and propelled Janet forward. "You turn that music down now, and we'll make an appointment to chat tomorrow when we're both rested and able to focus. If five thirty tomorrow night works for you, I'll meet you out here in the hallway. Neighbor."

Janet swayed on her feet, and opened her mouth as if to say something. Then her mouth snapped shut, and she nodded once. Or maybe she just forgot to hold her head up for a moment. Either way, Stella closed the door and held her breath, waiting. After a minute or two, the thumping bass abruptly shut off.

She enjoyed a triumphant moment of silence, then turned off the overhead light in her room and climbed back into bed. But before her clock flipped to three fifteen, the opening notes to another sad song cued up, and Stella could swear that Janet cranked up the volume.

"That unbelievable bi—" but her own words were drowned out by the music, and she closed her eyes in frustration.

Stella sighed into the dark room, and flopped back onto the bed, pulling the covers over her head.

Eventually exhaustion won out. She finally drifted off to sleep, listening to a sad song about heartache. On repeat.