

Prologue

Cici was right, when she said the first day would be horrible. It was. I cried and stayed alone in my room and let the sorrow take me. Even through that day, however, there were moments when I just knew I had done the right thing. Moments when I saw her, held in Meredith's arms, and knew she was going to have a wonderful childhood. The kiss that Meredith had dropped on my forehead was a gift, because in that one moment, I knew without a doubt that Little Miss, that Emily Ann, would grow up knowing love. In that one small kiss, I felt the love my daughter would know. She will have her hand held and she will have her toes tickled and her belly rubbed when she doesn't feel good. She will have puppies to play with and cousins. She will have. She will have enough of everything, and she will do good things in the world because of it.

Part One: Spring

Chapter 1

The deserts of Arizona had completely taken my breath away. I wish now that I had planned to come through at dusk or daybreak, like Cici had suggested, but I had slept through daybreak and woke with the sun already moving high in the sky. I had driven through the Painted Desert during the late hours of the morning, and it was still beautiful, with the stark shadows falling out on the sand from the sandstone hills and mounds. I almost wished my drive ended there, so I could stay in those painted dunes, but Cici was waiting in California, so I drove on. Hours and hours on.

Poway, California, sits north of San Diego proper, and it is nearly full dark when I pass the sign leading into the city. I miss my merge onto 67 toward Ramona and have to drive on down to another exit to get back to where I need to be. I finally merge onto 67 going toward Ramona and turn left onto Scripps Poway Parkway. Another five miles before I merge off the highway onto Pomerado Parkway, a main thoroughfare through the town. I make a left onto Tarzana and an immediate right onto Annabelle Drive and into a parking lot, serving as a sort of courtyard in the middle of a series of squat, two-story buildings. I look around at the building, perplexed. Cici said her cousin had a house. I reach over to grab her letter from the passenger seat and confirm the address, disappointment rising. When I'm convinced that I am at the right address, I pull Little Red into a spot and let the engine go silent, sitting for just a minute, enjoying the novelty of not being in motion. Reframing my expectations

Somewhere off in the distance sirens begin to wail. I step out into the night. A whisper of air dances across my skin, dry and hot, and I am caught for a moment in a wind devil, my hair rising in a vortex, up and away. I close my eyes and let the wind touch me, like hands lifting my hair, caressing my neck, wicking the sheen of perspiration that has coated my skin the entire long drive from Illinois. Little Red does not have air conditioning, and I feel wind battered and beaten from the miles driven with the windows down.

The sirens are closer, and when I open my eyes, I see the red and blue lights bouncing from the buildings, seconds before the two cruisers steer into the lot. I jump back against my car, out of their way, feeling guilty, feeling that low panic in my stomach, that rising of fear.

I haven't done anything; they are not here for me.

The cars come to haphazard stops behind a blue sedan parked a couple of cars over. One officer steps out and, glancing at me, says, "You need to get back inside." His eyes scan the remainder of the lot, finding it empty, and turns back toward the building, nodding at the other officer that all is clear.

I hear what I hadn't heard before—chaos through the wind—now that the magic of that dry gust is gone. A thud sounds against a wall, then I hear voices yelling, a man, a woman. It's a domestic disturbance. That's what the police came for, somebody in a battle, throwing down. I should be unnerved, uncomfortable, this being my first landing in my new land, but the fight, the chaos feels like home. It feels normal. This is how people live, everywhere. That sudden understanding about the nature of life shows my mother to me in a different light. I judged her too harshly. I was too unforgiving, and this is just how people live.

I am here in California because Cici said her cousin had a room in her house I could rent. I came because it was Cici, my best good friend, and because it was a house, not a trailer, not an apartment, and that had felt like a move in the right direction.

The report of a gun echoes against the facing complex, and the cops hustle toward the building where the struggle is taking place. I slide back into my car, crouching low in my seat, and peer out into the night of blue and red. I wait. There are shouts, and I am taken back to the day Warren was taken by the police, to the sounds of the door being broken down, to his shouts into the phone, to their voices, the authority of their voices. Another shot rings out, and I draw my hands over my ears. I should leave. I should start my car and just leave. This isn't a house. This isn't what I came for.

I reach to put the key into the ignition and see the two cops exit the building, pushing a short, dark-haired man ahead of them. They wrestle him into the back of one of the cars, and I notice his hands are strapped behind his back. The police are followed by four women, the first holding a cloth to the side of her face. The third one is Cici.

They are all talking, and I stay low in my seat. The key in my hand drops away from the ignition. One of the cop pulls out his notebook to fill in the paperwork.

Cici is letting her hair grow, and it softens her. It is her voice that I hear ring out, "Of course she wants to press charges," but the woman with the cloth held to her face looks forlorn and shakes her head. I breathe. Cici looks like her head may explode, and I smile. There she is—Cici, conqueror of life. Of course, he's going to be charged with something, even if the woman holding her face doesn't want it. There are rules about guns, and surely you can't shoot one off in the middle of an apartment complex. Public endangerment, or something.

I wait, watching the women, watching Cici, pacing and angry. Every inch of her skin glows with a fire burning inside, and I wonder how I never realized how beautiful she is. It's more than just being pretty—she is vibrant, like all the atoms of her being are bouncing together at a higher rate than everybody else's. I sit for a very long time, listening to them while red and blue lights flash through all the edges of the lot. A few people have come out of their apartments to see the excitement, huddling in small groups.

When the police are finished with their questions, they climb back into their cars and the lights stop flashing. The woman with the cloth reaches out to the man in the backseat, and a flare of anger sparks against my chest. I will never let a man hit me. I can just hear her saying, "But he loves me. He didn't mean to." Stupid woman. I put the key back into the ignition. I don't have to stay.

But Cici is here.

When the police are gone, and when the women have gone back inside, when all the neighbors have floated back to their own spaces, I sit unnoticed for another half an hour, working my way through to this new reality. I have left chaos to find chaos, and my new understanding of the world is that all is chaos. I gather my nerve, hoping the drama is over.

I get out my car, go up to the door, and knock.

