

# CHAPTER ONE

In my line of work, surprises are never good. That's why, as I'm unlocking the door to the Mediterranean-style beachfront villa on Sand Dollar Lane, I freeze at the sound of movement from inside. It's midmorning, so I'm not expecting company. My last guests checked out yesterday, and the next one isn't due until later today. Whoever they are, they have no business being here.

Suddenly, I'm wide awake, where a minute ago I'd been yawning after another late-night Skype session with my boyfriend. I lower my black Tumi messenger bag and the wicker basket laden with goodies that I'm toting onto the Saltillo-tiled porch. I bend down and pull out my iPad and the .38-caliber Smith and Wesson I'm licensed to carry. I slide the revolver into the waistband of my size-ten Jag jeans. I use the iPad to access the Excel spreadsheet in which I keep track of arrival and departure dates and the maintenance and housekeeping schedules at the dozen properties I manage.

Casa Blanca, in the exclusive gated community of Casa Linda Estates, is the largest and most luxe of my vacation rentals. It sleeps fifteen, so bookings to date have been large parties. The current one is my first single. Also, my first celebrity guest. I consult the spreadsheet, which shows her arriving today, June 1, well after the 3 p.m. check-in time. I return the iPad to my bag. Now the only sound is that of breaking waves from the beach below. The noise I'd heard a minute ago was probably nothing, a mouse skittering or a breeze blowing through a window that had been left open a crack. I tend to spook easily, a holdover from my near death at the hands of an assailant last summer. Now, anytime I hear a car backfire, I think it's a gunshot. So I keep my gun on me just in case and ease the door open as I enter.

No sooner do I step inside does it come flying at me like a projectile-vomited hairball, startling me into almost dropping the basket. A blur of black-and-tan fur materializes into a small dog, a Yorkshire terrier I see when it launches itself at me, pawing at my pant leg and yapping maniacally. I recognize it from the cover story on Delilah Ward in the current issue of *People* magazine. There's a photo of the dog curled on her lap, wearing the same rhinestone-studded collar.

The bitch has arrived. And I don't mean the dog.

I knew she would be trouble from my dealings with her personal assistant, Brianna Sweeny, a scarily efficient young woman with whom I'd spoken over the phone. I'd envisioned Brianna as the secretarial equivalent of a hired gun, packing weaponry in the form of a laptop and multiple handhelds synced to a Bluetooth device glowing evilly in her ear as she bedeviled me with her employer's endless list of requirements, which included her desired brand of

toilet paper (Quilted Northern), pillow (down, medium-firm), and coffeemaker (a Jura Capresso I'd had to order from Williams-Sonoma to replace the Mr. Coffee). To add insult to injury, Brianna had told me I was expected to sign a legal document agreeing not to reveal the location of Miss Ward or so much as breathe her name. I almost called it quits at that point, but in the end I couldn't refuse. I owed it to my clients, the Blankenships. The booking was through the end of August, which amounted to a tidy sum.

After payment had been made in full, I emailed the set of instructions with passcodes for the key lockbox and house alarm. Standard operating procedure. I expect guests to show me the courtesy of arriving and departing on schedule. Occasionally, there's overlap at either end, but never had a guest shown up an entire day in advance. Why hadn't Brianna or her boss requested an early check-in? Did they think I existed solely to serve at the whim of Her Royal Highness?

I shake the Yorkie loose from my leg. "Down, Cujo. I come in peace." My soothing tone has no effect. He continues to boing up and down like a kid in a bouncy castle, barking his furry little head off.

Normally, I carry treats in my pocket—dogs frequently mistake me for an intruder, an occupational hazard—but I'm fresh out on account of the Rottweiler that nearly took a chunk out of my leg at the Andersons' Cape Cod on Cliff Street earlier in the day. At the moment, however, I'm less concerned with any threat posed by Cujo's Mini Me than I am with the beeping sound emanating from the alarm console. I dart over and punch in the passcode, breathing a sigh of relief when the blinking light goes from red to green. The last thing I need is for the cops to show. As it is, I'm on thin ice with Detective Breedlove after my arrest for breaking and entering last summer. (I'd been after clues in my mom's murder investigation, not valuables, but try telling him that.) But that shouldn't have surprised me given our history. When you've lived in a small town your entire life, you don't need class reunions to remind you of bad shit that happened way back when—your former classmates are the folks with whom you do business or serve on committees or vote for (or against) in local elections. Or, as in my case, who are arresting you.

"Hello! Anyone home?" I call in my loudest voice. No answer. She must have stepped out. Fine. I'll leave the goodie basket and be on my way. Filled with locally sourced comestibles—coffee beans from the Daily Grind, blueberry muffins from Paradise Bakery, a selection of cheeses from Fog City Dairy—the basket is my way of welcoming new guests, and I make sure it's the first thing to greet them when they arrive. The bottle of Bonny Doon chardonnay I normally provide is the only item missing from this one. I don't

want to tempt Delilah, who is fresh out of rehab, into falling off the wagon. From the stories I hear in AA, I know that it's a short fall.

I head deeper into the house, Mini Me trotting docilely at my heels, having apparently decided I'm friend and not foe. I'm nearing the end of the hallway when I spot a figure lurking in the shadows up ahead. I let out a yelp before I realize it isn't human. It's a foam-core cutout of Delilah, part of a freestanding lobby display advertising her soon-to-be-released action flick, *Category Five*. I gaze upon her doppelgänger—sultry eyed and pouty lipped, butter-blond tresses blown back as if by hurricane winds—and wonder if she could possibly be that gorgeous in person.

She's more than a pretty face. From humble beginnings—she grew up in foster care—Delilah Ward skyrocketed to fame at age nineteen with the low-budget slasher flick *They Come Out at Night*, which grossed over two hundred million worldwide and went on to become a cult classic. She costarred in several more pictures after that, before her life and career were derailed by personal tragedy. Ten months ago, she lost her husband, former stuntman Eric Nyland, when his private plane went down in the ocean off Catalina Island. She went into seclusion following reports of a breakdown, resurfacing a couple months later to confirm in a press conference that she had been in rehab, after the tabloids ran a blurry shot of her outside the Betty Ford Center. Since then, she'd gone on to make another picture. Now she's here in Cypress Bay, where her next picture is being filmed.

It's a big deal in our small community. Excitement has been building since the film crew set up camp along the coast twenty miles north of town. Our sleepy Northern California seaside town hasn't seen this much buzz since Brad and Angelina were here to look at a property a few years back. I step from the hallway into the great room. Usually, the ocean view showcased by twelve-foot floor-to-ceiling windows is the first thing I notice when I walk in. But that's not what draws my attention now. I come to an abrupt halt and look around in disbelief. The room is in shambles. Dirty plates and glasses litter every surface. Cigarette butts overflow from saucers used as makeshift ashtrays—never mind this is a nonsmoking residence. A red-wine stain mars a fawn sofa cushion, and the residue of white powder on the glass surface of the wrought-iron coffee table tells me booze wasn't the only substance abused. Delilah Ward didn't just arrive a day early; she partied all night.

I've spilled more alcohol than the average person drinks in a lifetime, so normally I don't judge. I've been sober four years but still have dreams from which I awake disoriented and drenched in sweat, wondering where I was the night before and who I had sex with, verbally abused, or inflicted bodily harm

to. But this is beyond the pale. Typical of a drunk, Delilah has trashed the place when she wasn't even supposed to be here.

I make my way into the open-plan kitchen where the granite countertops and butcher-block island are awash with empties and half-eaten deli platters. There's wet garbage in the recycling bin and, inexplicably, a man's wallet. The soles of my sneakers stick to the tiled floor where spills had been left to dry. My disgust mounts as I move from room to room surveying the wreckage that extends throughout the house. The master bedroom looks like the post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans Astrodome, bedcovers torn apart and the cream carpet strewn with items of clothing. Beer bottles sit in pools of moisture on the cherry night tables. Towels are heaped on the travertine floor of the en suite bathroom, and in one of the double sinks, an upended container spills lavender-scented lotion. A close look shows it to be from the set of Molton Brown toiletries I'd supplied upon Delilah's request. I'm mad enough to wring her pretty little neck.

Mini Me whines piteously as if to say, *It wasn't me*. I'm bending to give him a reassuring pat when I see what he left on the Turkish runner in the hallway. "Bitch," I growl. "Not you," I say when the Yorkie yips in response. It's not his fault that his owner didn't let him out to do his business.

I so do not need this. I have two more stops on my morning rounds, one of which involves an ant invasion, the other a dead tree limb. I could leave this for Esmeralda, my housecleaner who was hired by Delilah to come in every day, but I don't. With a sigh, I push up the sleeves of my turquoise Hang Ten Surf Shop sweatshirt to tackle the worst of the mess. I'm itching to phone Brianna—her Bluetooth device will be buzzing like an angry hornet in her ear when I do—but it can wait.

Dripping with sweat, I dump the last of the three large garbage bags I've filled in the trash bins. I'm heading out the door when I remember the goodie basket that I left on the kitchen counter. I retrace my steps, mentally scratching out the words *Compliments of the Management* on the handwritten card tucked inside and substituting *Bite me* as I retrieve it. I'd sooner give it to a stranger on the street.

If I were nicer, I'd cut Delilah some slack, if only because she was recently widowed. But I'm not nice, so to hell with it. I'm headed to my SUV with the basket tucked under my arm when a midnight-blue Lexus sports coupe pulls into the driveway. A blond woman, dressed in short-shorts and a tank top, climbs from the driver's side. A jolt of recognition has me halting in my tracks. I stare at her as she walks toward me. Even with the huge designer sunglasses

that partially cover her face, I instantly know who—or rather what—I’m looking at.

The supernova that is Delilah Ward.

She really *is* that gorgeous in person. Slender and perfectly proportioned, she has legs that go on forever and boobs that bounce in a way that tells me they’re not the store-bought kind. Her hair is naturally blond—I know from the pictures I’ve seen of her as a child—and falls in loose curls around her shoulders. If someone told me she was from another planet, it would make sense. A planet where there is no such thing as cellulite, and you can party hard without appearing the least bit hungover the morning after.

She smiles, dazzling me with the whiteness of her teeth as she extends her hand to shake mine. “Hi, I’m Delilah! And you must be ...” She frowns as though trying to remember my name.

“Tish.” It’s short for Leticia, my grandmother’s name. It’s a moment before I remember I’m mad at the woman with whom I’m shaking hands. “I wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow.”

“Oh, God.” Her smile gives way to a rueful grimace. “I knew I was forgetting something. I promised Brianna I’d call and it totally slipped my mind. Karol”—she names the director of the picture—“wanted us to meet to go over some script changes, so I flew in a day early. I’m sorry. My bad.” Her gaze drops to the goodie basket. “For me? Oh, now I feel even worse. I’m such an idiot!”

“It happens.” I can overlook the fact that she failed to inform me of her change in plans, which seems minor compared to her having trashed the place. “But I have to charge you for the extra day.”

“No problem. I’ll have Brianna take care of it,” she says blithely.

“There’s something else we need to discuss.” I say, adopting a firmer tone.

She pushes her sunglasses onto her head. Her eyes are the blue of a tropical lagoon fringed with dark lashes. I become transfixed as I gaze into them. “Is this about the neighbor lady who complained? She calmed down after I explained we were rehearsing. I’m surprised she said anything.”

Mrs. Cooley is the closest neighbor. She’s in her eighties and hard of hearing, so it was more than loud talking if she’d called to complain. “From the looks of it, you were doing more than rehearsing.”

“Oh. Right. About that,” she says, catching my meaning. “I was going to tidy up, but it was late by the time everyone left, and ...” She trails off at the stony look on my face, and I brace myself for a blast of who-do-you-think-you-are star displeasure. But she smiles instead, a dimple forming in one cheek—the dimple that fixed her place in the Hollywood firmament from frame one. “I bet you think I’m one of those Hollywood types. I’m not, I promise. I’m usually very considerate.”

I soften toward her. “Well, you might want to review the rental agreement. I wouldn’t want your stay spoiled by any ... unpleasantness. Also, keep in mind the housekeeper, Esmeralda, works a tight schedule. If you need full-time help, I can recommend a service.”

Delilah waves her hand in an airy gesture, the diamond engagement ring she wears on her right hand, signifying her widowhood, flashing in the sunlight. “That won’t be necessary. I can manage. Between you and me” — she drops her voice to confide — “I’m no stranger to scrubbing toilets.”

“It’ll be our secret,” I reply with a smile. She glances down at the basket that’s tucked under my arm. *Am I forgiven?* her plaintive gaze seems to say. I relent as I had earlier with Mini Me when he licked my hand. I hand her the basket. “Enjoy.”

She beams as if I’d just awarded her an Oscar. “Thank you, I will.” She plucks the card from the basket, scribbles something on the back with a pen she produced from her teal Prada bag, and hands it to me. “My cell number,” she says casually, as though it hadn’t been as tightly guarded by her assistant as the pin number for her bank account. “Call me if Brianna gives you a hard time. I pay her to be scary because I’m the world’s biggest softie,” she adds in a hushed voice, eyes sparkling like those of a naughty but adorable child who pulled one over on the adults.

I walk away confused. Was that the spoiled creature who’d insisted on two-hundred-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets and who couldn’t possibly drink coffee that wasn’t brewed in a machine that cost more than what I make in a week? The woman I’d just encountered had seemed ... sweet. A word I never thought I would use to describe Delilah Ward.

## CHAPTER TWO

The Voakses' Spanish colonial sits high on a hill above the bay, a mile or so from the Roaring Brook Camp where I was a counselor the summer before my sophomore year of high school. Amid the serene woodland setting, I wage war on the ants that have invaded the kitchen. I strafe them with bug spray and set out traps, then do a sweep of the pantry searching for any open food containers, which are crack to critters small and large—I once chased a bear from one of my other properties—before I head over to the Russos' midcentury modern by the university to meet with Brandon, the tree trimmer.

The dead tree limb that hangs over their neighbors' garage is the proverbial sword of Damocles in more ways than one. The neighbors in question, the Hendersons, a retired couple in their sixties, offered to split the cost of having it removed, and while I like to think they're simply reasonable people, I can't help wondering if their friendly gesture has anything to do with the fact that my client, Victor Russo, owns a casino in Vegas. Maybe the Hendersons are afraid he'll have them whacked, along with the tree limb, if they don't play nice.

It's almost 1:30 by the time I break for lunch. Leaving Brandon to finish up, I climb back in my Ford Explorer, the green Eddie Bauer model with the red stripe that tells you how old it is—the speedometer has more miles on it than Bonnie and Clyde's getaway car—and head over to Ivy's. My best friend, Ivy Ladeaux, lives down the street from me, so when she's not pulling a shift at the Gilded Lily, the collectibles shop where she works part-time, we eat lunch together. On the way, I stop to pick up sandwiches at our favorite vegetarian eatery, McDharma's. The parking lot is full and I'm lucky to find a spot. I pull in as a circa 1970s Volkswagen bus, painted with peace symbols and plastered with political stickers, is pulling out. The driver, an old dude with graying shoulder-length hair, wearing sunglasses the same vintage as his vehicle, gives me a friendly wave.

Cypress Bay is the land of old hippies who didn't fade away. Take the owner of McDharma's for instance. Austin Atkins is a former sixties activist who burned his draft card back in the day. More recently, when the McDonald's corporation threatened to sue for copyright infringement, he took action and became a cause célèbre after he went to the press. McDonald's backed down within days of the story about the David-versus-Goliath battle going viral. Austin threw a party to celebrate, a meatless barbecue if you can imagine, and we all raised our glasses, business owners and counterculture types alike, in a toast to his victory over The Man.

When I pull into the driveway of Ivy's gingerbread house, I'm greeted by the sound of hammering. Jax, the handyman, is replacing a section of rotted railing on the front porch, his golden retriever, Buddy, stretched out alongside him. Jax's hair, tied back in its usual ponytail, is the same red-gold shade as his dog's fur. The two have become a fixture since Ivy inherited the house from her grandmother. There's always some repair going on. The two-story Victorian is a money pit and far too big for one person, but Ivy has lived in it since she was twelve and has a sentimental attachment to the house. I think she would sooner donate a kidney than sell it. I walk over to greet Jax and Buddy before making my way to the garage that Ivy converted into a studio.

I find her hunched over the workbench, peering into the retractable magnifying glass clamped to one end as she puts the finishing touches on the diorama she's been toiling over all week. She wears bib overalls and a smocked peasant blouse with puff sleeves, an outfit no one over the age of ten could pull off except her. Ivy resembles Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally* with curly black hair instead of blond. You might find her unbearably cute, with her big blue eyes in a heart-shaped face, until you get to know her and discover she's a woman of substance with the heart of a warrior. She's also quirky, another thing I love about her. She doesn't just march to the beat of her own drummer, she dances the funky chicken and makes it seem cool. Which is why we've been best friends since we met in sixth grade.

Next to her, I look like the giantess in *Attack of the Fifty-Foot Woman*. I'm five foot ten with dirty-blond hair, cut shoulder-length, gray-green eyes and dusky skin of my Cherokee ancestors—if there's any truth to the Ballard family lore about the raid that resulted in the birth of my great-great-grandfather. My grandma used to say I had an hourglass figure, which, in modern-day parlance, means you could stand to lose a few pounds. You'd think it wouldn't be hard with all the running around I do in my line of work, except that for every calorie I burn, there's always another one lying in wait ready to pounce. I think guiltily of the party leftovers that I ate for supper last night, after they were pressed on me by one of my clients. I don't want to know how many calories are in a gougère.

Ivy looks up, blinking, at my approach. "Don't tell me it's lunchtime already?"

"Past."

She peers at her diver's watch, which looks cartoonish on her dainty wrist, and makes a surprised noise when she sees what time it is—a quarter past two—before remarking, "Well, that explains it."

"What?"

"I suddenly realized I was starving."

“I left you a message. Which you’d know if you checked your voicemail.”

I bend to examine her latest creation. Ivy’s dioramas are one of a kind in that they’re made from dead insects, which she buys from an honest-to-God insect emporium in L.A. It sounds gross, but it’s not. Her dioramas are works of art. The one before me is of a shoe store, featuring a daddy longlegs spider and a longhorn beetle as customer and clerk, detailed with dollhouse miniature-size furniture and objects. I watch as she bends a spider leg no thicker than an eyelash, using tweezers and a moistened Q-tip. When she finally sits back, all eight of the spider’s appendages are perfectly positioned and shod in teenyweeny sneakers. I smile at the whimsy.

“Sweet. But my favorite is still the ladybug picnic.”

“That’s because ladybugs aren’t on your hit list.” She can smell Eau de Raid on me.

“Ladybugs eat aphids. They can live.”

With a tired sigh, I sink into the chintz armchair, a castoff from the house, whose seat is permanently molded to the shape of Grandmother Ladeaux’s bottom.

“Rough day?” Ivy turns her swivel chair around to face me.

I tell her about my diva in residence, Delilah Ward. “I’ll have to put the number for FEMA on my contact list if she destroys anything else,” I say after I’ve described the scene I encountered at the house. “Though the weird thing was, I liked her. She seemed ... I don’t know, like a real person.”

“As opposed to what—a raving bitch?”

“Or a bereaved widow.”

“People have different ways of showing grief.”

“True. Also, it’s been a while.” She lost her husband a year ago in August.

Ivy fetches the TV tray that she decoupled with vintage photos from the flea market, and I set out our lunch: hummus and avocado sandwiches, a large bag of Terra Chips, and bottled iced teas.

“What bothers me most is that she was doing coke. Or one of her guests was. Either way, it doesn’t bode well for someone fresh out rehab.” I add, in a subdued voice, “It brought back memories.”

“You were never that bad.” Ivy tears open the bag of chips and crams a handful into her mouth.

“True, I never did coke.”

“And you got sober.”

“Only after I burned all my bridges.” That was when I was a real-estate broker and wore nice clothes to work. I fooled myself into thinking no one could see through my disguise. I ignored the funny looks I used to get, the conversations that broke off when I entered a room, the buyers who were all

smiles one day and not returning my calls the next. I hit bottom when a seller pulled her listing due to my “erratic behavior,” and I went ballistic. I showed up at her house that night, stinking drunk, and proceeded to tell her exactly what I thought of her, a tirade that culminated in my hurling her keys, along with the remote control device to her gated community, into her koi pond. In front of her little girl no less. I was so ashamed the next morning when I realized what I’d done, I attended my first AA meeting. I’ve been going ever since.

“Not all. I stuck by you,” Ivy reminds me.

“Yeah, so you could kick my butt.”

We exchange a grin. I uncap my peach-flavored iced tea and take a swig. Ivy brushes chip crumbs from the bib of her overalls and unwraps her sandwich. I think about the night I showed up drunk at her house for a dinner party and she sent me packing. I was mad at the time, but a year later, when I was making my AA amends, I thanked her for being a hard-ass. *That’s what friends are for*, she’d said.

“Talked to Bradley lately?” she asks before she bites into her sandwich.

I groan. My boyfriend is another sore subject. Bradley, a cameraman for CNN, is currently on assignment in Afghanistan. Last night while we were Skyping, I decided to surprise him with a striptease. We haven’t had sex in a while, and I was feeling frisky. It wasn’t until after I’d bared my boobs that I noticed the blurred figure in the background. To my mortification, I saw that it was Bradley’s Afghani driver, Yusef, when his bearded face swam into view.

“Bet you made his day,” Ivy comments with a laugh, after I’ve relayed the incident.

“Who, Bradley or his driver? If you’re referring to Yusef, I very much doubt it. He looked pretty shocked. In fact, I may have set back peace in the Middle East another hundred years.”

“Sure, if it had been Hillary Clinton doing the striptease.”

“Over there women are stoned to death for less.”

I make light of it, but I can’t speak of death without a chill going through me, recalling my close call, the previous summer, at the hands of a gun-wielding psycho while I was investigating my mom’s murder case. I vowed to stick to my day job from then on. I started my own business, Rest Easy Property Management, after I got sober. I tend to other people’s homes as I do my own. I see to repairs and ensure that my clients aren’t getting ripped off by their pool or gardening service and that any domestics in their employ possess green cards. For the vacation rentals, I screen potential renters. I’m also the soul of discretion. Recently, after I’d noticed several tampons missing from a previously sealed box of Tampax at the Millers’ house while the wife was out of town, I replaced it with an unopened box so she wouldn’t find out her

husband was cheating on her. “What did Bradley have to say?” Ivy brings me back into the moment.

“He wanted to know what I was doing for an encore.”

She chuckles. “My kind of guy.”

“He’d feel differently if a *fatwa* was issued against me. On the other hand, we’re talking about a guy who isn’t bothered by the fact that his parents hate me.” I take a swig of my iced tea, washing away the bitter taste in my mouth at the mention of Joan and Douglas Trousdale.

“There are worse things.” Ivy’s tone is light, but I can see something is troubling her. Hers is the kind of face that shows emotion like a barometer shows changes in atmospheric pressure. “I had dinner with Rajeev’s parents last night,” she explains in response to the questioning look I give her. “Remember I told you they were coming for a visit?” Her boyfriend’s parents live in Mumbai.

“Right. So how’d it go?”

“Good,” she reports in a flat voice. “They were nice.”

“You don’t sound very happy about it,” I comment before remembering who I’m talking to. “Let me guess. They don’t have their hearts set on their son marrying a suitable bride of their choosing.”

She makes a wry face that tells me I guessed correctly. “They were totally modern, not at all what I expected. They *adored* me, to quote Rajeev.” She looks panicked all of a sudden. “Oh, God, what am I going to do if he asks me to marry him?” Which to my mind isn’t a matter of *if* but *when*.

Rajeev is crazy about her. He’s also a catch. He could be a Bollywood star with his looks. More importantly, he’s sweet natured, funny, smart, and successful—he earns a six-figure income as a software designer. None of which I point out because Ivy has no desire to marry. She’s turned down two marriage proposals already. One from the fellow artist she dated a couple years ago, and another before that from her boyfriend in college. I temper my response. “I think you should be open to the possibility that it’s not the worst thing that could happen.”

She groans. “It’s not as if we haven’t talked about it. He knows how I feel.”

“Exactly. You’re in love with him.”

She doesn’t dispute this, though you’d never guess to look at her she was a woman in love. She lapses into silence, winding a stray curl around her finger as she stares out the window. When she brings her gaze back to me, her expression is weighted with the doubts and fears I know she’s feeling. “You think I should marry him.” It’s an accusation rather than a statement.

“I didn’t say that. But I think you should keep an open mind.”

It all goes back to her mother, in my opinion. Dr. Ladeaux sold her medical practice in Seattle and ended her marriage to Ivy's father to move to Malawi, where she runs a free clinic in a remote village. Ivy, who was twelve at the time, was left in the care of her dad and grandmother. She's always acted like she was totally fine with her mom's decision. *She's doing important work saving lives*, Ivy would always say in her defense. But I know from having lost my own mom at an early age how a thing like that can shape you. Or warp you.

She nods slowly, saying, "I'll try."

"Just promise not to pick a bridesmaid's dress that makes me look fat."

She growls in response and tosses her wadded napkin at me.

## CHAPTER THREE

After I leave Ivy's, I drive across town to meet with Shondra Perkins, director of the Trousdale Senior Center, with whom I have a 3:30 appointment. Shondra didn't say why she wants to see me, but I assume it has to do with my brother, Arthur, who volunteers at the center. What did he do this time? Argue out loud with the voices in his head? Share one of his crackpot conspiracy theories? Inform one of the old people at the center, where he teaches computer skills, that his or her pacemaker was picking up alien transmissions from outer space?

Arthur has been doing much better since his most recent stay at the puff—insider-speak for psychiatric facility—and although I would like to believe he's turned a corner, that his current meds are the magic cocktail, or that his mental illness has lessened with age as can sometimes happen, I know better. Arthur is schizoaffective. A cross between schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, it has him subject to both delusions and manic phases, which come and go, usually without warning. He can be fine one day and obsessing over something that exists only in his mind the next: listening devices planted in his walls by the CIA or top-secret government missions for which he's been recruited to create a software program. But like I said, he's been on an even keel lately, so maybe I'm worrying needlessly. Maybe there's a benign reason Shondra wants to see me. I'll know soon enough.

The Trousdale Senior Center is located to the south of town, in an area far removed from the quaint charms of the historic district and dominated by office buildings and medical complexes. I take the old coast highway, which is slower than the freeway but more scenic. The road curves past cliffs, from which cypress trees lean leeward like grizzled mariners braced against storm winds, and ocean vistas that are indeed worthy of a film location. Of the properties that front the ocean, no two are alike, funky older cottages stand beside beautifully restored Victorians and contemporary homes like the ones you see in *Architectural Digest*. I used to love showing those properties when I was a broker, not only because of the wow factor, but because there was something for everyone—a reflection of the community itself. Driving past Paradise Point, I see the seal-like figures of surfers in wetsuits dotting the waves. A man carrying a ratty backpack ambles alongside the road. At the beach shuttle stop, several teenage girls in cutoffs and bikini tops loiter by the snack bar, purposely ignoring the boys who appear to be checking them out.

I round the bend at Dolan State Park, and I'm treated to views of the ocean to the west and the wetlands to the east. Sailboats cut graceful swaths out at sea, and ducks paddle amid the tall reeds of the saltwater marsh. The weather is

unseasonably warm for the beginning of June. I'm tempted to join the beachgoers splashing in the surf. I keep a gym bag in the back of the Explorer, packed with a towel and swimsuit, for just such impulses. But duty calls. Like it or not, I am my brother's keeper.

Fifteen minutes later, I pull into the parking lot of a two-story clapboard structure, white with green trim, that has a vaguely Ethan Allenish feel, like a midprice chain hotel masquerading as a bed-and-breakfast. Conveniently situated between a medical complex and a Rite Aid, the senior center is named after the late Leon Trousdale, Bradley's grandfather and my mother's former employer. Leon donated the money to have it built. It galls me whenever I see the sign with his name, because we all know now he wasn't the man he pretended to be. But I also know good can come of evil, and this place has been good for Arthur since he started volunteering here. He's more like the confident, quick-witted brother I remember from when we were growing up.

Inside, the door to Shondra's office stands open. She rises from behind her desk to greet me as I enter. "Tish, it's good to see you. Thanks for making the time. I know it's the middle of your workday."

Shondra is in her fifties and on the heavy side, but she carries her weight well. She always dresses as though she is the keynote speaker at a convention. Today she's wearing a gold-and-black houndstooth blazer paired with a black pencil skirt, an outfit that complements her ebony skin. I feel frumpy next to her in my jeans and sweatshirt. "Everything all right?" I ask as we shake hands.

"See for yourself." She motions toward the interior window opposite her desk that looks out on the large, airy common room. My gaze travels past a pair of elderly men playing chess and three ladies practicing some sort of dance routine to where my brother sits at the computer station, as erect as Captain Kirk at the helm of *Starship Enterprise*, instructing his current students, eight women and one man. I watch them lean in as he demonstrates something on his computer. I'd expected to find him behaving strangely or sitting alone staring into space, and it comes as a profound relief to see him holding his own, commanding the respect of people twice his age.

"My brother, the rock star," I remark, smiling.

The director chuckles. "He's especially popular with the ladies. Have you met Mrs. Sedgwick?" She points out a petite, henna-haired woman who's pressed in more closely than the others. From this distance, she doesn't look like a senior citizen. In contrast to the other ladies, who are dressed in leisurewear and sweats, she wears four-inch black patent-leather heels and a chevron-pattern wrap dress that shows off her figure. I bet she still turns heads even at her age. *My brother's for one*, I think when they exchange a private smile, after she's whispered something in his ear.

“Arthur’s made a real contribution around here,” Shondra goes on. “We’re lucky to have him.”

I whip my head around to stare at her. “You mean you ... you don’t want him to leave?”

Shondra looks surprised before she seems to realize where I’m coming from. She hastens to set me straight. “Leave? God, no. I wish I had four more like him. Some of those folks don’t get out much.” She gestures toward the cluster of mostly gray heads bent toward Arthur. “Now they can Skype with loved ones and surf the Web, and they don’t feel as isolated. All because of Arthur.”

I blink back tears. “Wow. I’m ... I’m glad it’s going so well.”

“I confess I had my doubts at first, given his ... challenges. But it’s worked out better than I had hoped. And I know from talking to Arthur, he feels the same way.”

It occurs to me that one reason my brother has flourished here is because he’s not always the craziest person in the room. Some of regulars at the center are in the early stages of dementia; others have cognitive impairment. I watch him come to the aid of a tiny, white-haired woman who’s staring at her screen in confusion, cupping the mouse as gingerly as if it were an explosive device. He speaks calmly to her and puts his hand over hers to guide the mouse until she gets the hang of it.

“He’s certainly in his element,” I agree.

“I’d like to offer him a paid position. That’s why I asked you here, Tish. I thought I should discuss it with you first.”

“You’re offering him a *job*?” It’s all I can do not to shriek with joy.

She nods and smiles. “If you don’t think it’d be too much for him. He’d be working five afternoons a week, instead of three, to accommodate all the people who’ve signed up for his classes.”

“I’ll have to run it by his psychiatrist, but I don’t imagine he’ll have a problem with it.” In fact, it was Dr. Sandefur who’d suggested Arthur might benefit from volunteer work. “Personally, I’m all for it.”

“I’m afraid we couldn’t offer much in the way of salary.”

“Not a problem.” I explain about Arthur’s SSDI benefits, which restrict how much he can earn in supplementary income. We chat a few minutes more before I take my leave. I promise to get back to her as soon as I’ve gotten the green light from Arthur’s psychiatrist.

On my way out, I stop to say hello to Arthur. He peels away from a heavysset, platinum-haired woman in a purple pantsuit who’s complaining in a loud voice that she can’t find the cursor and hurries to meet me as I walk toward him.

“Tish, what are you doing here?” he asks, frowning.

I'm struck by how handsome he looks. He wears a blue-striped Oxford shirt and pressed khakis instead of the baggy sweats he slops around in at home. His shaggy brown hair is styled with product except where it curls over his ears. You'd never guess this was the same Arthur who once assaulted a Greenpeace volunteer whom he'd mistaken for a CIA operative. "I was in the neighborhood," I lie.

He eyes me suspiciously behind his black-framed Clark Kent glasses. "I'm fine. Everything under control." He speaks in a low voice as if to a social worker doing an assessment.

"So I see. I'm not here to check up on you," I assure him. "And I'm not staying. I have to get back to work."

"Okay. ... Good-bye, then." He catches himself and says in a nicer voice, "Can we talk later?"

"I'll stop by after work to pick up your laundry." Arthur doesn't own a car and the nearest Laundromat is some distance, so I do his laundry whenever the coin-operated machines at his apartment complex are on the fritz. "We can grab a bite to eat, if you'd like. I thought we'd try that new pizza place."

"Could we make it another night?" He's suddenly having trouble making eye contact. "I, um, have this ... thing."

I can barely contain my surprise. Arthur rarely goes out in the evenings unless it's with me, or Ivy if it's the three of us. He usually stays in playing video games or writing computer programs while consuming giant bowls of Honey Bunches of Oats. His only friend is a fellow computer geek named Ray Zimmer, whom he met in an online forum. But if he had plans with Ray, wouldn't he have said so?

Before I can press for details, I'm distracted by the sight of a petite figure hurrying toward us, the henna-haired woman who was glued to Arthur's side a minute ago. "You must be Arthur's sister," she greets me, extending her hand. "I've heard so much about you, I feel as if I know you. I'm Gladys Sedgwick," she adds belatedly when it becomes clear I'm not equally familiar with her.

"Tish," I introduce myself, wondering why Arthur hadn't mentioned her to me. I know only what I learned from Shondra, that she's a wealthy widow whose late husband, Lloyd Sedgwick of Sedgwick Savings and Loan, left an endowment to the center in his will. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Sedgwick." The emerald on her ring finger catches my eye. It's the size of a cocktail onion.

"Gladys, please. I'm ancient enough as it is," she says in the tone of a woman who's used to being told she doesn't look her age. Her blue eyes sparkle in a fine-boned face with few wrinkles, and her porcelain complexion suggests she was a true redhead before she started dyeing her hair the color of a red-velvet

cake. “Arthur talks about you all the time. I was hoping we’d have a chance to meet.”

I smile. “Did he have anything nice to say?”

“He said you used to stick up for him at school.”

“True. I gave this one kid who was bullying him a black eye.”

“I hope he learned his lesson,” she replies staunchly.

“Yeah, be nice to kids with big sisters who have mean right hooks.”

Gladys chuckles, and Arthur says pointedly to me, “I thought you had to get back to work.”

“You act like you’re in a hurry to get rid of me. Worried I’ll embarrass you in front of your new friend?” I tease. His face flushes crimson, and I realize, to my dismay, I’ve done just that—embarrassed him.

“We don’t want to keep you. Art has told me how busy you are,” Gladys says, coming to his rescue. “You must have your hands full looking after all those homes.” *Art?* No one ever calls my brother Art; he hates that derivative. And why is she acting like they’re more than teacher and student?

Arthur directs a look of pained appeal at me.

“Later, dude.” I kiss him good-bye, putting him out of his misery, and he slips away to head back to his post.

“We’d be utterly lost without him,” Gladys says, walking with me to the door. “Some of us had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the digital era. It helps to have a teacher who explains things clearly, and who never loses patience.”

“He’s a good guy,” I agree with understated pride.

“He reminds me of my late husband. Such a dear man. Fifty years, and never a harsh word.”

“Sounds like you had a good marriage.”

“We did. Not a day goes by that I don’t miss him.” She sighs wistfully.

“Must get lonely.”

“Yes, but it helps to stay active. That’s what I told my granddaughter, Lexie, when she lost her husband two years ago. I urged her to hang on to their cattle ranch in Montana when she was thinking of selling it. Life doesn’t end when you bury your husband, I told her. You’re only thirty-five. She took my advice, though I’m sure there are days she wishes she hadn’t. Cattle ranching isn’t for wimps!”

“You don’t look old enough to have a grandchild who owns a ranch,” I remark.

She beams at the compliment, twinkling up at me like a shiny ornament from a low branch of a Christmas tree. “You’re only as old as you feel. In my mind, I can still turn somersaults.”

I wonder if she sees herself as someone in whom Arthur could be romantically interested. *Is he?* It occurs to me he must get lonely from time to time. He hasn't had a girlfriend since Amanda, his college sweetheart who broke up with him when he first started acting crazy. Was it so hard to believe he could be attracted to the well-preserved and young-at-heart Gladys?

"We go power walking in the mornings," she says as we're saying our good-byes at the door. "You should join us some weekend. Once around the park, and breakfast afterward at the Bluejay Café." I'm about to beg off, imagining it to be some senior-group activity, when she adds, "Arthur and I would enjoy the company, and you and I could get to know each other better."

I'm speechless. *Power walking?* Since when does my brother, who avoids all forms of exercise and who smokes cigarettes, go power walking? And why is this the first I'm hearing of it? I recall how evasive he was when I'd asked about his plans for this evening. Did he have a date with Gladys?

"I'd like that," I reply when I've found my voice. I would sooner walk over hot coals than go power walking in my free time—it's less strenuous, and blistered soles would give me an excuse to put my feet up—but I'm taking her up on the invitation, because I need to find out what the deal is with Arthur and his henna-haired hottie.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I do the math as I drive north on Highway One to my next stop. Gladys Sedgwick has a granddaughter who's thirty-five, a year older than my brother, which means Gladys has to be at least twice Arthur's age. My head swims thinking about it. Maybe I'm making too much of an innocent friendship, but my brother has a way of getting into situations that fall under the heading of *Weird Shit That Doesn't Happen to Normal People*. And it always ends the same way: a call to Dr. Sandefur, a packed bag, and a stay at the puff. I can only pray this isn't one of those situations.

Fifteen minutes later, I arrive at the Chens' Asian-themed split-level, in the residential country club of Paso Verde. It's the primary residence of the owners, but they're frequently out of town, which is why they need a property manager. Currently they're in Beijing where their export firm is headquartered. I do my walk-through and feed the koi, which are the size of puppies and snap greedily at my fingers as I sprinkle pellets into the pond. By the time I lock up, it's dark out. I swing by my brother's place on my way home and find his bag of dirty laundry inside the door but no Arthur. I catch a faint whiff of an expensive scent that I recognize as Chanel No. 5.

A perfume a wealthy older lady would wear.

Sleep is slow to come that night; the eventful day has my mind churning. The following morning when my alarm goes off at the usual ungodly hour, I have to pry myself out of bed. Yawning, I make my way down the hall to the kitchen, drawn by the aroma of coffee. A fresh pot greets me each morning when I get up, thanks to the programming feature on my coffeemaker. I'm pouring some steaming brew into a mug when the thump of the cat flap on the back door signals the return of my tomcat, Hercules, from his nocturnal prowls. He pads over to sit at my feet, meowing.

"What, you think you're the only one with problems?" I say, looking down at him.

I named him Hercules because he's a badass, all brawn and slinky stripes. I bet he thinks he's all that with the ladies, but I had him neutered when I took him in as a stray several years ago, so there's only so much trouble he can get into. (Though judging from his torn ear, he's fought his share of battles.) He continues to meow as I mix a bowl of cat food. Leaving him to it, I sit down at my 1940s red Formica dinette to savor my coffee and one peaceful moment of the day. The kitchen of my Craftsman bungalow, with its period details, is a reminder of an era before the invention of the handheld devices that make me

accessible whenever a toilet overflows or a coffeemaker goes kaput or some genius has the bright idea of taking a bubble bath in a Jacuzzi.

Fifteen minutes later, after I've finished my coffee and showered, I'm headed out the door. The sky is lightening above the rooftops of the older homes that line my street. The air is cool with the fog that rolls in most mornings in early summer. It's too early for any of my neighbors to be out and about; the only sound I hear is that of breaking waves. I live two blocks from the ocean, which is the other reason I bought my bungalow. So I can fall asleep each night to the lullaby of the sea.

I drive to the Voakses', and I'm relieved to find the ants haven't retaken Hamburger Hill. Next, I head over to the Mastersons' condo, by the yacht harbor, where I replace their old broken toaster with the new one I picked up at the Sears in Harborview Plaza, and make sure the stash of porn magazines belonging to their nineteen-year-old son, who's home from college for the summer, is tucked away where Esmeralda won't come across it while she's cleaning—she spends enough time praying for lost souls as it is. At the Willets' Cape Cod, I see that the gophers have been at the tubers again. I replenish the supply at the garden center, then it's on to my next stop, the Belknaps' shingled cottage on Cliff Drive, where the morbidly obese lady who lives next door waddles over to complain about the renters who were sunbathing in the nude. I wonder what she'd say about my having bared my boobs to a perfect stranger, a devout Muslim at that, in the Middle East.

I'm tempted to stop at Casa Blanca, if only to make sure the house is still standing, but I don't normally drop in at my vacation rentals unannounced when they're occupied, and what if Delilah's home? She might think I'm some creepy fan who wants to be her new BFF. Besides, if anything really bad had happened, like the house burning down or a flood from a burst pipe, I would have been informed by now. I leave a message on her voicemail instead.

Two days later, when she still hasn't returned my call, I give in to the gnawing feeling in my gut and head over to Casa Linda Estates to see what's what. Driving south on Highway One, I consider the many faces of Delilah Ward. There's the seemingly down-to-earth woman I met. The spoiled diva who'd driven me crazy with her long list of requirements. The grieving widow shown on the cover of *People* magazine, her head bowed in grief at her husband's memorial service. The actress who starred in the teen slasher pic that rocketed her to stardom and who was later nominated for an Emmy for her role in the HBO original series *Hard Rain*.

The movie Delilah is filming in Cypress Bay is a remake of *Suspicion*, the 1941 picture starring Cary Grant and Joan Fontaine about a wife who suspects

her new husband is out to kill her. It's titled *Devil's Slide* after the famously treacherous stretch of Highway One south of San Francisco. Delilah was signed, for the role played by Joan Fontaine, after she blew the competition out of the water with her screen test. I'm sure she'll rock the part. I'd seen her in enough roles to know how talented she is. She's that rarest of creatures: the hot blonde from central casting who can act. What remains to be seen is whether or not she was putting on an act with me.

It's 11:00 a.m. when I pull up to the gates at Casa Linda Estates. I wave my key fob to activate the gate at the entrance, and as it swings open, another vehicle, a black Escalade, glides past me in the opposite lane and through the gate at the exit. I take notice only because it has tinted windows; you don't see many of those around here. I imagine it belongs to one of the movie people who's been to visit Delilah Ward, but I give it no further thought as I wind my way through quiet streets lined with Spanish colonials and Mediterranean-style villas, driving at a crawl due to all the speed bumps, which I'm convinced outnumber the children, dogs, or ducks in the gated community. Ten minutes later, I arrive at Casa Blanca. Easily the most impressive property on the cul-de-sac, the four-thousand-square-foot villa boasts a barrel-tile clay roof, a columned arcade that forms a dramatic entry to the house, and decks that look out on the ocean in back.

The massive front door is made of Brazilian hardwood with raised panels carved in a Mayan design and fitted with a wrought-iron pull. I ring the doorbell, and after I've waited long enough to conclude that no one is home, I use my key to let myself in. I see no sign of either Delilah or her dog, but I'm relieved to find the house spotless. Floors mopped and carpets vacuumed, furniture polished, the granite countertops in the kitchen gleaming. Clothes tumble in the dryer, and I'm reminded that I still have my brother's laundry, which is washed and folded in my SUV except for the red Stanford hoodie that I'm wearing. It must have fallen out of Arthur's overstuffed laundry bag before I took his clothes in to launder them. I discovered it this morning while I was on my rounds and put it on after my own sweatshirt got soaked as I was changing a water filter.

I step through the French doors that open onto the patio. The early morning fog has burned off, and the sky is blue with fluffy clouds skimming overhead. The swimming pool glitters with reflected sunlight. I notice the side gate is open. Delilah must have taken her dog for a walk and neglected to lock up. I'm walking over to secure it when I notice a blond, bikini-clad woman lying face-down on one of the chaises by the pool. Delilah Ward, as I suspected, I see when I draw closer. She appears to have dozed off. I'm thinking I should wake her before she gets any more sunburned but I'm hesitant to do so. I know from

the confidentiality agreement her assistant had me sign how fiercely she guards her privacy. She might get angry that I let myself in.

Finally, I decide I have a moral obligation, if only to prevent her from looking like a lobster when filming starts. I come to an abrupt halt as I'm crossing the patio when I notice her backside isn't the only thing that's red. There's a pool of blood beneath the chaise and her hair is bloodied. Had she fallen and hurt herself? That happened to me once before I got sober. I woke one morning to find my pillow bloody and a bump on my forehead from a fall I'd taken the night before that I had no memory of. Delilah's injury, however, looks more serious than mine was.

My heart is pounding as I rush to her aid. *Please, God, let her be okay.*

That's when I see the bullet hole in the back of her head.

Buy [Swimsuit Body](#) now!