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USA Today bestselling author Catherine Cowles has had her nose in a book since the time she could read and finally decided to write down some of her own stories. When she's not writing she can be found exploring her home state of Oregon, listening to true crime podcasts, or searching for her next book boyfriend.

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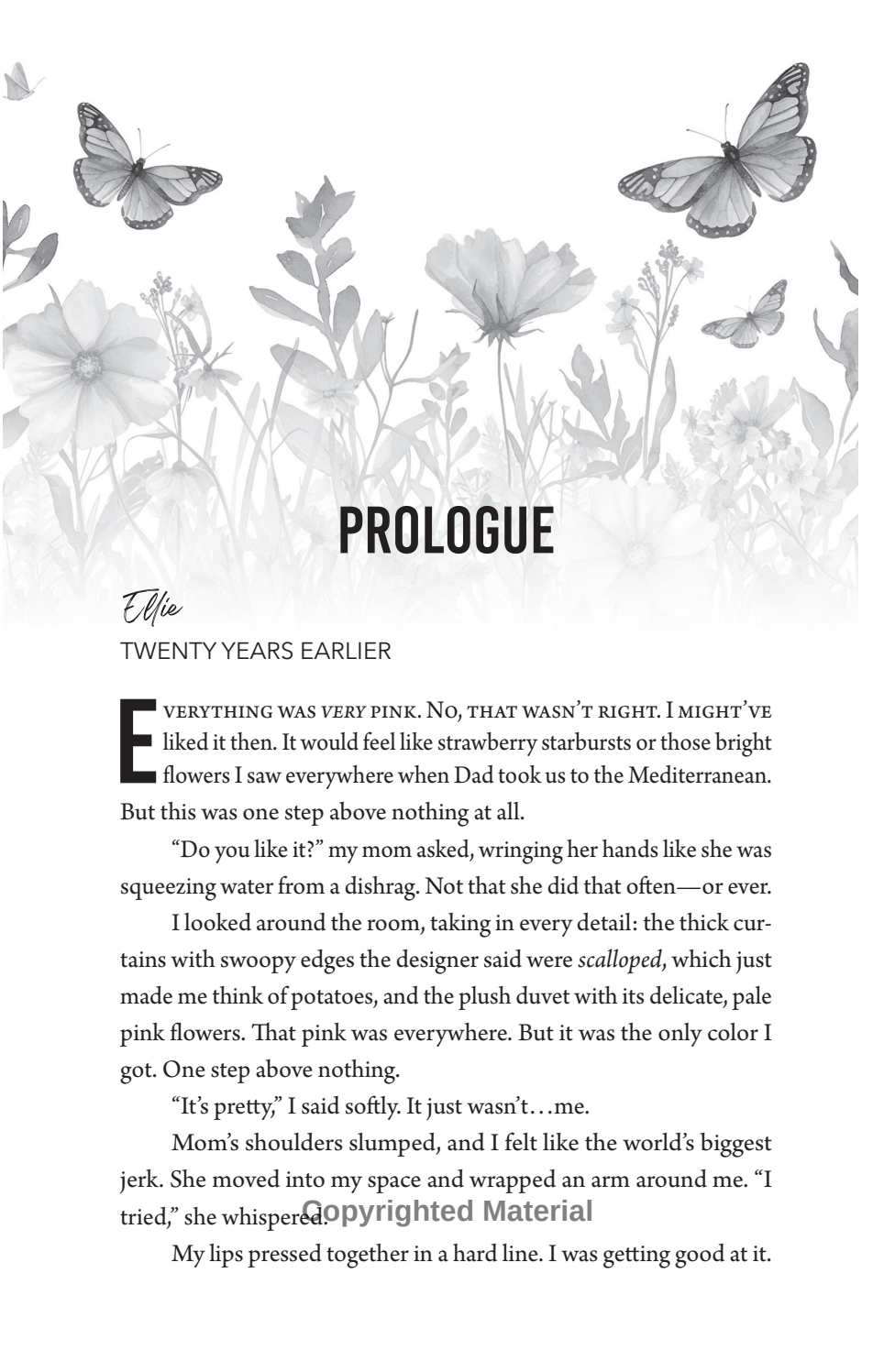


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FOR EVERYONE STRUGGLING TO BE PERFECT.
ALL YOU NEED TO BE IS YOU.
THAT'S WHERE THE MAGIC IS.

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The background of the page is a light, monochromatic illustration of a garden. It features several large, five-petaled flowers, possibly cosmos, with long, slender stems and leaves. Interspersed among the flowers are several monarch butterflies in various stages of flight. The overall aesthetic is soft and naturalistic, rendered in a light gray or sepia tone against a white background.

PROLOGUE

Ellie

TWENTY YEARS EARLIER

EVERYTHING WAS VERY PINK. NO, THAT WASN'T RIGHT. I MIGHT'VE liked it then. It would feel like strawberry starbursts or those bright flowers I saw everywhere when Dad took us to the Mediterranean. But this was one step above nothing at all.

"Do you like it?" my mom asked, wringing her hands like she was squeezing water from a dishrag. Not that she did that often—or ever.

I looked around the room, taking in every detail: the thick curtains with swoopy edges the designer said were *scalloped*, which just made me think of potatoes, and the plush duvet with its delicate, pale pink flowers. That pink was everywhere. But it was the only color I got. One step above nothing.

"It's pretty," I said softly. It just wasn't...me.

Mom's shoulders slumped, and I felt like the world's biggest jerk. She moved into my space and wrapped an arm around me. "I tried," she whispered.

My lips pressed together in a hard line. I was getting good at it.

Tightening my mouth so all the truths I held inside didn't break free. Wouldn't spill out like oil polluting the sea. "It's okay."

When the designer asked what I wanted for my new room, I'd said rainbows. Dad had squashed that faster than I could blink.

"I'm not having that sort of ridiculousness in our home. That isn't the kind of thing someone of station uses in décor."

Home. That was the only ridiculousness. Nothing about this penthouse apartment with its views of Central Park was homey. I knew that much.

I'd been in places that felt like a home. My friend Kate's apartment in Brooklyn was full of chaos and light. Her artist mom let her *draw* on her bedroom walls. I wasn't even allowed to have a poster.

"I really like the window seat." That much was true. I broke out of her grasp, unable to hold my disappointment and her hurt at the same time. I crossed to the cushioned bench upholstered in the same pale pink flowers as my bed.

I'd wanted huge splashes of color in my room. The brighter, the better. But at least I still had my window.

When I leaned against the pillows and rested my head against the glass, I could see into the park—Linc's and my escape. Not that he needed it much anymore. He was a senior now, ready to escape and find his freedom. And I'd be here. Alone.

Mom followed me over to the window, staring out into the park as if she could find her freedom there, too. But she didn't venture out much anymore. As if it hurt too much to go.

Sometimes, it felt like she was fading in front of my eyes, turning into a ghost I could only see at certain moments.

Her hand sifted through my hair, strands that seemed to change color depending on the light. It was mostly light brown with hints of blond, but the light hit strands of red every so often. Mom called it *magic hair*.

"It's boring, huh?" she asked.

My brows rose in surprise as I looked up at her.

Mom's lips twitched the barest amount. You can be honest. There isn't a speck of real color anywhere. And my girl is rainbows."

Pressure built in my chest, and the sudden urge to cry hit me. Not because I was sad but because I remembered what it was like to feel like my mom *saw* me. Know she was on my side.

"I'm gonna spill something, and Dad's gonna get mad," I mumbled.

Mom's mouth pursed. "You know what? I think we need to mix it up a bit. I saw a rainbow comforter at a store a few blocks over. We'll get that and some rainbow pillows. I think it'll look great with the flower curtains and window seat."

"Really?" I asked, hope bleeding into the word. Mom *never* went against Dad's wishes.

Her pale green eyes, so similar to mine, sparked with a little more life, a hint of fight. "I think we should paint a mural on the wall. A rainbow over your bed."

My jaw went slack. "Paint a rainbow on the *wall*?"

A laugh bubbled out of her. "What? Afraid to get your hands dirty?"

I thrust my chin up. "Never." I wasn't like Dad, afraid to do things myself.

Mom's hands snaked out, and she tickled my sides. "Are you sure? You might get covered in rainbow splatters."

I shrieked, flopping back onto my bed as she tickled me in earnest. I rolled and writhed, trying to escape the attack. "I'm gonna splatter you with rainbows."

A chuckle sounded from the doorway, deeper than it had been even a year ago. When I caught sight of my older brother, he looked more like a grownup than a teenager. He'd bulked up from playing hockey in a local league—much to our father's chagrin—and had just a hint of dark stubble on his face. Kate's older sister, Angeline, told me his hazel eyes were *dreamy*. Gross.

"Threats in the form of rainbows. Watch out, Mom," Linc said, eyes gleaming.

Mom grinned at him. I hadn't seen that kind of smile in months. "I can take it." She straightened and pulled me to sitting. "We're going to paint a rainbow over Ellie's bed. Want to help?"

Linc's dark brows almost hit his hairline before a look of unease

flickered across his face. He covered it quickly, and an answering grin spread. "I'm in."

"The hell you are," a new voice boomed from the hallway.

It wasn't a yell, exactly. It never was. But the tone made my stomach churn because Dad's punishments were crueler and more clever than the typical stuff. He didn't spank or ground. He took the things you cared about most.

A class or club you loved. Access to your favorite friend or the library. Only for him to replace them with things he thought you needed to be an *appropriate* young lady. Stuff I hated. My life got a little smaller every time.

Dad's dark eyes flashed, and Linc moved instantly, stepping between us and him. That telltale muscle in Dad's cheek pulsed in a staccato beat, his dark gaze moving to Mom. "We discussed this, Gwyn."

Mom wrung her hands again, that nervousness bleeding back into her. But she didn't back down. "I know. But this room isn't really Ellie. She's six. She needs color, life."

The continued pulse in Dad's cheek was the only thing that gave away his anger. I'd gotten good at looking for it. It was my sign to run for one of my hiding spots.

As if Linc had read my mind, he held me tighter and moved closer to Mom...preparing.

One corner of Dad's mouth lifted in something that looked a lot like a lip curl a Disney villain would make. "So noble."

Linc's eyes flashed. "You don't need to be a dick just because your six-year-old has the audacity to be a kid."

Dad only took one step, but the power behind it had me sucking in a sharp breath. He glared at Linc. "I'm the one who's keeping you. Those clothes, your tuition, this *house*...it can all go away in a single second if I want it to."

Linc's jaw clenched, making sharp angles appear where more rounded curves had been.

"And you," Dad spat, turning to me. "I spend thousands of dollars redecorating your room and you want to ruin it with sloppy finger painting?"

My legs started to tremble. There were so many things I wanted to say. I hadn't wanted thousands of dollars spent on designers and fancy, stuffy decorations. I just wanted my room to feel like *me*.

"You're an ungrateful brat," he snarled.

"Philip," my mom said on a gasp as I started to cry.

"A *sniveling* brat, apparently," Dad muttered.

"Enough," Linc barked, lifting me into his arms.

I pressed my face into his neck, trying to hide the tears.

My father let out a sound of disgust. "She's weak. Just like her mother."

"Philip," Mom whispered. "Let's discuss this privately."

"Mom, don't," Linc said, his voice tight.

"It's okay," she assured him. But I heard the lie in her voice. I'd gotten good at that, too, hearing the way untruths turned voices just a little higher, tighter.

"It's not," Linc gritted out.

At least he was honest. Linc never hid what he was feeling. He let it play out on his face and in his voice and words.

"Take care of Ellie," she whispered, heading for the door, knowing Dad would follow.

As they stepped into the hallway, I heard his angry words. Mean ones that cut her down like vicious blows. Threats that made her bow to his every wish. Sometimes, he seemed worse than any villain in my storybooks. Because he was smarter, too. And the good guys never won.

The cruelty in Dad's voice only made me cry harder. Linc's hand moved over my back as he sat us on the edge of my bed. "It's okay, El Bell. Everything's going to be okay."

"It's not," I hiccupped, the words breaking through my sobs. "I shouldn't have said anything. It's my fault, ConCon. I should've lied better."

Linc muttered a curse. "No, you shouldn't have. You should say exactly what you think. What you feel. Fuck 'em if they don't like it."

My eyes went wide as I pulled back from my brother, settling next to him on the edge of the bed. "That was a bad one."

He grinned at me, but it was sad around the edges. "It was honest, though."

I rocked my feet against the floor, back and forth, again and again as I mulled over his words. "I hate them sometimes."

It was the worst kind of wrong: hate. Even hating my father, who could be so mean. But it was worse to feel that way about Mom. I wanted so badly for her to make it all stop, to take us away from the cold cruelty of this house and bring us somewhere with warmth, lightness, and air. A place I could breathe.

"I know," Linc said quietly. He curved his hand around mine and squeezed gently. "How about we make a promise?"

I looked up at him. "What?"

"That we'll never be like them."

I pulled in air as if I were drawing that vow into my very being. "We'll never be like them. Mean, or..."

"Not fighting for ourselves, for what's right," Linc said, his hazel eyes flashing a little more gold in the fading afternoon light.

"I wanna be strong. Like you, ConCon," I whispered.

Linc's expression softened. "You already are."



A ringing clawed at my ears, making me blink against the darkness in the bedroom. By the time my eyes were fully open, I wondered if I'd imagined it. But then the knocking began, followed by muffled voices.

I pushed up in bed, throwing off the stupid, pale pink comforter and sliding my feet into my slippers. I crept toward my door as if some invisible ghost might spot me out of bed and tattle to Dad. The voices got louder as I approached the door, and a shiver worked its way down my spine as my fingers closed around the glass doorknob.

I waited, listening, trying to make out the words. But everything was too muffled. I stayed there for a moment, my heart hammering against my ribs at just the thought of what I wanted to do. I closed my eyes and summoned my strength as I replayed the promise I'd made

with Linc earlier today in my mind. Ever so slowly, I twisted the knob and slid into the hall just as Linc's door opened.

His gaze cut instantly to me. "Go back to bed," he mouthed.

I shook my head and jutted out my chin. I was finding a little of the strength he had.

He let out a frustrated breath and then reached for my hand. We carefully moved down the hall, both aware that the wood planks might give us away if we stepped wrong. We tried to stay on the antique rugs that dotted the path.

I caught a few words as we approached the entryway. *Upstate New York. Bridge. Crime scene.*

A sick feeling slid through me, making me feel queasy and heavy all at once. I tried to fight off the nausea, but it distracted me enough that I stepped in the wrong spot. The floor creaked, and the voices went silent.

Dad stalked around the corner. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"I-I heard voices," I stammered.

"You guys weren't exactly quiet," Linc defended.

Dad ran a hand through his hair, giving it an unkempt look that was very unlike him. His jaw tightened, and that telltale muscle pulsed again. "Doesn't matter." His gaze moved from my brother to me and back again, a coldness creeping into every part of him. "There was an accident. Your mother's dead."



SEVERAL MONTHS LATER

I chewed the bite of pork tenderloin our chef had probably spent hours on and tried not to think about the little creature it had once been. The one time I'd told Dad I wanted to stop eating meat, he hadn't been thrilled. "You don't want to eat like a normal person, then you'll get bread and water in this house and nothing else."

I'd lasted three days. When I asked to eat with him again, he'd

served the rarest cuts of meat for a week straight and sat there until I ate every last bite.

But nights like tonight were easier. He was focused on files as he ate while I stared out at the glittering lights of the city and the park's lit pathways. I told myself stories about a little girl who discovered she was really a fairy princess and the royal court that came to rescue her from the evil human who'd kidnapped her.

I was getting pretty good at the stories. They were all I really had now. Dad had stopped letting me have playdates with Kate, Linc had told Dad to jump in the Atlantic and went off to Stanford instead of Harvard like Dad wanted. And Mom...she was gone.

A burn lit at the backs of my eyes. I missed her. I missed the little glimmer of hope that she'd take Linc and me out of here. Somewhere we could be free. Even if it never happened, at least I'd had the hope. Now, I had nothing at all.

"Eleanor." Dad's voice snapped out like a whip.

My spine jerked straight as I took a mental inventory of what I might've done wrong.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. He held up a piece of paper, but the sheet trembled, so I couldn't make out the words.

"W-what do you mean?"

"This." He slammed the paper down on the table, making the plates rattle.

Dad rarely let his temper show, so I knew I'd stepped in it. Whatever I'd done.

"I told you that you had two choices. The flute or the violin. A young lady does not play the saxophone."

I felt the blood draining from my head. The all-girls school I attended on the Upper West Side had a music program that started in second grade. We all got to pick an instrument. Everyone except me, apparently. But at the last possible second, I'd been a rebel. I'd been strong like Linc and picked the sax because it sounded cool.

I hadn't thought Dad would find out. It wasn't like he ever came to anything but the meetings with my teacher. He always

played the working-single-dad card. I'd heard him too many times to count.

But I should've known. He had eyes everywhere. He probably got weekly reports on my behavior from people at the school.

"Eleanor."

That tone. It instantly had sweat rolling down my back and my hands fisting in my lap.

"I'm disappointed in you."

My mouth went dry, and my legs began to shake.

"Clearly, you aren't ready for the responsibilities I've bestowed on you. The privileges."

A sick feeling took root in my belly. *What else is left? What else can he take away?*

And then he said it.

"Until you can prove that you are worthy of the privileges I bestow on you, there will be no more weekly chats with Lincoln—"

"Dad, no! Please!" The tears were instant, streaming down my face in angry torrents. It didn't matter that Linc was working two jobs to cover his tiny apartment or taking extra classes to try to finish early. He always made our calls.

My father's cold look had me snapping my mouth closed. "He's already a bad influence on you. Overly emotional. Rebellious. I won't stand for it."

All the best parts of me were things Linc had instilled in me. Things he'd fostered. Because he was often more father than brother.

I'd have to pack those things. Hide them from the world until it was safe to take them out again.

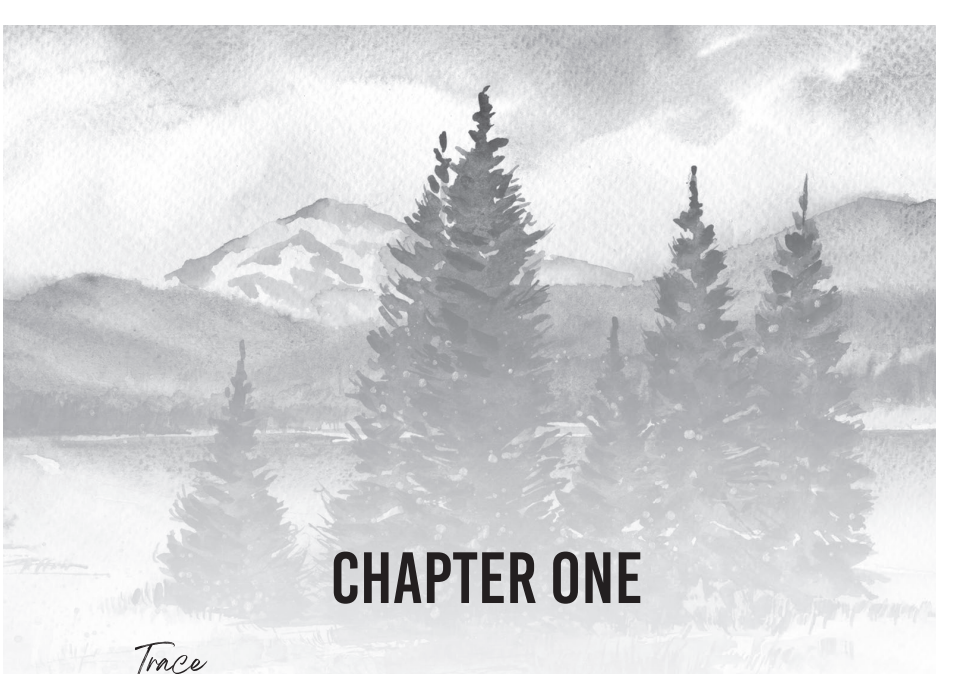
"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'll do better. I just...please don't take him away, too."

My father smiled then. Like when he won an especially brutal round of racquetball or closed a business deal. Because he knew he'd won. "I'm glad to hear that, Eleanor. Now, tell me. What will it be, flute or violin?"

I stared at the plate of half-eaten food, knowing I'd have to finish or risk hellfire for that, too. "Whatever you think is best."

Dad's grin only widened. "I've always been partial to the flute. Violin can be a little shrill, don't you think?"

Some part of me knew I answered. That I'd played the part he wanted me to play. But the rest of me? I buried it deep so no one could ever steal it from me again. The only problem was that *I* didn't have it either.



CHAPTER ONE

Trace

DAAAAAADDY.” KEELY’S VOICE CUT THROUGH OUR HOUSE LIKE a heat-seeking missile. “My toothpaste exploded.”

I didn’t move for a second, just stared at the wall before I pinched the bridge of my nose in that spot just below my brow bone where headaches loved to form. Everything hurt. Whether from sparring with my foster brother, Kyler, or tackling a perp behind The Soda Pop after he tried to snatch cash out of an open register, I wasn’t sure. Both options made me feel old.

“It’s really everywhere.”

The amused wonder in Keely’s voice had me pushing to my feet. As cute as my kid was, she could leave destruction in her wake. I strode down the hallway, adjusting my empty gun belt as I moved. But I froze as I stepped into the doorway.

It looked like a murder scene, not a kid’s bathroom. Red goo was *everywhere*. The sink, the mirror, and all over said kid’s face.

I stared at her for a long moment. Her long, brown locks were in haphazard pigtails she’d attempted to tackle herself. Her green

eyes, a couple of shades lighter than my own, looked up at me with a hint of wariness.

That flicker of uncertainty spurred me into action. "You just had to have the strawberry flavor, didn't you."

Keely broke into a fit of giggles, just as I'd hoped. "I dunno what happened. I just squeezed, and *BOOM!*" She threw her hands wide, making more red goo hit the walls.

I tried not to wince at the mess. "Gentle squeezes, remember?" She sent me a sheepish grin. "I forgot."

I chuckled, grabbing her pink washcloth dotted with strawberries. "Bet you won't next time."

"Proolly not," she mumbled as I ran the cloth under the water.

I dabbed at my daughter's face, trying to get her clean while glancing at my watch. Five past eight. *Damn.* I scrubbed faster.

The thought of being late ground at me. Logically, I knew it wasn't the end of the world, but it reminded me too much of growing up. Of the time before I went to live with the Colsons. When I'd gotten to school hours past starting time, hungry and in stained clothes a size too small.

That would never be the case for my kid.

"Daaaad, too scratchy," she complained.

"Sorry, Keels." I instantly softened my movements, trying to get every sticky ounce of red gel off her. Laying the washcloth on the sink, I lifted and deposited her in the hall so she wouldn't step in the mess. "Arms up."

Keely instantly shot her hands in the air. I fought a laugh as I pulled her T-shirt covered in tiny rainbows over her head and handed her the toothbrush from the counter. "Go brush your teeth in my bathroom, then pick out a new shirt."

"Aw, man. That one's my favorite," she complained.

My lips twitched. "You want your friends to think you miss your mouth when you're eating jelly and toast?"

Her little nose wrinkled adorably. "Noooo. Do I have to use your gross mint toothpaste?"

"Mint isn't gross."

"It burns, and it tastes like a plant from Grams's garden."

I shook my head. "Lucky for you, I stocked extra strawberry in the hall closet. Just be careful."

"Yes!" She shot both hands in the air again and did a little dance down the hallway.

I laughed, but as I turned back to the bathroom, a groan replaced the sound. I glanced at my watch again. Five minutes. I could handle that. I'd become an expert in mess cleanup at record-breaking speed.

Pulling open the cabinet, I grabbed some paper towels and cleaning spray and got to work. As I cleaned, I realized the red toothpaste was leaving pink stains behind everywhere. It really did look like a crime scene.

My back teeth ground together as I scrubbed harder. My kid wouldn't have a bathroom with stained tile. I'd have to tackle it with bleach tonight.

I did the best I could with the time I had, wiping up the worst of the mess. I straightened as that heat-seeking missile cut through the air again.

"Daaaaaddy! It exploded again."

I dropped my head, pinching the bridge of my nose and rubbing the spots where pressure was building. I didn't make a habit of cursing, not in front of others, and especially not in my daughter's presence, but there was only one word that would do right now.

"Fuck."



Downtown Sparrow Falls still bustled with foot traffic as I turned toward the sheriff's station, but it wasn't quite as busy now that we'd hit early October, and tourist traffic was waning. The rock climbers, mountain bikers, and whitewater rafters seeking out Central Oregon's beauty would be replaced by skiers and snowboarders once the snow hit. But there was usually a lull in the fall that let all of us locals enjoy the peace of our town.

Turning into an open parking spot, I turned off the engine just as my phone dinged. I grabbed the device from my cupholder and took in the alert on the screen.

Kye has changed the name of the group to Trace's Bloodbath.

I scowled at the screen, and my fingers typed out a message.

Me: *I was just asking if anyone knew how to get stains out of tile, that's all.*

I should've known better than to ask my siblings for help. They loved to roast me on a good day. Most of us might not be related by blood, but that didn't mean the seven of us weren't like any other siblings. Kye was the ultimate shit-stirrer, though.

Kye: *I always knew you had murderous tendencies under that rule-following facade.*

Rhodes: *I'm framing this photo. Or seeing if Lolli can make it into diamond art.*

My scowl deepened at my sister's text. She'd come to live with the Colsons at age thirteen after losing her family in a fire and was particularly fond of our grandmother—a woman infamous for creating inappropriate gemstone paintings. This one wasn't nearly dirty enough for her.

Me: *That picture of my bathroom was shared in confidence.*

Fallon: *I'm pretty sure Keels got toothpaste on the ceiling.*

If I'd thought Keely's bathroom was bad, it had nothing on mine. And I'd had no chance to clean it before I left to drop her at school. Just the thought of going home to that had me twitchy.

Me: *Pretty sure it's worse than your glitter bombs.*

Fallon: *Nothing is worse than my glitter bombs. That's why I hold all the power.*

My sister was the kindest, gentlest human being and had the most empathetic heart. But she had a creative vengeful streak. Once you crossed her, there was no going back. The combination made her

perfect for her role as a social worker with Child Protective Services. But the fact that she went into volatile situations wasn't easy for any of us.

Kye: *Stay far away from me with that devil's breath.*

Fallon: *Depends, are you going to follow me on my home visits AGAIN?*

Kye: *If you go after dark to bad neighborhoods, I sure as shit am.*

My back teeth ground together. Fallon was determined to stand on her own, sometimes to her detriment. It drove Kye and me crazy, but him especially. The two shared a bond that went beyond words. When Kye came to live with us at sixteen, raging at the world and the horrific situation he'd come from, she'd been the only one who could reach him.

Fallon: *Then prepare for my can of whoop-ass.*

She dropped a glitter explosion emoji in the chat, and I knew Kye would be paying for his latest protective stunt.

Me: *If you jerks aren't going to help me, I'm going to work.*

Shep: *Watch out, he said the J-word. Might as well be an F-bomb. We're all in for it.*

Me: *I hate you all.*

I switched the chat to silent, noting that I hadn't heard from our siblings Arden and Cope this morning. Cope was up in Seattle, back to hockey training, his fiancée, Sutton, and her son, Luca, making the trip with him. And Arden was likely holed up with her fiancé, Linc, or lost in a painting or sculpture. But I still typed out quick texts to make sure all was good.

Making sure all was good with my siblings on a daily basis was a compulsion, and I knew it. But most of us had come from rough circumstances, making our way into the system through loss, neglect, or abuse. Even Nora Colson's two birth children, Cope and Fallon, had

been through their share of heartache, losing their father and brother in a car accident at a young age.

It was a reminder that none of us made it out of this life unscathed. And recent events only made that more evident. The thought had twitchiness surging back to life. The urge to call the school just to check on Keely was strong, but I fought it back and climbed out of my SUV.

Striding toward the station's front door, I appreciated the slight chill in the air. After a summer of record temps, everyone was ready for fall. As I stepped inside, a man in his mid-twenties looked up from behind the desk with a grin. "Morning, Sheriff."

"Morning, Fletcher," I greeted. "Anything on fire today?"

"Just the mountain of paperwork from your arrest last night. Nice tackle, by the way."

I cracked my neck, trying to relieve some of the leftover pain from the move. "I'm getting too old for this stuff."

Fletcher shook his head, making his light brown hair flop over his eyes. He looked like a quintessential college quarterback without a care in the world. "Never."

I scoffed. "I'm thirty-six, not twenty-six. Practically geriatric for law enforcement."

"Whatever you say, Sheriff."

I waved him off. "I'm gonna go fill out that paperwork and probably ice my back."

I headed through the bullpen, the familiar din of various voices filling my ears. Some stopped conversing to say hello, others just gave me a chin lift. Will Wright pretended he didn't see me at all, as if that were some sort of power play. The deputy was power-hungry, and that sort of thing made an officer dangerous. But so far, he hadn't done anything I could fire him for.

"Hey, Sheriff," Beth Hansen greeted as she balanced an egg sandwich in one hand and a phone in the other.

"Morning, Beth."

"Left a sandwich on your desk."

"Thanks," I muttered. I'd managed Keely's breakfast this morning but not my own.

"Kiss ass," Will muttered.

Beth's eyes cut to him. "If you weren't such an ass, I'd get one for you, too. But it's hard for a zebra to change its stripes."

Frank Smith let out a guffaw at his desk as he patted his stomach. "Mine tastes mighty fine, Wright."

I shook my head and moved toward my office. I didn't have the energy to referee their antics. Besides, if I knew one thing for sure, it was that Beth could hold her own. And she wouldn't take kindly to me stepping in on her behalf.

Entering my office, I came up short when I saw my friend and second-in-command, Gabriel Rivera, sitting in a chair opposite my desk. "If you stole my breakfast sandwich, we're gonna have words."

Gabriel looked up, but there was no amusement on his face like I expected.

The grin slid from my face as I shut the door. "What happened?"

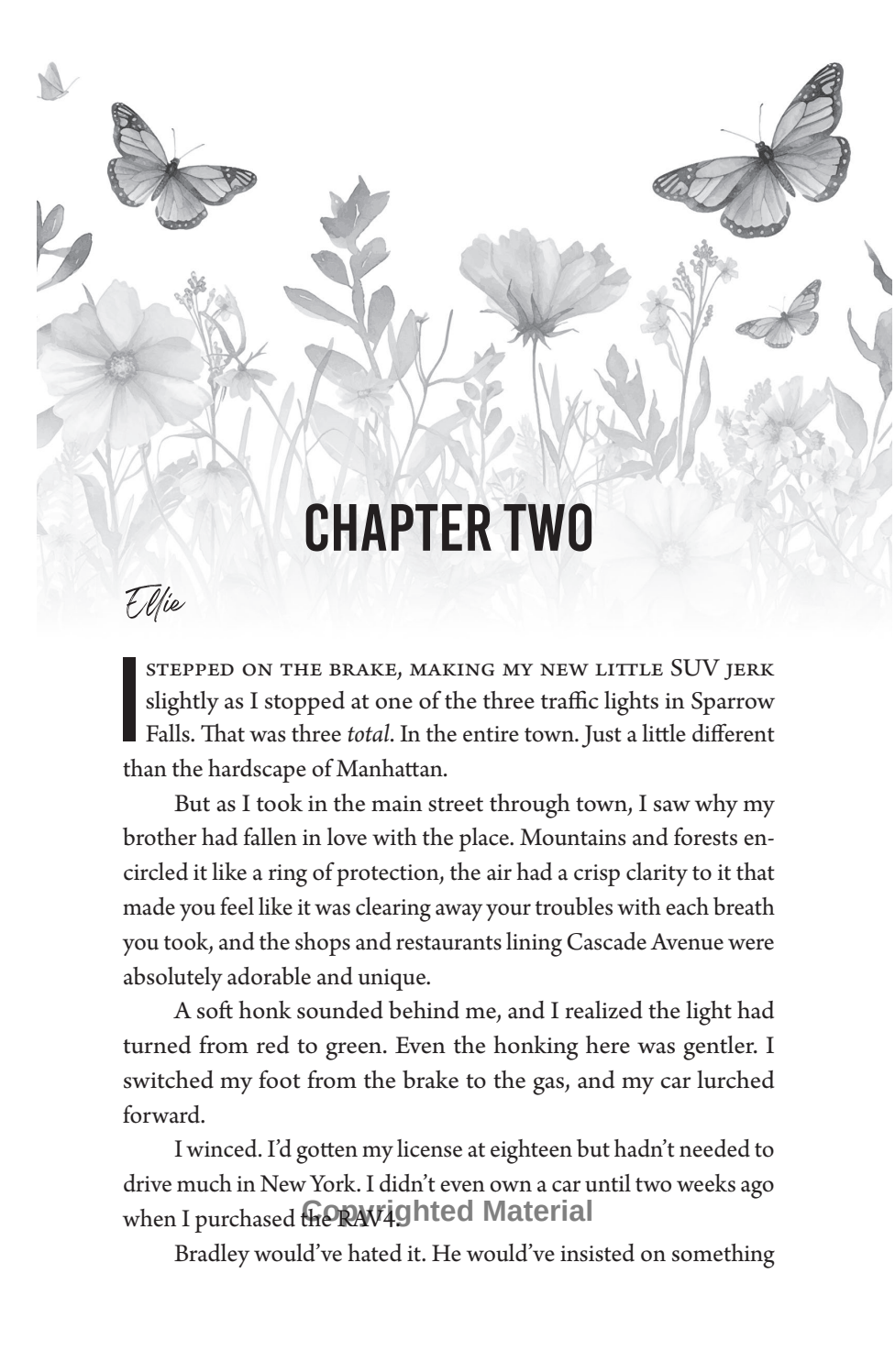
He stared back at me, giving it to me straight, like always. "It's your dad. He's out."

Blood roared in my ears, and my jaw clamped shut so hard it would be a miracle if I hadn't cracked a tooth. *Out*. Not out of the hospital or a day spa. Out of prison.

Where I'd sent him at the age of twelve.

A sentence he'd vowed to make me pay for.

Now, he would get his chance.

The background of the page is a light gray illustration featuring several monarch butterflies in flight and various wildflowers, including cosmos and daisies, with their stems and leaves. The overall aesthetic is soft and natural.

CHAPTER TWO

Ellie

I STEPPED ON THE BRAKE, MAKING MY NEW LITTLE SUV JERK slightly as I stopped at one of the three traffic lights in Sparrow Falls. That was three *total*. In the entire town. Just a little different than the hardscape of Manhattan.

But as I took in the main street through town, I saw why my brother had fallen in love with the place. Mountains and forests encircled it like a ring of protection, the air had a crisp clarity to it that made you feel like it was clearing away your troubles with each breath you took, and the shops and restaurants lining Cascade Avenue were absolutely adorable and unique.

A soft honk sounded behind me, and I realized the light had turned from red to green. Even the honking here was gentler. I switched my foot from the brake to the gas, and my car lurched forward.

I winced. I'd gotten my license at eighteen but hadn't needed to drive much in New York. I didn't even own a car until two weeks ago when I purchased the RAV4.

Bradley would've hated it. He would've insisted on something

understated but astronomically expensive. A top-of-the-line Mercedes or Maserati. Something in black or metallic gray.

At the dealership, I'd swapped white for Ruby Flare Pearl at the last moment. My hands had started sweating just saying the name. It felt like my first true rebellion in years. And it felt good.

My fingers wiggled on the wheel. I was still relishing the lightness of my left ring finger, where the diamond solitaire used to sit. The one that felt more like a chain than a promise of forever. The only remnant of it now was a faint tan line I was determined to erase, along with all memories of the man my father had all but picked for me to marry.

Heading down Cascade Avenue, I passed The Mix Up, my one-stop shop to feed my cupcake addiction; The Soda Pop, a diner with the best burgers around; and the sheriff's station. I forced my gaze away from that building, images of dark green eyes that saw too much filling my mind.

Not today.

Today was for new beginnings and the first place that would be mine alone. I'd gone from my father's penthouse to an apartment with Bradley, never getting to make a place *mine*. But that all changed today.

I flipped on my blinker and made a slightly too-wide turn onto a side street. I'd need some driving practice before the snow came. Thankfully, my new rental was close enough to town that I could walk if needed—or wanted. As I moved away from downtown, the streets turned residential with enchanting Craftsman houses on lots with yards that said the people who lived there took pride in their homes.

Making another turn onto Lavender Lane, I grinned. The houses were a bit more spread out on this street, the yards bigger. I'd looked at countless rentals. Apartments over shops, guesthouses on properties outside of town, and, finally, this one. It was perfect.

The house had been painted lavender, matching the street name. Nothing about it was cookie cutter, from the garden gnomes decorating the front yard to the stained glass hanging in each window. The outside was a riot of color that called to a part of me I'd shoved down for far too long.

Turning into the driveway, I pulled to a jerky stop and hopped

out, breathing in the Central Oregon air. I'd been to places with mountains before: Aspen, Vail, Tahoe, and even the Swiss Alps. But the air was different here, as if it had a scent all its own.

A horn sounded, and a familiar Range Rover pulled in behind my SUV. The passenger door was open before the engine was off, and a woman with dark hair and hypnotic eyes jumped out, her massive dog behind her.

Arden's eyes twinkled as she crossed to me. "Move-in day. How do you feel?"

I grinned at my brother's fiancée. "I'm excited. Ready to make this place my own."

"You shouldn't be jumping out of cars," Linc called, slamming the door to punctuate his point as he glared at Arden.

She just rolled her eyes. "Cowboy, the doctor gave me a clean bill of health a week ago. I can spar with Kye if I want to."

That was the wrong thing to say. Linc's scowl deepened, and his hazel eyes went stormy. "You still need to be careful."

"Do I?" she challenged.

"Vicious," he growled. "Don't make me tie you up."

Arden's lips twitched. "Promises, promises."

Linc's expression softened as he gently pulled her into his arms, grazing her temple with his lips. "Just want you to be careful."

A pang flared along my sternum as I crouched to give Brutus some scratches, anything to distract me from the longing taking root somewhere deep. My brother had found himself the best possible family. The Colsons were warm and accepting, the kind of people who always had each other's backs. And Arden and Linc needed that. Especially when my father had tried to tear them apart and ruin their happiness.

Brutus laid his big cane corso head on my shoulder, and I wrapped my arms around his gray body. He always seemed to know when I needed a little extra comfort and was the best at giving it.

"You need a dog," Arden said, cutting into my thoughts.

I looked up at her and grinned. "I do."

“Will Mrs. Henderson let you have pets?” she asked hopefully. “She had a couple of cats.”

The woman who used to live here had moved into assisted living after she fell and broke her hip. But she wasn’t ready to sell the place quite yet, allowing me to luck into this rental.

“She said I was welcome to as long as I pay the pet deposit.”

Linc studied me carefully. As Arden fully recovered from her injuries at the hands of my father and his minion, Linc’s focus had turned to me more often than I liked. He was too astute for his own good, and I was a horrible liar. Another reason I needed some space from him and Arden.

“Maybe you should wait a little bit. You’ve had a lot of change lately,” Linc said gently.

Break up with my fiancé? Check. Leave my well-paying interior design job? Check. Move across the country? Check. Watch my dad go to prison? Check.

“Sometimes, it’s better to just rip off the Band-Aid.” At least, I hoped it was. I wasn’t rocking in a corner. Yet.

Linc frowned. “Maybe you should stay with us for a little longer. And I’m putting a guesthouse in at the new build. You can have that all to yourself.”

“Cowboy.” Arden laid a hand on his chest. “Ellie’s an adult. She wants her own space. This is good for her.”

My brother’s frown deepened. “I just—”

“Love her. So, it’s natural for you to worry about her. But no one will mess with her in this house.”

My brows pulled together. “Why?”

“She just means Trace has you on his patrol officers’ drive-by list,” Linc said quickly.

Trace.

Arden’s brother and the most stunning man to ever see me at my worst. Those dark green eyes flashed in my mind again. So full of concern, with a healthy dose of pissed off.

“He doesn’t need to do that,” I gritted out as I pushed to my feet.

Arden looked from me to Linc and back again, then shook her

head. "I'm not getting between you two. El, we got groceries to stock your kitchen."

I grimaced. Just another new thing I'd be tackling in this era. Cooking. Living in New York meant restaurants on every corner and some of the best cuisine the world had to offer. Sparrow Falls had some delicious spots, but certainly not enough to sustain me seven days a week.

"She's going to burn the house down," Linc muttered as he pulled me into his side.

"I am not," I huffed.

Amusement danced in his eyes. "At least I learned how to boil water for ramen in college."

Because that was all he could afford. My brother had stood strong when our father cut him off. He'd gotten a scholarship and loans so he could go to the college of *his* choice. Not me. I'd toed the line, attending Columbia and living at home just like *Dad* wanted.

Anger surged. But not at my father, at *me* for going along with it. I'd wanted to study painting at Savannah College of Art and Design, but it was far too *hippie* for Philip Pierce's tastes. And I'd caved, not wanting to rock the boat. But I hadn't known I was kowtowing to a killer.

"Hey." Linc gave my shoulder a soft squeeze. "You okay?"

I lifted my gaze and forced a smile. "Peachy. Just thinking about what culinary masterpiece I'm going to serve you to make you eat your words."

Linc chuckled. "I'll believe it when I see it."



I set the final box in the living room and surveyed the space. As vibrant and quirky as the outside of the bungalow was, the interior was fairly...bland. Furniture in neutral tones with the occasional hint of color in the form of a throw pillow. It reminded me too much of my

bedroom growing up, as well as the apartment I'd shared with Bradley and the aesthetic my design firm favored.

Rocking from my toes to my heels, I started envisioning what the space *could* be. The colors and textures I could use to bring it to life. The only problem? I wasn't sure what I wanted my life to be. And I'd gone so long without color that I wasn't sure what my favorites were anymore.

Color wasn't the only thing I'd gone without. I'd missed out on so many things. But I could only change one thing at a time.

I slid my phone out of my jeans pocket and moved to one of the bags from the massive haul I'd gotten at a catchall store. Grabbing a portable speaker from the bag, I hooked up my cell and opened my music app. It only took a couple of minutes of scrolling before my lips tugged up.

Boy Band Bangers.

I hit play, and *NSYNC's *Tearin' Up My Heart* filled the room. My preteen heart soared.

Sayonara, silence.

I lost myself in unpacking everything I'd purchased for my rental over the past few days and the suitcases of personal items I'd brought from New York. I'd left behind a closetful of clothes Bradley was likely shredding out of spite.

It didn't matter. That wardrobe was just as bland as the walls of my apartment. I'd get new clothes that fit the me I didn't quite know yet.

By the time I finished getting the bulk of my new belongings settled, I was a starving, sweaty mess. But Backstreet Boys were keeping me going with *Everybody*. I swung my hips to the beat as I made my way to the kitchen.

Looking around the room, I tried to decide what the easiest thing to make would be. Definitely nothing that required steps and assembly. Maybe I could take a cooking class for that.

I crossed to the fridge, opened the freezer, and grinned. Arden knew me well. The compartment was filled to the brim with frozen

lasagna, bags of veggie stir-fry, and an array of other meals. But moving required one thing and one thing only.

Pizza.

Grabbing a veggie lover's from the top of the stack, I read the instructions. Seemed simple enough. I crossed to the oven that looked older than the Backstreet Boys bop currently playing from the speakers. I turned the knob to bake and set it to four hundred and twenty-five degrees. I quickly cut the pie out of the plastic wrapping and set it on the rack, which had certainly seen some use over the years.

After making sure the preheat light flashed on, I headed for the stairs. While the lot for my rental was large, the house was fairly small. It had two bedrooms and one and a half baths, with a tiny living room and office downstairs. But it was all I needed and more—because it was mine.

I snagged a fresh change of clothes from my room and headed for the shower. Turning on the water, I peeled off what I'd been wearing and left it in a pile on the floor. A smile that probably looked more than a little unhinged spread across my face.

I could leave my clothes in that pile all week if I wanted to. There'd be no arched eyebrows or wrinkled forehead and look of disgust from Bradley. No sharply barked command from my father that no daughter of his would be a slob. I could pick them up whenever I damn well pleased.

And as if *NSYNC could read my mind, *Bye Bye Bye* came on the second I stepped into the shower, seeping up through the floorboards. I belted out the lyrics as I shampooed my hair and washed my face. By the time I was ready to turn off the water, I felt better than I had in years, maybe ever.

Quickly toweling off and getting the excess water out of my hair, I reached for my underwear and grinned. They were totally ridiculous. An impulse purchase at one of the big-box stores I'd hit up in preparation for my move. I was pretty sure they were a kids' design, but I didn't give a damn.

The rainbows decorating them reminded me of what I'd wanted

to be back when I wasn't afraid to reach for it. I pulled them on and then reached for my bralette. The lace was a creamy white, but I'd find some brighter ones. There was a small boutique in town that might carry some things. If not, I'd order online.

Before I could dream up what colors to buy, an angry beeping blared so loud it resembled a tornado warning.

Do they get tornados in Oregon?

I didn't have the first clue, but I was already racing out of the bathroom. And that's when I smelled it.

Smoke.

"Shit, shit, shit!" I raced down the stairs toward the kitchen. Smoke billowed out of the oven in angry waves, and I tried to remember if this was the sort of fire I could put out with water. I spun around, trying to see if there was a fire extinguisher or a pitcher of some kind, as the blaring warred with the nineties pop.

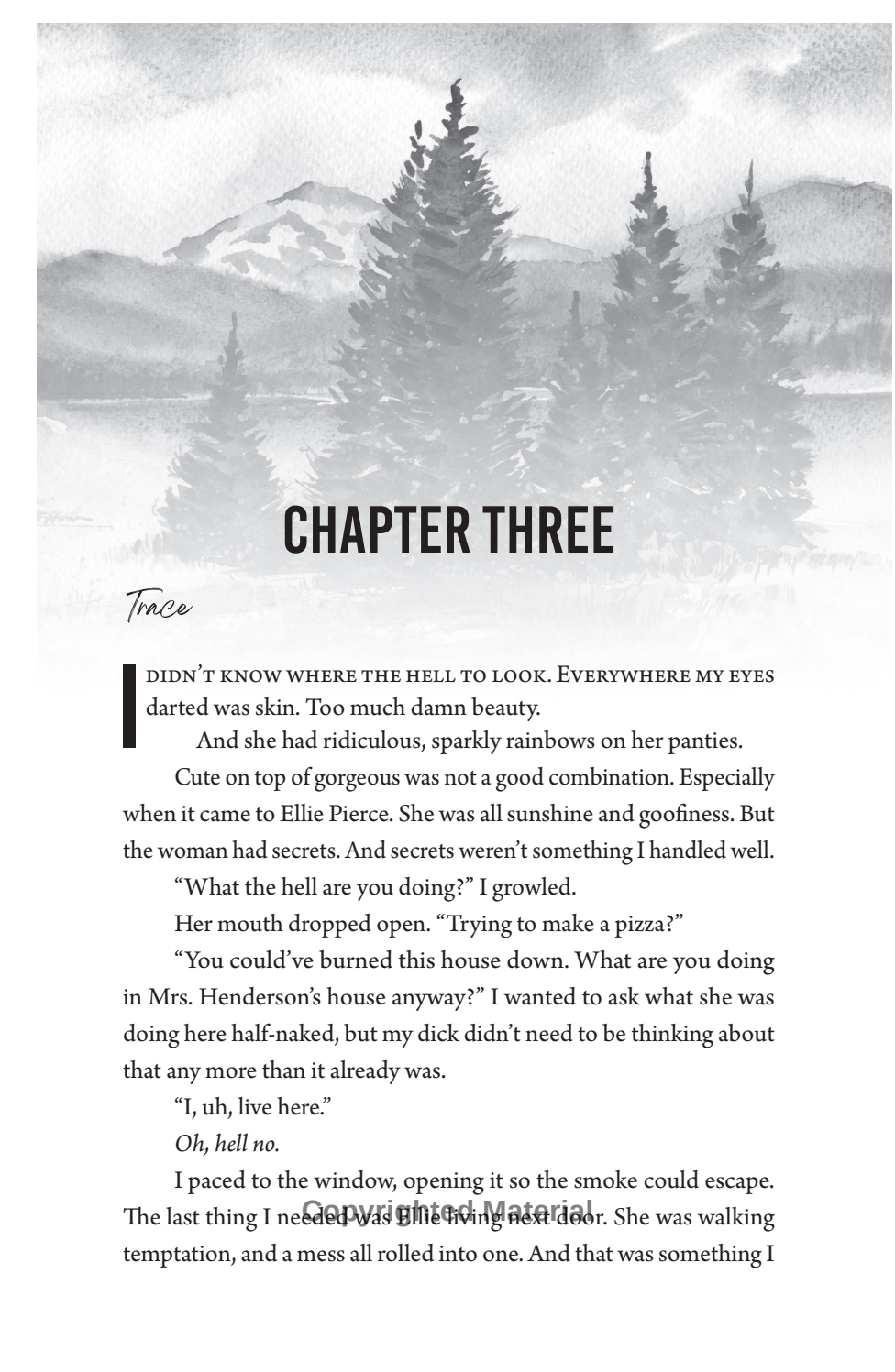
I swore I heard something else, too. A banging. But I was too worried about potentially blowing myself up to seek out the source.

I should have.

Because I was frantically opening cabinets one second, and the next, a dark god of fury was striding into my kitchen. I gaped as the man hauled open the oven and sprayed something inside to douse the flames.

As he straightened, I took in the details I couldn't grasp before. Dark hair still damp from a shower. Green eyes like the hues found deep in the forest. Scruff dotting a jaw so sharp it could cut glass. And a worn Mercer County Sheriff T-shirt, the kind that was perfect for sleeping in.

"Trace?"



CHAPTER THREE

Truce

I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE THE HELL TO LOOK. EVERYWHERE MY EYES darted was skin. Too much damn beauty.

And she had ridiculous, sparkly rainbows on her panties.

Cute on top of gorgeous was not a good combination. Especially when it came to Ellie Pierce. She was all sunshine and goofiness. But the woman had secrets. And secrets weren't something I handled well.

"What the hell are you doing?" I growled.

Her mouth dropped open. "Trying to make a pizza?"

"You could've burned this house down. What are you doing in Mrs. Henderson's house anyway?" I wanted to ask what she was doing here half-naked, but my dick didn't need to be thinking about that any more than it already was.

"I, uh, live here."

Oh, hell no.

I paced to the window, opening it so the smoke could escape. The last thing I needed was Ellie living next door. She was walking temptation, and a mess all rolled into one. And that was something I

needed to stay far away from when I had a daughter to think about. I needed safe, stable, and predictable. And Ellie was rainbow fireworks.

Fireworks and secrets.

Turning back around, I wanted to jab an ice pick into my eyes. Tan skin, pale green eyes, hair that couldn't quite decide what color it wanted to be, and curves for days. My dick twitched.

That was it. I was going to hell.

"For the love of God, put this on." I tugged off my tee and handed it to her.

Ellie flushed, the color deepening the apples of her cheeks and only making her look *more* beautiful. "Sorry, I, uh, just got out of the shower."

"You're making it worse," I groaned, pinching the bridge of my nose.

She tugged the shirt over her head. "Better?" Her gaze dipped to my chest, tracing lines I couldn't see. Information I didn't need.

"Not really," I grumbled.

Annoyance took over some of the embarrassment. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a grouch?"

"You're the one who almost set the neighborhood on fire."

"You're the one who broke into my house."

Heat flared because she had a point. "I have a key."

Ellie's eyes narrowed, a hint of fire slipping into her pale green irises. "Why do you have a key to *my* house?"

"Because I live next door."

Ellie's jaw went slack, and her eyes widened. "No, you don't."

Amusement replaced a little of my frustration. "Want me to show you the title?"

She let out a huff of air. "My damn interfering brother," she grumbled, moving around the kitchen in search of something.

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Linc insisted on touring every rental with me. He found something that wouldn't do for his little sister everywhere we went. Then he *happened* to hear about this one. But he just wanted me living next door to the sheriff." She snatched a set of oven mitts and a garbage

bag, moving toward the fire zone. "So-called drive-by route. You drive by it all right. On your way home."

My eyes narrowed on her. "Why would he want you living next door to me?"

Ellie slid out the burned-to-a-crisp pizza and tossed it into the trash bag. "That's a damn good question. You'll have to ask him."

Linc and Ellie's father had recently proven he was the worst of the worst, but he was in prison now, and they were out of his reach. Unless there was something else. I knew it wasn't the first secret Ellie was keeping. Just like I knew she'd lied when she arrived in town a few weeks ago with a black eye, saying she'd hit herself with a suitcase by accident.

My hands fisted on instinct, anger surging in hot waves. Everything about the faint purple beneath expertly applied makeup had reminded me of another time. One I'd do anything to forget.

"There something you're not telling me?"

Her mask fell into place so fast it nearly gave me whiplash. Gone were the frustration and hints of humor, and in their place was a nothingness I hated with every fiber of my being.

"Linc is overprotective. You should know that by now since your sister can't sneeze without him calling three doctors to give her a checkup."

That much was true. I'd had my concerns when Linc and Arden got together, unsure if she'd ever be ready for a relationship like that. But he'd turned out to be everything she needed.

"You in trouble?" I asked, watching for any flickers of a lie on that beautiful face. I might've been blind to that sort of thing in my past, but I wasn't now.

Ellie lifted her chin, the movement slight but telling. "What I am is exhausted."

A non-answer. Not a lie, but not the truth either. And that ground at me—the idea that someone might be messing with her. It wasn't any of my business, but I couldn't stop the urge to step in, help, and shield her from whatever was headed her way.

I opened my mouth to speak, but the smoke detector cut out,

finally signaling that the smoke had abated somewhat. But it didn't leave us in silence. Instead, it left us with some god-awful pop ballad about promises and lifetimes. "What in the actual—?" I stopped myself from cursing. "What is that?"

A little of the fatigue left Ellie's expression, and her lips trembled as if fighting a smile. "What do you have against the classic vocal stylings of *NSYNC?"

My face screwed up. "I think I'd take Arden's ear-bleeding metal over this."

"You can't tell me you've never jammed out to *It's Gonna Be Me*."

One corner of my mouth kicked up as I winced at an especially high note. "I'm more of a *Bye Bye Bye* man."

"You missed that one earlier. I did some epic shower singing to that bop."

Ellie. Singing. In the shower.

I'd be needing one of those soon. A very cold one.

Ellie turned, surveying the room and sighing. "I just wanted a veggie lover's pizza on my first night in a house that's all mine."

The sorrow in her voice hit me square in the solar plexus, and I wanted to fix that, too. "It's the oven. Mrs. Henderson hasn't used it in years. The local church brought most of her meals. Otherwise, she ate with Keely and me. The oven needs to be cleaned out before it's used."

Ellie stared at the appliance like it was her archnemesis. "I should've thought of that. It looked... well-loved."

I barked out a laugh. "That's the kind way of saying it."

"I'll get some oven cleaner tomorrow. And a whole bunch of rubber gloves."

"You should have someone come out and look at it. Make sure it's safe to use." I stared at her. Noticing how her hair soaked through the cotton of my tee, making the fabric cling to her. How the strands appeared so much darker than before. The urge to touch them, to know if they were as soft as they looked nearly took me out at the knees.

"I will." Ellie turned then, the sorrow from her earlier words now in her eyes. "Thanks for riding to the rescue."

“Just glad I was home.” I wasn’t always. The nights Keely was with her mom, Leah, I usually stayed late at the station to catch up on paperwork. The thought of Ellie getting caught in a blaze while alone had a sick feeling taking root in my gut.

She started for the door. “Tell Keely hi for me.”

That was my cue. It shouldn’t have been hard to leave. The kitchen reeked of smoke, and I was freezing without a shirt and the window open. But my feet felt like lead as I headed for the door.

“I will. She’ll be excited you’re her new neighbor.”

Ellie winced, and I knew she wasn’t sure about having me next door. My kid, on the other hand? Ellie and Keely got on like two peas in a pod and had since Ellie braided Keely’s hair at a Colson family dinner. That would only make things harder.

“Goodnight, Trace,” Ellie said, hovering in the entryway as she waited for me to leave.

Hearing her say my name was beauty and pain all at once. “Night, Blaze. Try not to start any more fires.”

I stepped out onto the front porch but waited until Ellie shut the door, and then I waited a little longer until I heard her turn the dead-bolt. When I forced myself to start walking, I pulled my phone out of my pocket. Tapping the contact I needed, I listened as the line rang.

“Hello, you’ve reached Firehouse Pizza. How can I help ya?”

I recognized the teenager’s voice instantly. “Hey, Steve.”

“Sheriff Colson, how’s it hangin’? Looking for another meat lover’s or a cheesy delight?”

I kept walking, even though a twitchy feeling had taken root in my limbs. “I’m actually calling in an order for my neighbor. You can put it on my tab, along with a twenty-percent tip. Veggie lover’s to 365 Lavender.”

“Someone finally rent Mrs. Henderson’s house?” he asked over the din in the restaurant.

“They did.” I knew he wanted more information, but I wasn’t about to give it to him. The last thing I needed getting around town was that I’d ordered pizza for the new woman in the house next door.

“Well, I’ll get that right in for you. Probably about thirty minutes or so.”

“Thanks, Steve.”

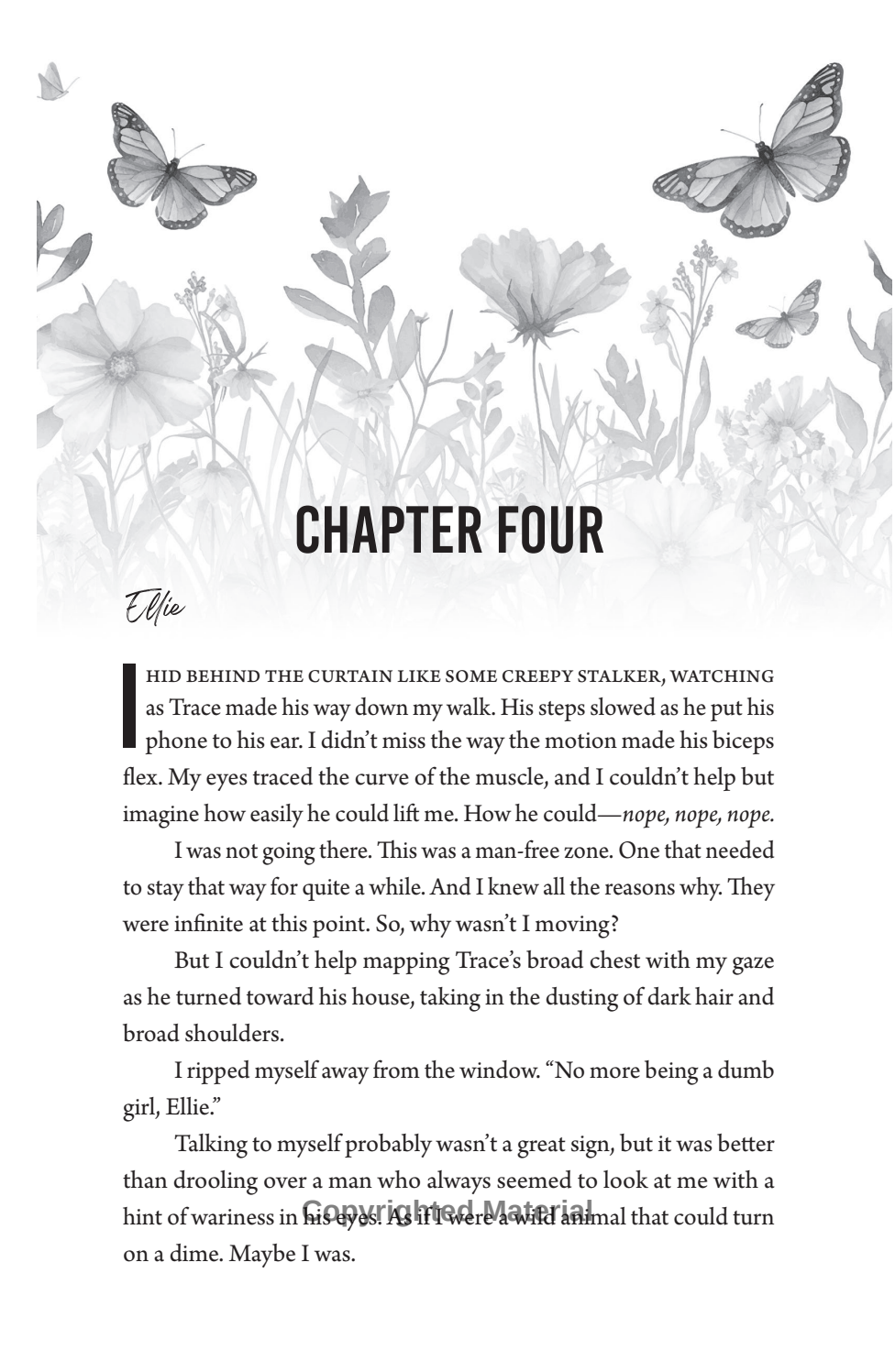
“No probs, boss man. I got your back.”

I chuckled as I hung up but couldn’t help glancing back at the purple house. I was an idiot for looking for flickers of movement in the windows. There weren’t any.

As I walked up my front walkway, the door flew open, and Keely stood there in pajamas with brightly colored hearts. I fought back my scowl. “Keels, what’s the rule about opening the door if you don’t know who it is?”

“I knew it was you, *Daaaaaad*. I looked out the window.” She giggled. “But you’re naked. What happened to your shirt?”

Wasn’t that the million-dollar question?

The background of the page is a soft, grayscale illustration of a garden. It features several large, five-petaled flowers, possibly cosmos, with delicate stems and leaves. Interspersed among the foliage are several monarch butterflies in various stages of flight, some with wings spread wide and others in mid-flutter. The overall aesthetic is gentle and naturalistic.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ellie

I HID BEHIND THE CURTAIN LIKE SOME CREEPY STALKER, WATCHING as Trace made his way down my walk. His steps slowed as he put his phone to his ear. I didn't miss the way the motion made his biceps flex. My eyes traced the curve of the muscle, and I couldn't help but imagine how easily he could lift me. How he could—*nope, nope, nope*.

I was not going there. This was a man-free zone. One that needed to stay that way for quite a while. And I knew all the reasons why. They were infinite at this point. So, why wasn't I moving?

But I couldn't help mapping Trace's broad chest with my gaze as he turned toward his house, taking in the dusting of dark hair and broad shoulders.

I ripped myself away from the window. "No more being a dumb girl, Ellie."

Talking to myself probably wasn't a great sign, but it was better than drooling over a man who always seemed to look at me with a hint of wariness in his eyes. As if I were a wild animal that could turn on a dime. Maybe I was.

As I strode toward the kitchen, a new scent cut through the smoke. I sniffed, trying to catch it. Sandalwood and...black pepper?

I pulled the neck of the tee I had on to my nose and inhaled deeply. The aroma nearly made me stumble. Earthy and real. Unexpected. So very *Trace*.

I instantly released my grip on the cotton. "Now, you're sniffing him?"

I was an idiot. I forced my feet to move deeper into the scent of smoke. That would burn out the witchcraft of Trace's cologne.

Donning the one pair of dish gloves I had, I got to work cleaning up what I could. The oven's interior would have to wait until tomorrow when I could get the proper supplies and call a repair person out to make sure the fire hadn't damaged anything important. I'd replace the range if I had to. The last thing I wanted was poor Mrs. Henderson knowing I'd almost set her house on fire the first night. Not a good look.

As I finished mopping the floor where the extinguisher goo had landed, my phone dinged, cutting into the pop tunes no longer feeding my happy buzz. I leaned the mop against the counter and headed for the living room. If Trace had tattled on me to my brother, I was going to egg his house.

Disconnecting my phone from the speaker, I stopped the music and opened my messaging app. The moment I saw the name at the top, my stomach sank. I tapped on the text, seeing the string of messages I'd left unanswered. They started with apologies, promises that it would never happen again, moving to petulant guilt trips, and finally anger.

Bradley: *You break off our engagement so you can move into a trashy house in the middle of nowhere?*

A chill skated down my spine, and my palms began to sweat. I suddenly felt far more exposed than I had standing in my kitchen with Trace in just a bra and underwear. I knew it was bait. Something to startle a response out of me when nothing else had worked.

I hadn't told Bradley where I'd moved, but it wouldn't be a

stretch for him to assume I'd gone to Linc. It also wouldn't have been the first time Bradley had put eyes on me. The driver he'd *gifted* me with in New York had reported my every move to my future husband. But when I caught sight of the email dossier, I hadn't said a word. Just played the good little girl and kept my mouth shut. No longer.

I wasn't about to let Bradley win. He'd already stolen too much from me. No, not stolen. I'd given it away. I'd become exactly what my father demanded of me and what Bradley expected of his future wife. I'd given up the pieces of me that made me who I was. Now, I couldn't even remember where I'd hidden them away.

My doorbell rang, making me jump and fumble my phone. I cursed as it hit the floor, part of me hoping it was smashed to bits so I could become one of those people who lived without one.

When I snatched it up, I saw that I wasn't so lucky. But as the bell rang again, I realized I might need to call 9-1-1. I unlocked the device and crept toward the door, hitting those three numbers on the screen, just in case.

"Who is it?" I called through the door.

"Firehouse Pizza," a youngish male voice called. "Got a delivery."

"I didn't order anything."

"It's a gift. From your next-door neighbor. Veggie lover's pie."

I stilled, a stinging sensation taking root in my nose. I carefully unlocked the door and opened it. The guy standing on my front porch looked no older than seventeen. As his gaze swept over me, stilling on my bare legs, I remembered what I was wearing.

I winced, heat hitting my cheeks. "Sorry, I, uh, wasn't exactly expecting anyone."

The teenager grinned. "Don't gotta apologize to me. Never gonna mind a beautiful woman answering the door in just a tee." One corner of his mouth kicked up further. "A tee that looks a hell of a lot like one of Sheriff Colson's."

Oh, crap. That was just what I needed. Some rumor that I was banging the sheriff getting back to Linc or the Colsons.

"It's not like that."

"Never is," the kid said, amusement lacing his words.