

## CHAPTER ONE



Eight hours earlier

**T**he rich aroma from the simmering homemade spaghetti sauce fills the kitchen. I dance in front of the stove to a song from an upbeat boy band playing on the radio—a musical group my daughter liked in high school. I sing along, “I am the boy of your dreams, girl,” smiling as I stir the sauce. Dipping a spoon into the bubbly liquid, I lift it to my lips, careful not to burn my tongue. Tilting my head, I scan the assortment of spices on the counter. It needs something.

My phone dings. I rush to the counter to retrieve the device. Only a news notification. I sigh and set the phone down, only to pick it up again. Staring at the screensaver photo, I touch my finger to my daughter’s smile. How long has it been since Emma texted me? How long since I saw her smile in person? I dial her number again, and my call goes straight to voicemail. How many messages have I left? A plop-plopping from the stovetop, followed by a loud sizzle, jerks me from my

reverie. I grab my wooden spoon and give the sauce a quick stir, turn the burner to low, cover the saucepan, and wait.

Several dogs bark in our little cul-de-sac, which usually means the mail has arrived. Looking out our kitchen window, I see the white mail truck drive away. I head outside to check the box.

The new neighbor waves at me from her front porch, and I return the gesture. Judging by her bright-pink high-rise shorts and matching racerback tank, she's returning from a run. A few wisps of hair have escaped her high blonde ponytail. The loose tendrils frame her youthful face.

"Mrs. Goodwin, wait," she calls as I turn to go back inside.

I am not sure how she knows my name. Maybe read it on our mailbox? I stop and she jogs over to me, sweat glistening on her forehead.

"Hi. I'm Olivia Piercy." She extends her perfectly manicured hand. "I moved in a few weeks ago." She points to her house across the street.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Sarah." I return the smile.

After I shift the mail to my left hand, we shake. Olivia releases my hand and points to a boy and a girl riding bikes around our cul-de-sac. "Those are my kids. Mia is six, and Liam is eight."

Liam's short brown hair is damp from pedaling his bike. He sports a red muscle shirt paired with black shorts. Olivia motions for her kids to join us, but Liam continues to ride his bike in circles, popping a wheelie off the curb each go-around.

Mia races her bike to us, then stomps on the brakes. Her bike skids sideways, almost throwing her off its purple banana seat. Once she regains her balance, she looks up at me and smiles. With her deep-blue eyes and thick, long blonde ponytail, she is a carbon copy of her mother, except for her two

missing front teeth. A mermaid graphic glitters on Mia's purple top.

Olivia wets her fingers with her tongue, bending down to rub dirt smudges from Mia's left cheek. The little girl giggles, then places her small tennis-shoe-clad feet on the pedals, setting the bike back in motion. Light flashes from her soles with each push.

Dave has been nagging me to clean out Emma's room. I wonder if Mia would like any of her *Little Mermaid* toys.

"Mommy, watch this." Mia attempts to pop a wheelie, but her tire barely leaves the pavement.

"Way to go, sweet pea." Olivia smiles and applauds.

The pride on Mia's face is reminiscent of toddlers I've seen throwing their hands in the air, thinking they are jumping high while their feet never leave the ground.

A large lump forms in the back of my throat as I watch the interaction between Olivia and Mia. "Enjoy them while you can," I say. "They grow up way too fast."

Olivia turns her attention back to me.

The threat of tears burns the backs of my eyes. I clear my throat. "My daughter is coming home today for a visit. Emma just finished her junior year of college. I've been cooking her favorite meal all day."

"Oh, how nice." Olivia smiles.

"Yes, I've missed her so much. It seems like only yesterday Emma was Mia's age, riding her bike while I watched from my porch." I gaze back at Mia while remembering a different little girl on a different bike. "Emma rode a neon-pink bike with silver flecks. She loved to clang the attached silver bell as she rode around our neighborhood. I'm sure the neighbors loved that." I laugh. "Her prized baby doll sat in a precarious position in the white wicker basket strapped on her handlebars." A wistful smile forms across my lips.

A loud beeping from the open kitchen door sounds. “Oh, no! My bread,” I exclaim, panicking. “I have to go.”

“Oh, okay.” Olivia’s voice drops, sounding disappointed. “Do you need help?”

“No, I’ve got it, but thank you for offering.” I pat her shoulder, then whirl back toward our house. “It was nice to meet you, Olivia,” I yell over my shoulder as I sprint up the sidewalk.

“Maybe we can visit longer next time?” she shouts behind me.

“That would be nice,” I say before shutting the kitchen door.

Once inside, I notice a sweet yeasty scent now mixes with the tomato-herb aroma. Lowering the oven door, I’m met with a loaf of wonderful golden goodness. Perfect. I didn’t burn it after all.

After slicing the bread and finishing the spaghetti noodles and sauce, I check the dining room. Crystal glasses sparkle under the chandelier. Porcelain china with delicate rosebuds adorn the table. Emma will inherit all the dinnerware handed down to me by my grandma once she’s married. Exhaling a satisfied breath, I smile at my efforts.

I check my appearance in the large antique silver mirror hanging above the buffet sideboard. I’m wearing the emerald silk blouse Emma bought for my birthday last year over a pair of white capris. She said the blouse matched my eyes. My shoulder-length hair is straight and sleek. It took a lot of product and a straightener to tame my unruly auburn curls. Emma likes my hair better straight. She’s blessed with her dad’s thick, slick ebony hair.

“Wow, something smells delicious.” Dave enters the living room. He stops in front of me. “You look nice.” He places a tender kiss on my cheek.

“Thanks.” I smile. “When did you get home? I didn’t hear the garage door open.”

“Just a few moments ago.” He scans our living room. “Looks like you’ve been busy. What is all this?”

“Wedding stuff.” I raise an eyebrow and fold my arms across my chest. “Remember? Emma’s coming home for the summer, so we can start planning her wedding.”

“I remember.” His body stiffens. Dave frowns as his mocha-brown eyes travel from the wedding invitations on the coffee table, to the bridal magazines strewn on the couch, to the box of pictures on the floor. His gaze lands on my wedding dress draped over the brown leather recliner.

His eyebrows draw together, forming grooves on his forehead as he continues to stare at the dress.

My mind races. The frown on his face is the opposite of what I was expecting. Instead of asking why he looks so sour, I walk over to the dress and hold it up against my chest. “I know Emma is taller than me, but a skilled seamstress can add some lace to the bottom to lengthen the gown.” Dave’s silence makes me uncomfortable. “Of course, the sleeves will need updating. Thankfully, puffy sleeves are not in style anymore.” I titter. “Maybe remove the lace around the neck.” Flustered, I shrug. “I don’t know what all it needs, but Emma and I will figure it out.” Carefully spreading the dress back across the recliner, I continue, “Can’t you see it, Dave? You walking Emma down the aisle in the same dress I wore at our wedding.”

Misty-eyed, I raise my gaze from the satin-and-lace gown to Dave, who remains as motionless as a stone statue, frowning. What is wrong with him? Does he not want Emma to get married?

After a heavy sigh, he asks, “Have you talked to Emma recently?” He runs his right hand through his salt-and-pepper

hair—a gesture he does when he’s worried. “Is this what she wants?”

Confused by his question, I counter, “Why wouldn’t she want this?” I wave my arms at the evidence displayed around us. “I want her to have her dream wedding.”

Dave gives another long, low sigh. “Are you sure it’s not the wedding of *your* dreams?”

My back bristles.

Biting my lower lip, I swallow hard. “This is our last summer with Emma before she graduates and begins her new life with Philip.” A painful hollowness sinks deep into my stomach. Tears build, but I continue to defend my reasoning. “Planning this wedding will give me time with her before she becomes Mrs. Emma Polk. It’s the last thing we get to do for her, Dave.”

He rubs the back of his neck, and his posture sags. His six-foot-three frame seems to shrink before my eyes. “You should have talked to our daughter first.”

I want to take his face in my hands and smooth the worry lines from his brow, but I resist. Frustrated, my body tenses. “Well, I would have if she would pick up her phone,” I reply in a biting tone.

Dave releases an exasperated sigh, then checks his watch. “I don’t have time to finish this conversation right now. There’s a lot more that needs to be said, but it will have to wait.”

“Oh, no, you don’t. What more needs to be said?” I throw my arms in the air. “Whatever you are going to say, Dave, say it.”

His face reddens. We stand toe to toe for what seems like an eternity. “We have a problem, Sarah.” The words tumble out.

My throat constricts. The sinking feeling I had earlier hits

the basement floor with a thud. My temples throb as I wait for him to explain. Images of Dave leaving me for a younger woman reel in my brain.

“Who is she?” I blurt.

“What?” His wild-eyed expression makes it clear an affair is not the problem.

My brain shifts with lightning speed, conjuring up another dreadful scenario. In a matter of seconds, I remember Dave saw his doctor yesterday for a checkup. With my brain in wedding overdrive, I forgot to ask how it went. “What did Dr. Jones tell you?” My voice is shrill, panicked.

“Sarah, calm down,” Dave says. “You’re letting your imagination run away with you again. I’m fine.”

I take a deep breath in and exhale, willing my heartbeat to slow to a normal pulse.

“Then what is it?” I grow impatient.

A car horn blasts outside, and he swivels his head toward the front door. His taxi to the airport has arrived.

“You can’t leave me hanging here,” I plead.

When he turns back to face me, his olive skin pales so that the dark circles under his eyes are noticeable. My heart goes out to him, but I can’t back down. I need him to finish what he started. “Please, Dave.”

He glances around the room uneasily, then his intense gaze lands on my face. His eyes bore into mine. “Your obsession with Emma.”

My mouth falls open and I take a step back. “You’re ridiculous. Obsession?” Why has he been stressing me out for the past few minutes when I have more important things to attend to? “She’s my daughter. I only want what’s best for her.” My chest heaves. “What kind of mother would I be if I didn’t take care of her?”

His face reddens again. “She’s not a little girl anymore.” His

scolding is loud, stern. “She’s a grown woman. She has her own life now, Sarah.”

“I know that.” I match his volume and tone. “But I’m still her mother.”

Dave throws his hands up. “Of course you are, but she doesn’t need you like she did when she was little. You need to take your focus off her and find something new to get excited about. Every day, you mope around the house, waiting and hoping she’ll call or come home. You need to make some friends, start a hobby, join a gym.” Then he says, with slow precision, “Get a life.”

My face stings from the imaginary blow across my cheek. I stand frozen. My gaze drops to the floor. I wish the thick carpet beneath me would become quicksand and swallow me up.

The taxi’s horn blasts again.

“Do you have my overnight bag packed?” His voice is so quiet, I almost don’t hear him.

Embarrassed and hurt, I point to the front door, keeping my eyes averted from him. His brown leather overnight bag sits in the corner of the entryway. He pivots to retrieve it, then throws it over his shoulder. “I have to go. I can’t miss my flight. I hate to leave this way, Sarah.”

I shrug, feigning indifference while mentally shrinking into myself.

He walks back to me and kisses my forehead. I keep my focus pinned to the second button of his shirt.

He exhales, then places his palm under my chin to lift my face until our eyes meet. “I love you.”

Tears well in my eyes.

Dave’s lips form a weak smile. “I hope you enjoy your time with Emma tonight.” He releases me, pivots abruptly, then strides out the front door.