

CHAPTER THREE



Not sure where to go, I drive up and down the side roads surrounding our town until the local diner’s sign with a lit-up arrow points to my left. My stomach gurgles. I haven’t eaten since breakfast. The parking lot is full, but I turn in anyway.

The scent of grilled burgers wafts through my open car window. My stomach growls louder. Once parked, I pull the car visor down and check the mirror. My eyes are red. The puffy skin underneath them, along with smudges of mascara streaking down my cheeks, has me frantically dabbing at my face with a tissue. Hunger pangs override my vanity. Maybe everyone inside will be too busy eating and visiting to notice I’ve been crying.

Shoulders back and posture straight, I sprint with long strides to the entrance. The bell attached to the glass door chimes when I enter, but thankfully, no one glances my way. The sign on a metal stand reads “Seat Yourself” in big, bold black letters. Before anyone notices me, I scuttle to a nearby booth and slump low into my seat.

A young waitress makes her way to my table with a menu and a glass of water in her hand. She looks familiar. Searching my memory, I picture a younger version of her running in a purple jersey. She was on the high school soccer team with Emma.

“Hi. Aren’t you Emma’s mom?” she asks with a sunny, youthful smile.

I divert my eyes to the menu she hands me, not wanting her to notice my red eyes. Then my conscience pricks. Not wanting to be rude, I plaster on a smile. Maybe she will only think I’m tired. “Yes, I am.” My chirpy voice sounds fake to my ears.

I had hoped to be in and out of this diner without engaging in small talk, but Emma’s old schoolmate wants to chitchat.

“How’s Emma doing?”

“Oh, she’s doing well,” I say in a happy singsong tone while feeling dismal on the inside. Before she has time to ask any more about Emma, I blurt out, “What’s the special?”

“Taco salad.” She points to the chalkboard menu on the wall.

I hand her the menu. “I’ll have the taco salad.” I add a quick “water is fine” before she can ask anything else.

She writes my order on her notepad, then walks off. Relieved, I check my phone. No missed calls or texts from Emma or Dave. Probably for the best.

A boisterous group of ladies sits in a large circular booth behind me. I crane my neck their direction, trying to eavesdrop on their conversation. Howls of laughter intertwine with words like “Caesar’s Palace ... gondola ride ... Cirque du Soleil.”

When the waitress places my food on the table, my memory clicks. Ashley. The waitress’ name is Ashley.

“Do you know the ladies behind me, Ashley?” I emphasize her name, praying my memory hasn’t betrayed me. She doesn’t

correct me, so I add, “They seem to be having a fun time together.”

“I don’t.” She bends closer to my face and whispers, “But I do know they are going on a girls trip to Las Vegas tomorrow. Doesn’t that sound fun?” She winks.

“It does.” When was the last time I did something fun?

The bell on the door jingles. Ashley leaves my table to greet the man and woman who are heading to a nearby booth. Thoughts of returning to my empty house have me picking at my meal. Even my appetite has abandoned me. After placing my napkin over my plate, I drag myself out of the booth to pay my bill.

More laughter spills from behind me, and pain tweaks my heart. They seem to be having the best time. Compelled, I turn toward the circular booth. Three women—seventy-ish, by my guess—sit with flushed faces. A wistful smile forms as I watch the group of ladies enjoying each other’s company. Dreading returning home, I do something out of character. I walk to their booth.

The conversation stops as they stare up at me.

Hot flames shoot up my neck. What am I doing? “I’m so sorry. I’m usually not this forward,” I say, flustered. “You see, I was at the cash register, and you ladies seemed to be having such a good time, and ...” I run my hands down my crinkled shirt to smooth out the wrinkles. “You’re going to think I’m crazy, but I felt drawn to meet you.” My pulse pounds as I wait for their reaction. Will they burst into more laughter or tell me to leave? Maybe both.

Neither happens. Instead, the woman with the tight gray curls says, “Well then, you must sit with us. We were just getting ready to order some pie.”

Dumbfounded, I stare like she has two heads, but she doesn’t seem to notice.

“I’m Agnus.” Her warm, pleasant voice slows my pulse. “These are my friends Bea and Delores.” Each lady nods at me as Agnus says their names.

“It’s nice to meet you all. I’m Sarah.”

Delores pats the seat next to her.

“I should go.” I push my purse strap to my shoulder but hesitate to leave.

Agnus’s warm brown eyes, made larger by her horn-rimmed silver glasses, rest on my face. “You look tired, Sarah. Have some pie with us. My treat.”

“Yes, please do,” Bea says in a deeper tone. Her lime-green polyester athletic suit reminds me of my elementary school gym teacher.

Delores pats the seat again. “Whatever you’re going through, pie always helps. At least that’s our motto.” They all laugh again, and she winks at me through her black rhinestone-framed glasses.

Taking a deep breath, I concede and slide into the booth beside Delores.

“Yay!” The ladies’ cheer causes several heads to turn toward us.

My face again heats from the attention while a blanket of warmth spreads across my heart. The tension in my shoulders eases as I listen to them. I’m thankful for the distraction from the events of today.

We place our pie orders and add coffee.

“We are in a pickle,” Agnus says as soon as Ashley leaves, and the other ladies nod.

Raising an eyebrow, I wait for Agnus to continue.

“We booked a trip to Las Vegas for four people,” she states. “But only three of us can go.”

“What happened?” I ask.

Each lady leans in, making our circle tighter.

“Our friend Irene was our fourth. She fell trying to put shingles on her roof and broke her hip,” Agnus explains.

“Why she was on her roof, I will never understand.” Delores purses her ruby-red lips.

“Don’t you ladies know what happened?” Bea lifts her cloth napkin to the side of her mouth to conceal her words from the neighboring tables. “Instead of getting a friend to help him fix her roof, her good-for-nothing son had Irene on the roof with him.” She smacks her palm on the table. A vein in her temple pulses.

“Well, it’s not all his fault.” Delores’s numerous bracelets clang and sparkle with each movement of her wrist. “Irene always thinks she’s younger than she really is—trying to do things she knows she shouldn’t be doing—acting like she’s twenty when she’s eighty-two.”

Agnus nods. Her gray curls jiggle.

“You know that’s true.” Bea nods her baseball-capped head.

“What’s worse, Irene has been saving for this trip all year, and now she can’t go. She tried to get her money back from the travel agency, but they said it was too late. They have a thirty-day no-refund policy. It’s a shame. I’m sure she could use that money for her medical bills.” Agnus tsks.

All three women stop talking, seemingly lost in their own thoughts, as Ashley unloads our desserts and coffees from her tray onto the table.

“I could buy the ticket,” I blurt out.

