

## { chapter I }

For seven years, Lexi Solomon had been as cold as the wind that raced down the mountain above her home. She was not ice-in-her-veins cold, or I'll-freeze-you-with-a-glance cold, but numb with the chill that came from being uncovered and abandoned.

Only the love of her daughter, a warm and innocent love that was so easy to return, had prevented her from dying of exposure.

At the back of the Red Rocks Bar and Grill, Lexi checked to make sure the rear stoop wasn't icy, then exited and pulled the kitchen door closed. The blustery elements had spent decades huffing and puffing on the backside of the local haunt with nothing to show for the effort but a tattered awning and a battered screen door. The stalwart cinder block, painted to match the russet clay dirt that coated Crag's Nest, was as stubborn as the snow that refused to melt before midsummer at this altitude. And it was only March.

At her throat Lexi clutched her ratty down jacket, the same one she had worn since high school, while she fumbled with the restaurant keys in her other gloveless hand. She'd forced her only pair of gloves into her daughter's coat pockets that morning because Molly had lost hers coming home from school.

Which could only mean she hadn't been wearing them. Chances were, Molly hadn't worn the gloves today either. Well, she was only nine. Lexi smiled at that and thought she might get them back. If only she could be a kid again, oblivious to weather and wet.

Lexi shoved the key into the cheap lock and turned it easily. That hamburger grease coated everything. Above her head a yellow bug light shone over a cracked concrete slab. Her tired breath formed a cloud in the night air and then a fog on the wire-threaded glass of the door.

It was 2:13 a.m. Thirteen minutes later than Lexi usually locked up, thanks to the frozen computer that she had to reboot twice before she could close out the cash drawer and lock the day's receipts in the safe. Thirteen minutes gone from the precious few she got to spend with Molly, curled up next to her in their one flimsy bed. Between Lexi's two jobs and Molly's school days, she figured they had an average of ninety-four minutes together, awake, per day. It wasn't enough.

Lexi closed the restaurant every Monday, Thursday, and Friday night. *Restaurant* was too generous a word for the greasy spoon a half mile off the main tourist drag, too far off to draw many out-of-towners. But the staff was familylike enough, and the locals were loyal and tipped fair, and the extra fifty dollars she got for being the last to leave three times a week didn't hurt. Every little bit put her and Molly that much closer to a better situation. A better home in a better part of town. A more reliable car. Warmer clothes.

Molly needed new shoes, and once Lexi got caught up on that past-due utility bill, she thought she'd have enough to buy the pair with sequins stitched onto the sides. Maybe for Molly's birthday. She'd seen her daughter bent over a picture of the shoes in the Sunday circulars left out by their roommate, Gina.

After jiggling the locked kitchen door for good measure, Lexi turned her back on the glare of the naked bulb and headed toward her Volvo. The sturdy old thing was parked on the far side of the sprawling blacktop, fender nosing a swaying field of tall grasses, because that was where the only operating lamppost stood, and Lexi was no idiot when it came to vacant lots and late-night lockups.

The wind cut through her thin khaki pants, numbing her thighs.

She fingered the can of pepper spray on her key chain as she passed the shadowy Dumpster behind the kitchen. A large man could squeeze between it and the trash can's cinder block cove easily enough. The dishwasher Jacob did this on his breaks to catch a smoke, because the manager wouldn't tolerate cigarettes, not even outside.

A dark form darted out, leaping over the long shadow of her body cast by the gold light behind. She flinched, then scolded.

"Scat, Felix." The resident alley cat carried something in his mouth. Lexi guessed a chicken bone, but it might have been a mouse. He jumped the wobbly wood-slat fence between the restaurant and the dry cleaner next door.

The grasses in the field, as tall as her shoulders, whispered secrets.

She stepped from the slab onto the asphalt lot. The spotlight over her dull silver Volvo, which tilted to the left due to a weak strut, went out for a second, then hiccupped back to life. It was only a matter of time before the lamp finally died, then weeks or months would probably pass before the property manager got around to resurrecting it. Each time she locked up, she found herself hoping the light would last one more night. She weighed whether she ought to start parking closer to the kitchen. Just in case.

Just in case what? Tara had been murdered in a bright shopping mall, in a bustling crowd. Maybe where a woman parked in the darkness of night didn't matter as much as she hoped.

Lexi's soft-soled shoes made an audible, squishy noise on the cold blacktop as she quickened her step, eyes sweeping the lot like some state-of-the-art scanner. Her keys sang a metallic song as they swung against the can of pepper spray. There was an extra can in the book bag slung over her shoulder. Another one in her glove box. A fourth buried in the planter outside her kitchen window at home, right by the front door. Lexi wondered for the millionth time how old Molly should be before starting to carry some in her backpack.

Glimpsing the dark glass of the car's rear doors, she wished again that

she had one of those key fobs that could turn on the interior lights from a cautious distance.

The parking lot light gasped again and this time faded to black. The steady yellow light behind her also flickered once and died, stranding Lexi in black air exactly halfway between the restaurant and car. She stopped. A second later, two at most, the light over the Volvo staggered back to relative brilliance.

She gasped. The thin air knifed her throat. The grasses had fallen silent, and the winds were as still as if God had stepped between them and the earth.

All four doors of her car were flung wide. Two seconds earlier they had been sealed shut, but now they gaped open like Lexi's disbelieving mouth, popped open with the speed of a switchblade, with the flip of an invisible lever, the flick of an illusionist's light.

A heavy hand came down on her shoulder from behind. Lexi yelped and whirled out from under the palm.

"Sexy Lexi."

Her hand was at her throat, her pulse pounding through the layers of the thin jacket, her breathing too shallow for her to speak.

A slim white envelope fluttered between the restless fingers of the man's left hand. A tattoo peeked out from under his T-shirt sleeve on the left, filling most of his upper arm. It was a set of keys, skeleton keys, hanging from a wide round ring.

He was middle-aged, sallow skinned, and his dark hair needed a trim. Oily strands flipped up in little curls that stuck out the bottom of a knit cap. The scrappy T-shirt looked thin across his narrow chest and sinewy arms, but he did not shiver in the low temperatures.

He said, "I half expected you'd be out of town after all these years."

Lexi's fright came off its startled high and settled into unease. She took a step back, glancing involuntarily at her car. Years ago, Warden Pavo had taken adolescent delight in pranks. She wondered how many people would have to be involved to pull off one like this.

“Why would I leave Crag’s Nest if I thought you’d never set foot here again, Ward?”

“Warden.”

“Yeah. I forgot.”

He smirked. “How’s the family?”

“Fine.”

“Your mom’s still globe-trotting?”

Lexi stared at him, finding his interest in her family new and strange, and perhaps offensive.

“Any improvement in dear old dad?” he asked.

“What do you want, Ward?”

“Warden.”

Lexi crossed her arms to hide their quivering.

“What?” he said. “I heard that your old man fell off the deep end, and I’ve been worried about you.”

“You’ve never worried about anyone but yourself. Besides, that happened years ago.”

“After that whole thing with your sister. What a tragedy. Man, I’m really sorry about that, you know.”

Ward removed a nylon lanyard from the pocket of his jeans. A small key chain weighted the end of it. Twirling the cord like a propeller blade, he wound it around his wrist, wrapping and unwrapping it.

Lexi looked away. “It’s behind us now,” she said.

“Is it? Von Ruden’s up for parole. I assume you heard.”

She hadn’t. A shiver shook her shoulders though the wind had not picked up again. Up for parole after only seven years.

Norman Von Ruden had killed Tara, Lexi’s older sister. He knifed her in a food court at lunchtime during the Christmas rush, when there were so many people that no one noticed she’d been attacked until someone accidentally whacked her crumpled form with a shopping bag. After Tara’s funeral, Lexi’s father raised the drawbridge of his mind and left her with her mother on the wrong side of the moat.

“Why is it that whenever you show up, I can expect bad news?”

“Aw, that’s not fair, Lexi. I’m only here to help you, as always.”

“One finger is too many to count the ways you’ve helped me.”

“Be nice.”

“I am. You could have helped me years ago by refusing to sell to Norm.”

“C’mon now. You know that’s not what happened.”

Lexi turned away and moved quickly toward her gaping Volvo.

Ward’s voice chased her. “Norm was Grant’s client, not mine.”

Lexi kept walking. Ward followed.

“If you blame anyone, gotta blame Grant.” Ward’s keys clanked together as they hit the inside of his wrist. “You can blame Grant for a whole lotta your problems.”

“I’d appreciate you not bringing Grant up,” she said.

It was true that Lexi’s husband had not paved the streets of her life with gold. The same year Tara was killed, Grant drove their only car out of town and never came back. Lexi, having no money to pay for a divorce, never received divorce papers from Grant either and sometimes wondered whether abandonment laws alone made their separation official.

Beyond that, she’d managed to prevent her thoughts from chasing Grant too often. Only Molly was worth Lexi’s wholehearted concentration. For Molly’s sake, Lexi had made a vow to be more clearheaded than Grant ever was.

Lexi reached out and slammed the door behind the driver’s seat. The metal frame was warm to the touch, sun-baked without the sun. The unexpected sensation caused her to hesitate before she walked around the back to the other side and slammed the other rear door. It, too, was unnaturally heated. She wiped her palm on the seat of her pants.

“If that’s all you came to tell me, good night.”

“But it’s not.”

Ward stopped twirling the lanyard and stood at the driver’s door. She glanced at him across the roof of the Volvo and took new notice of the envelope he held and extended toward her.

“Picked up your mail for you.”

“How?”

“Intercepted the mailman.”

“Why?”

“Save you the trouble.”

“Seeing as it’s no trouble, please don’t do it again.”

“You really could be more grateful.”

She leaned against the car and lay her arm across the roof, gesturing that he give the envelope to her. He dangled it above her open palm. She snatched it out of his fingers.

“Thank you,” she said, hoping he would leave. She lifted the flap of her book bag, intending to cram the letter into the side.

“Open it.”

“I will, when I get home.”

“Now.” Ward’s keys cut the air on that whirling cord again. Rather than irritate her, the motion threatened. Those keys were weapons that could inflict serious pain if they hit her between the eyes with any momentum. She thought she saw them striking out at her and jerked back, then felt embarrassed.

“I read my mail without an audience.”

“Add a little excitement to your life. Do it differently tonight.”

“No.”

“It’s not a suggestion.”

Lexi closed the third door and made her way back around the rear of the car to where Ward was waiting. She focused on maintaining a confident voice. “Ward, it’s late. I’m going home. My daughter—”

“Molly. She’s all grown-up and fresh to be picked by now, isn’t she?” Heat rose up Lexi’s neck. “I saw her at the school today. They’re a bit lax over there about security, in my humble opinion.”

The tears that rushed to Lexi’s eyes were as hot and blinding as her anger. That level of offensiveness didn’t deserve a response. In two long strides she reached the open driver’s side door and, still holding the mystery letter, placed her left hand on the frame to balance her entry.

Ward's lanyard snaked out and struck her wrist, knocking her hand off the door, which slammed shut. The paper fluttered to the ground. She stared at it stupidly, not comprehending what was happening.

He stooped to pick it up. "Read the letter, Lexi, then I'll let you go home."

Her wrist bone ached where the keys had struck it. She took a step away from Ward, then turned the letter over to read the return address. The envelope was from the office of a neighboring county's district attorney. It quivered in her fingers. She held it under the light of the lamppost for several seconds. The beam flickered.

"The postmark on this is more than a month old," she said.

"Yeah, well, I didn't say I picked up your mail *today*."

Her perspiring fingers were tacky and warped the linen stationery slightly. Lexi tapped the short side of the envelope on the roof of the Volvo, then tore a narrow strip off the opposite side and let the scrap fall to the ground. She withdrew a piece of heavy folded paper, then spread it flat on the hood.

She thought it was a notice of Norman Von Ruden's parole hearing. She saw, at a glance, phrases like *your right to participate* and *verbal or written testimony*. But a red scrawl like a kindergartener gone crazy with a Sharpie obscured much of the text. A balloon poked by half a dozen arrows surrounded the date and time. Stick figures at the bottom of the page depicted a man coming out of an open jail cell, and a happy woman waiting for him.

Ward was breathing across Lexi's ear. She felt his body too close behind her.

"Isn't that nice?" he said, pointing. "That's Norm, and that's you!"

Lexi looked at the backside of the envelope to see if he'd tampered with the letter but it was still securely sealed. He knew. How could he know? She pushed off the car and shoved him away from her, leaving the letter behind. She snapped at him so that he wouldn't hear the fear she felt.

"You're sick, Ward. I'm going home."

"I'm entirely well, though I appreciate your concern. Aren't you going to ask me what it means?"



“It means you haven’t changed one bit since the last time I saw you. I don’t have time for your pranks.”

She pulled the door open and dropped onto the seat without taking the book bag off her shoulder.

Ward picked up the letter and turned it over, holding it out to her. He propped his forearms on the open door and lowered the sheet, scrawled with another juvenile drawing, to her eye level. A red figure that looked like a child with *x*’s for eyes was visible through the glass door of an oven.

“No prank, Sexy Lexi.”

Lexi felt blood rush out of her head. She took a shallow breath and lowered her voice.

“Okay. What does it mean, Ward?”

“*War-den. Warden.* Get it right.”

There was no sarcasm in her voice now. “Warden. What does it mean?”

“That’s my girl. It means—if you love your daughter like I think you do—that you are going to show up at Norm’s hearing next Friday and testify on his behalf.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you love your daughter.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You can’t love her?”

“No! I can’t . . . Norman Von Ruden? He’s insane.”

“Not clinically.”

“Don’t do that. They diagnosed him with something.”

“Nothing a fine shrink and a few bottles of pills couldn’t handle.”

“No.” She shook her head. “No. I hate him.”

“You loved him once. I’ll wager there’s still whore in you.”

Lexi lashed out, clawing the letter out of his hands and scratching the skin of his knuckles. His keys fell onto the blacktop.

“How dare you!”

Ward seized both her wrists easily and shoved her back down onto the seat of the car.

“He killed my sister! He wrecked my family! My parents—”

“Will be mourning the loss of little miss Molly as well if you don’t come to the party. So be wise about it, or I’ll tell your secrets to everyone you love—and plenty of people you don’t.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because you should have chosen me, Lexi. All those years ago, you chose Von Ruden. But you should have chosen me.” He crumpled the letter into a ball and tossed it across Lexi onto the passenger seat.

The light over the car died again. In the blackness, Lexi reached out and slammed the car door, punched down the manual lock, then contorted her body to hit the three remaining knobs in sequence.

“Save the date,” he said through the glass.

She willed the wind to carry his words away, but the air was as still as her dead sister, bleeding on the sticky tiles of the mall floor.

## { chapter 2 }

Beyond the windshield of Lexi's car, the dark mountain range was a jagged saw blade that would tear the sky in two if the wind started blowing again. Crag's Nest slept, the few streetlights blinked yellow, and no other cars blocked the narrow stone bridge that separated her simple neighborhood from the flashy historic district and tourist traps. It took her only five minutes rather than the usual eight to race home. Ward's remarks about seeing Molly at school burned the back of Lexi's throat.

She spent every second of the drive regretting the choices she'd made that had led, however indirectly, to Ward's visit. On some level, his demand should not have come as a surprise to her. She'd known that he was a truly low man. After dragging her husband down into the sludgy gutters of meth addiction, Ward had vanished at the same time Lexi's world spun off its axis: it was the year that Norm killed Tara, that Grant drove away, that her father lost his mind.

Ward's departure from her life had been a weight lifted, though she couldn't take any credit for it. She had always believed that once Norm fell

and Grant fled, Ward had no use for her. Which made his accusation about her rejection all the more confusing.

Ward's intentions regarding Norm's parole were a mystery. Her testimony couldn't guarantee the man's release and might even be called into question if the parole board learned the truth of her relationship with Norm. For a fleeting second she wondered if doing this thing Ward had asked of her might be the best way to keep her secret hidden.

How would Lexi explain a testimony to her mother?

The more pressing question was how to get through this with no damage to Molly. If her daughter was about to face the consequences of the most foolish decision Lexi had ever made, Lexi didn't know what she would do. There was no more precious child on the face of the earth than that little girl. All the love that Lexi had ever wanted to pour into another human being—love spilled out and lost over Grant's closed fists—had been welcomed by Molly's open hands.

Lexi pulled the lopsided Volvo into a gap that was not a parking space at the sidewalk leading to her apartment. The car creaked when she jumped out. She slammed the door and came around the front fender in a tight corner. Her foot connected with a metal object that tipped and then clattered.

"Oh no."

Painters who'd been touching up the flower boxes before spring planting had left a can behind. A small pool of black latex formed on the asphalt at the mouth of the can. Lexi stepped out of its reach and gingerly picked up the can by its handle, then carried it up the path toward her front door. She'd leave it outside, then take it to the manager in the morning.

The living room lamp shone through the window to her right. Lexi's roommate had likely fallen asleep in the old La-Z-Boy. Gina had her own bed, and her own desk for studying in her very own room, but the eternal student zonked out most nights with some massive university text on her lap.

Lexi made a mental note: *Window: closed. Sturdy dowel still in place in the track.* She hoped Gina was sleeping, or reading, and not doing something unimaginable.

*Oh, stop it.*

She blamed Tara's murder for her tendency to jump on runaway mental trains. If Ward meant what he said, he wouldn't do anything to her or Molly before Norman's hearing.

On the left side of the stoop, another window looked into the miniscule kitchen. A checkered café curtain covered the bottom half of the glass. The latches were in their upright, locked position. Gina knew better than to prop any window or door open. Lexi gave her an earful the first summer Gina lived with them until she caught on. Under the window, a planter box still contained the plants that had died months ago in October's first freeze.

The screen slapped against Lexi's backside while she shoved her key in the lock. It stuck, but she finally wiggled the dead bolt free of the jamb. The door glided open. The bottom of the screen clipped the heel of her shoe as she entered and passed through the short front hall.

Gina's recliner was empty. Her textbook lay open on the floor under an uncapped highlighter and legal pad. Her thick Bible balanced on the arm of the recliner.

Lexi closed the door, turned the lock, and headed straight for the room she and Molly shared.

The floorboards outside the door squeaked. She didn't try to avoid them this time, grasping the knob and pushing the door open, half hoping to wake Molly from a peaceful sleep so she could enjoy the good moment of tucking her back in again. The little girl's lava lamp night-light cast a pink glow over the shoebox room.

Molly was as she always was: snoring on her stomach, one arm hanging off the queen mattress. Her open mouth was all that was exposed by the thin sheet and threadbare blanket that otherwise covered her entire body. She slept kitty-corner across the bed and claimed this was because she wanted to keep Lexi's side warm for her.

Lexi's shoulders relaxed at this beautiful sight. She bent and kissed Molly on the back of the head, then stroked the girl's hair off her cheek. Circuiting the foot of the bed, Lexi lifted the curtain and checked the sliding glass door

that led out into the back common area: latch secure, dowel in place. Two of the three lamps in the courtyard were out. The rest cast a weak beam across weed-pocked grass. No one was roaming at this hour. She dropped the window covering.

Nothing in the room was out of place.

Molly stirred and said something about noodles, then breathed heavily again.

Lexi returned to the hall to look for Gina. The women had known each other since they were sixteen, so when Gina needed a place to stay and Lexi needed someone to help look after Molly, they struck a deal: Lexi let her live in the second bedroom rent-free in exchange for babysitting Molly at night. Gina was six years into her late-started bachelor's degree and figured she could graduate next fall from the little Bible college down in Riverbend if she stayed focused. Her parents' decision to quit paying her way offered considerable incentive.

The desk lamp in Gina's room painted a stripe of yellow at the bottom of her door. Lexi knocked gently. When her friend didn't answer, Lexi took care to open it undetected.

Gina was bowed over her laptop on the desk, slumped forward in one of the chairs from the kitchen table. Her forehead rested on the touch pad, and her straw-blond hair blanketed her shoulders. The glare of the monitor turned her white sweatshirt blue.

"Gina?"

Her hands, which seemed to have slid off the keyboard in the middle of typing, rested on the back of their wrists against the lip of her desk at each side of her bent head. Her relaxed fingers, turned upward, cupped invisible balls.

Lexi's heart interfered with her rational self, refusing to examine this scene rationally.

"Gina . . ."

She didn't want to, but Lexi reached out to lift the hair away from Gina's face.

“Gina, are you okay?”

Lexi’s unsteady hand brushed her friend’s shoulder.

They both screamed at the same time. Gina shot out of the chair, knocking it backward into her bed as she scrambled to get away from Lexi. The chair bounced off the mattress and came back at her, catching her bare foot midair and tripping her. Her wide eyes registered shock as she flailed, snagging the desk lamp with her fingers. The lamp teetered.

Lexi reached for her, missed. Groped for the lamp, caught it. Gina’s fingers, tangled in the cord, nearly wrenched it away, but Lexi held on. The tilting shade cast angular shadows around the room. Gina’s head smacked the closet’s accordion doors, rattling them hard, and she landed heavily on her tailbone.

“*Off!*”

Lexi held her breath. Gina burst into giggles.

All her fear escaped Lexi in an explosive laugh of her own.

“Doggone you, Lexi. I’m having a heart attack!”

“Shh! We’re gonna wake up Molly.”

“That girl could sleep through the Second Coming.”

Lexi set the lamp on Gina’s desk and leaned over to help her stand, bringing her full weight to bear. Gina was a good six inches taller than she was, and half again as wide.

Her heart, too, was twice as warm and three times as generous, Lexi believed.

There were tears of laughter in her roommate’s eyes and a red depression from the computer touch pad across her forehead.

“You’ve got to get more interesting classes,” Lexi said.

“Shoot, Lexi, it’s three in the morning. Nothing’s *that* interesting.” She wiped her eyes and tried to smother another outburst. Her effort sounded like a sneeze. “If you ever do that again I swear I’m moving out.”

“You can’t afford to move out.”

“I won’t be able to afford the therapy I’ll need if I stay.”

Lexi dropped onto the unmade bed. “I’m really sorry.”

“I’ll recover.” Gina reached for her upended chair, and Lexi realized how grateful she was that Gina was here, with Molly. That they both were okay.

“How was Molly tonight?”

“Angel as always. Cooked us up some spaghetti for dinner.”

“She’s good at spaghetti. Any leftovers?”

“You bet. She said you’d want some for breakfast.”

“You know it.”

Gina straddled the chair and rested her elbows on the back. “She’s learning blonde jokes.”

Lexi shook her head, embarrassed. “I’ll talk to her.”

“Oh pooh. I’m teaching them to her.”

“Gina!”

“Blonde walks into a library and tells the librarian, ‘I’d like a cheeseburger with fries and a diet coke.’”

“Stop it! You’re supposed to be tutoring her in division!”

“Librarian says, ‘Lady, I don’t know what you’re thinking. This is a library.’”

Lexi shook her head.

“The blonde is mortified. She apologizes profusely, drops her voice to a whisper, and says, ‘I’d like a cheeseburger with fries and a diet coke.’”

Lexi chuckled. “You’re corrupting my daughter.”

“She was in stitches for ten minutes. Honest-to-goodness, pure-kiddo funny bone.”

“I pay you way too much.”

“And I was going to broach the subject of a raise!”

Lexi drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

“So everything was okay here tonight? No weird goings-on?”

“No more than usual.” Gina’s eyes shot away for half a second. If Lexi hadn’t been looking right at her, she wouldn’t have noticed. But when Gina caught her eyes again, Lexi found herself trying to remember whether looking away to the right or to the left indicated a lie.



After a lengthy pause Gina said, “Mrs. Johnson’s cat got stuck up on 10C’s balcony.”

“Juliet must get stuck up there twice a week.”

“And shall continue to do so until a tree surgeon trims that maple back.”

“The manager won’t spend the money. Especially not for a cat.”

“Course he won’t. So the guys in 10A put on an impromptu performance of *Romeo and Juliet*’s balcony scene. Molly suggested we take our spaghetti out on the back patio to watch.”

“Dinner theater.”

“Exactly.”

“Did it work—romancing the cat, I mean?”

“I don’t recall that the original Juliet hurled herself from the balcony, but that’s how the cat came down.”

“You’re pulling my leg.”

Gina grinned. “Am I? Mort climbs up the tree, confesses his love and takes sweet Juliet in his arms . . . then the feline fatale claws him and gets dropped. I wasn’t sad to see the cat go down.”

“You’re hopelessly in love with those guys.”

Gina waggled her brows. “Just Mort. I told Molly she should save herself for Travis.”

Lexi stretched, then rose. “Maybe I shouldn’t leave you two alone so often. I’m not sure who’s corrupting who.”

“Not at all. We keep each other on the straight and narrow.” Gina yawned.

“You want some tea?” Lexi rested her hand on the doorknob.

“I’ll pass.”

“Thanks for all you do for Molly and me.”

“Oh gosh, don’t mention it. She’s a gem. And if it wasn’t for what you don’t pay me, you’d be gold yourself.”

“And yet you live in palatial splendor!”

Gina guffawed. She never complained about the shabby apartment,

though Lexi hated it. She hated it enough for all three of them and figured Gina knew this.

Lexi pondered telling her about Norman Von Ruden's parole, about Ward's freaky visit and more frightening demands. Gina had been compassionate toward Lexi and Molly when Grant fell into his drug-addicted ways, but she didn't know a thing about Norm except what the papers had reported of the murder. Lexi never spoke of him.

Gina stretched out on her bed, fully clothed, and yawned. The weight of the long night pressed down on Lexi's body. She'd have tea and ponder Norman Von Ruden privately, then go cuddle up with Molly.

"Good night," she said.

"Night."

She pulled Gina's door closed. The living room light still shone into the hallway, crossing the strip of carpet and glancing off the cheap linoleum of the dark kitchen. Lexi went to turn it off and accidentally stepped on Gina's textbook, which she'd left on the floor exactly halfway between the chair and the coffee table. Lexi picked it up and shut it, using the highlighter as a bookmark. *Exposition of the Prophetic Texts*. She retrieved the legal pad as well and carried the bundle to the kitchen, which also served as an eat-in dining area. She flipped on the light and set everything on the table next to the crumpled letter Ward had delivered to her less than an hour ago.

Her eyes locked on the wadded ball of paper. She hadn't brought the letter in, had she?

Maybe she had, preoccupied as she'd been.

Lexi picked it up and lobbed it into the trash can at the end of the counter. It would be impossible for her to forget the date, only a week away. No need for the threatening, red-inked reminder.

She rubbed her eyes and circled the table, grabbed an old stainless kettle off the stove, then turned on the ball of her foot and filled it with water from the tap. The kitchen was so small that she and Molly often joked they could set the table, cook dinner, eat, and wash dishes without moving their feet.

The water made a drumming sound as it filled the empty pot. Lexi

massaged the back of her neck with her free hand. She turned her head to the left, toward the window that looked out over the front walkway.

She saw black paint and heard the kettle fall into the sink. The water kept running.

Black paint dripped from a three-circle target that had been brushed on the kitchen window. The kitchen window she had passed on her way into the apartment not ten minutes ago. There had been no paint on the window then.

An involuntary shudder shook Lexi's body when she noticed that the paint had splattered her checked curtains. It was on the inside of the apartment.

Droplets of black speckled the countertop and the kitchen floor, leaving a broken trail that was smudged in front of the table. She must have stepped in it when she entered the kitchen. Her own shoe print led around the table and to the sink.

If Ward had followed her home and found a way in . . .

Lexi grabbed a knife out of her nearly empty knife block. It was short and dull but it was all she had. She held it out in front of her and followed the trail of black drops back to the hall. The carpets were worn from their original tan to a dingy gray, but as far as she could see, they were paint-free.

To her left: the bedrooms. Molly still snored. To her right: the front door. Closed. Both dead bolt and knob lock were vertical, secure. At eye level, though, a smudged row of four black stripes, rounded at the tips like fingers, gripped the door jamb.

Lexi's whole body was shaking. *Dear God, don't let Ward be in the house. Dear God, protect us.*

She tiptoed down the hall to the bedrooms, turning on the lights. Molly was okay, fully at ease in the rays of the lava lamp. *Thank you, God.* Gina faced her wall, breathing evenly. *Thank you, God.* Lexi checked the closets, the bathroom, the shower. She opened the linen cupboard. The bottom shelf was one of Molly's favorite hiding places.

No black paint in sight.

Better yet, no one wielding a paintbrush.

*Thank you, God.*

She didn't turn off the bathroom or hallway lights. She clicked on the only other living-room lamp and poked the knife into each side of the floor-to-ceiling curtains, which stayed open all the time. Cautiously lifting a slat at the far edge of the plastic miniblinds, she peered out into the complex.

Her square Volvo was half in gravel, half on the drive, at a haphazard angle. The parking areas that wrapped around the building opposite hers were nearly full. Her mind reviewed her encounter with Ward. Had his car been in the lot? She didn't remember seeing one. What was it he used to drive?

She couldn't remember that either.

That Ward knew how to scare a girl.

She decided not to call 9-1-1. What would she report? The ruckus of police arriving would lead to questions she wasn't prepared to answer. And she didn't want Molly to worry.

Leaving the lights blazing, Lexi pulled a kitchen chair out into the hallway where she could see in all directions, dropped onto the seat with her worthless knife, and planned to stay awake until dawn.

## { chapter 3 }

The exposed bulb in the ceiling fixture backlit the black target on Lexi's window. Warden Pavo leaned back against the front bumper of the Volvo and examined his work from the outside. He tried to be subtle most of the time, but every once in a while someone came along who deserved theatrics. Someone like Lexi Grüggen Solomon, the last man standing, so to speak, in the Grüggen family. Ward had been dismantling them for decades, and now, after seven excruciating years in which he'd had to bide his time, the moment for his coup de grâce had arrived.

He saw the shocked movement of Lexi's head and the jutting arches of her surprised brows when they rose above those cute little checked curtains. He congratulated himself for being in the right place when she lifted the slat of her living-room blinds to look for him, then dropped it. She couldn't see him standing right in front of her eyes. Wasn't that always the case?

Ward's fingers were still wet with the tarry paint. He dragged them up his exposed forearm, leaving four trails like jailbird stripes on his pale skin. He used his thumb and forefinger to bend the lines, smearing them apart from

each other into crooked bars. Maybe that would have been a better illustration for the parole notice he'd given Lexi: Norman Von Ruden, busted out.

He cocked his head and considered painting something like this on the sliding glass door in Lexi and Molly's bedroom.

*Fwack!*

Warden swore and jerked upright off the bumper. His hand shot up to the back of his head where he'd been struck. By a rock, he figured. He snatched off his knit cap. Blood was running into the neck of his T-shirt.

An apple thunked onto the hood of the Volvo and rolled down, leaving a sticky trail. His fingertips came away from the injury sticky and smelling sweet. Juice, not blood, mingled with the smudged paint.

A voice he knew came out of the shadowy carport at the side of Lexi's building.

"You should have called to let me know you were coming," it accused. "I could have prepared a proper meal to welcome you."

The figure that emerged from the darkness was not fit to be seen even by moonlight. Craven was the most emaciated fellow Warden had ever known, though the creature fed endlessly on apples. He had lived at this complex longer than any other resident and used that fact to justify his disregard for good hygiene. His nails were greasy and his odor earthy. Warden had a strong stomach, but he had planned to steer clear of this stench.

"I hate baked fruit," Warden said.

He shifted his foot, which connected with the apple that had rolled onto the ground and sent it like a missile toward Craven, who failed to anticipate the move. The fruit hit him hard enough that his head snapped back.

Yet even with his eyes closed, even with blood spurting from his nose, he caught the ricocheting Red Delicious in his open claw and flung the food back at Warden so fast that he could not see it.

But he could sense it.

He tilted his ear to his shoulder and felt the displaced air as the apple whizzed past his throat. With his forefinger, he wiped juice spray from his chin.

A draw, for now. Warden snickered and Craven joined with his own low laughter, wiping his bloody nose on the sleeve of his threadbare army field jacket, which was about ten sizes too big for him.

“What brings you, Ward?” Craven asked.

“It’s Warden to you.”

“Waaaard.”

Warden bristled. Craven sneered. “Your status as a jailer exists only in the black corners of your mind, Ward. Ward. Ward. Wardwardward.”

He withdrew another fruit from one of his pockets. Warden envisioned himself seizing the apple and cramming it into Craven’s jaws, then roasting him on a stick like the rodent that he was.

“So?” Craven asked.

“I’m back for Lexi Grüggen.” He had always preferred her maiden name. It was truer to her real self. She might think of herself as a Solomon, but that didn’t hide the facts of who she was and what she’d done.

“Ah.” He licked his cracked lips and examined the Granny Smith as if he hadn’t eaten all day. “What’re you willing to give me for her?”

“Give *you*?”

“She’s in my district.”

“Well she wasn’t when I started this job, so get over it.”

“Nah. I’d rather have a cut.”

“I’ll give you a cut. Right across your throat.”

Craven’s laugh was a snort. “Ten to one she’ll buck you. Again.”

“Your disrespect is going to get you killed one of these days.”

Craven bit into the apple’s flesh and talked around the food. “They keep saying that. But here I am. Make it twenty to one, you lose.”

“A hundred to one I’ll succeed,” Warden said.

“Stakes?”

“Your territories.”

Craven stopped chewing and looked up at his eyebrows.

“Mine are worth more than yours,” Warden said. “No need to calculate.”

“If they were worth more, you wouldn’t risk them for mine.”

“I’m not the one taking a risk. You’ve wanted a piece of my traffic for eons.”

“You’d like to think.”

“Do we have a deal or not?”

Craven hesitated. “You steer clear of Mort Weatherby while you’re here.”

“Who’s Mort Weatherby?”

Craven nodded at an apartment across the lot.

“I don’t have any interest in him,” Ward said.

“That’s never stopped you before.”

Warden grinned and leaned in toward Craven, getting a strong whiff of fruity sweetness mingled with sour clothing. “I’ll take him when I take your territories and kill you, fool.”

“We have a deal, then.”

Craven stupidly stuck out his hand and Warden gripped it in a sticky squeeze that crushed the guy’s knuckles. The tarry paint made a sizzling sound between their palms, then oozed out. A drop fell and hit the top of Warden’s shoe.

He looked down at it. Craven matched Warden’s grip and pulled, closing the small space between them.

“Friendly tip,” Craven said, lowering his voice. His face was split by the grin of an adversary who thought he had the upper hand. Warden found the pretense tiresome. “The Grüggen girl has a sponsor.”

“As you said, that’s never stopped me before.” Warden slid his hand out of Craven’s easily and took pleasure in having dampened the impression his competitor had hoped to make. “In fact, if it’s true, all the more reason for you to stay out of our way.”

Craven wouldn’t stay out. Warden could anticipate this without any lying words being spoken. Rule one of this business: every man for himself.

Warden decided he would have to keep an eye on this one, as he had on so many others he had bested over the years. That suited him fine. Tension kept his mind sharp and served him well.



Further words, being pointless, were unnecessary. Craven skittered like a walking stick back into the shadows, likely to find more edibles.

Warden turned his attention back to Lexi's apartment, which was ablaze with light, as if yellow beams begged the sun to rise early and meet them at the windows. Warden turned away. The light of the world would not come soon enough to prevent him from reducing Lexi to a sniveling mass of regret and bitterness. She would do anything he wanted.

Even if she did have a sponsor.