

CHAPTER 1

Our . . . I mean *my* house was sold before the divorce decree cooled. I call it mine, since I was the one who poured all my blood, sweat, and tears into it. My contribution toward making the perfect home.

While my husband was screwing a woman named She's-Just-a-Friend, by the way. Text messages, late-night calls, a hidden cell phone, and dinner receipts on days he was 'working late' said differently. Volumes were spoken.

Imagining things, he tried convincing me. Paranoid, I was. But Momma didn't raise no fool. And after ten, what I thought were wonderful, years together, I wasn't about to become one for his sorry ass.

Then came a different kind of tears. Ones forged by betrayal, lies, and deception.

The home I created for two was reduced to half-proceeds for each of us.

Moving on, as if I had another choice, I used said money to purchase a house two counties away. Far enough from Mark, but not so far as to lose touch with the only friend my ex-husband and I didn't share.

A casualty of a founding family that no longer cares and has long-since moved away, my new property has been abandoned for years. And it shows.

It was scheduled for demolition in three months. An old home that should have been listed on the national register of historical places, but wasn't for some reason. Something told me I needed to save it. That maybe it can save me.

All the house needs is some tender loving care, and since I have no one to share *that* with now, I went for it. Plus it was a steal for the price!

With all the hard work I'd put into my former dwelling, I'm sure I can restore this home to its former 1896 glory. God knows the former owners didn't.

The crackling of loose gravel under my tires breaks my concentration. No concrete drive, but at least it's not dirt.

I lean forward, holding onto the steering wheel and look out the windshield. The Queen Anne is more daunting than I remember. Or should I say all the work it needs. The corner turret draws my eyes upward toward darkening sky.

I'm glad I made it here before nightfall. The electricity won't be turned on until tomorrow, and I'd like to inspect the home before bedtime to decide just what it needs. It's best to keep my mind busy.

I leave everything in the car, except my purse, keys, and one suitcase. I think the U-haul can wait until morning.

Despite its looks, I can envision the house's potential. Two dingy wraparound porches with chipped paint, bottom and top floors, will be relaxing retreats once they're finished. I can see it now - sitting in a white

rocker, enjoying the cool river breeze while sipping a glass of iced tea during a hot summer's day.

And after dark, gazing at the river while drinking red wine. Or maybe something stronger. I find that nights are the hardest.

I walk the entire length of the porch, picking out the perfect spot for my future respite. Along the way, I'm amazed at the condition of the ornate, square-cut scrollwork under the eaves. I'll paint these a different color to make sure they stand out.

A few of the windows are boarded, others cracked, but the two diamond shaped windows on the second floor are definitely staying. They're in almost perfect condition.

On the outside, I determine mostly paint, replacing several rotting boards, a little roofing, time, and money is all this house needs to be whole again. The chimney passed inspection and the foundation was found to be strong and sturdy. Me, on the other hand. I'm not so sure.

I wonder how many hands before mine have turned this loose, tarnished doorknob. My fingers are trembling, and I don't know why. I can barely line up the key to the lock. The fourth time is the charm.

The door couldn't creak my name any louder as it opens. *A-a-a-n-n-n-a-a-a.* It feels good to be welcomed for a change.

The musty smell of neglect almost knocks me off my feet as I enter. But if I can survive a divorce, which is still yet to be determined, then I can survive this stench. It can only be described as a tawdry elixir brewed by years of disregard, mildew, and – body odor?

Holding the heavy door with my foot, keeping it open to let some fresh air in, I fumble through my purse for my cell phone.

"I'm in, Cheryl." . . . "Just now. You would not *believe* the stink!" . . . "Do you really care if it's ready? Come down this weekend. I'll try to make the place presentable before you get here." . . . "If not this weekend, then when?" A long silence resounds in my ears. "Never mind. I wanted to call and let you know that I'm here, safe and sound." . . . "You, too. Bye."

It hit me when I flipped my cell phone closed. I haven't been here for five minutes, and I'm already calling Cheryl. Starved for companionship. Afraid to be alone. That's what getting married straight out of high school did for me. This is the first time I've been on my own.

High school sweethearts, Mark and I had been dating for three years before tying the knot in front of God and all our friends.

I went from my parents' house to a fixer upper my new husband's father put a deposit on as a wedding gift not far from the college we were both going to be attending in the fall.

My parents had not been pleased, but they tolerated the wedding. Despite our age, we'd both had good grades and heads atop our shoulders, and had been together for years. What could they say?

I still haven't told them about the divorce.

The first six years were glorious. Mark and I both had full scholarships, worked part-time jobs to cover the mortgage, and spent the rest of our waking hours making love between study sessions.

Mark received his law degree two years after I received my teacher certification. We were both working in our respective fields. I taught third grade math and Mark practiced law with a small firm.

Thinking back, I guess we started growing apart after I mentioned having children. Some teachers don't want any after spending six hours a day, five days a week with so many, but I was the opposite.

I wanted at least two children, but Mark didn't seem to. At first I thought he just wasn't ready at the time, but after a year it was evident that he didn't want any. Ever.

So I bought a dog. His name was Max.

After another year, Mark was making more money as a state prosecutor rather than a defense attorney, and I could no longer take being around children knowing I was never going to have any of my own. I quit my job, and threw myself into remodeling the home where we'd been so happy. I thought if I could make it more childproof, then maybe

Now I'll throw myself into this house. To cope. To try to figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life.

You know, the more I think about it, the angrier I'm becoming. Cheryl knows I'm going through a tough time right now. She's been my best friend since middle school. She knows how I hate to be alone. And for the first time, too. She said to call her when I arrived here and we'd set up a time for a visit. Now she's brushing me off?

Either I still have some abandonment issues or I'm hungry. Since I cannot fix the first at the moment, and I'm sure the kitchen is a mess, I'm going back out to the car to grab the leftover pizza from lunch.