

CHAPTER ONE

Déjà vu. And not the warm fuzzy type.

It wrapped around Rose Bradigan like icy fingers squeezing her chest until she thought her ribs would crack. The sight of her sixteen-year-old daughter, Lily, standing on the other side of the front door, flanked by two of New York City's finest, brought back the nightmare that had begun two years ago when her husband, Ben, was escorted out of their home with his wrists cuffed behind him. A solid ball of fear lodged itself in the pit of Rose's stomach as she looked through the peephole at 1:30 in the morning.

She quickly twisted the two deadbolts, then with shaking fingers slid the chain lock open. Rose jerked the door open so hard it flew out of her hand to slam against the wall, leaving a two-inch gouge in the plaster.

"What is this? What are you doing out at this time of night, Lily?" Rose demanded, her eyes focused on her daughter. At the mutinous look on the teenager's face, Rose looked from one law officer to the other, as dread twisted around her heart.

"Ma'am." The younger of the two officers was the first to speak. He couldn't be much older than Lily. Or at least he didn't look like it with his baby smooth face and short curly blond hair. His piercing, gray-green eyes, however held a cynicism of a man several decades older. "Is this young woman related to you?"

"Of course. She's my daughter," Rose answered.

"May we come inside and speak with you for a moment, ma'am?" he asked.

Rose stepped aside without a word, her anxiety mounting. She closed the door after the two policemen stepped into the foyer. Lily reluctantly followed her mother into the living room and dropped into a chair. She draped one long, jean clad, leg over the arm of the wingback and proceeded to pull her cell phone out of her pocket. Her thumbs flew across the touch screen of her iPhone5 at lightning speed.

"Please, officers, have a seat," Rose invited, motioning to the sofa across from Lily's chair.

"Thank you ma'am, but we won't be long," the young officer said.

"Okay, what's going on?" Rose asked as she stepped to Lily's chair and nudged the girl's arm to get her attention. Lily ignored her. Not unusual considering their relationship since Lily's father had been sent to prison for drug trafficking and murder. Lily refused to believe that the father she worshiped and who doted on his daughter, would be guilty of anything illegal. When Rose told her she'd filed for divorce several months after his sentencing, Lily had vowed to hate Rose until her dying breath.

Earlier that evening Rose and Lily had had another of their screaming matches. Lily wanted to attend a party with her best friend, Mercedes. That would have been fine had it been a weekend night. Unfortunate for Lily, the hosting teen's parents were out of town and there would have been no adult supervision. Lily might be highly intelligent and bordering on genius, Rose had informed her daughter, but she was still a sixteen-year-old girl.

An angry, rebellious, sixteen-year-old girl.

Lily had then stormed up the stairs reaffirming her vow of eternal loathing before slamming her bedroom door so hard that the pictures on the stairwell wall had rattled. Maybe Rose was a little stricter with Lily than other mothers of teenaged daughters, but Rose only wanted the best for her child. Rose's own dysfunctional childhood and the loss of her mother at a young age had taught her to make sacrifices for the greater good. Rose had even checked on Lily at around midnight, hoping the girl would see reason. She had found Lily sound asleep in her bed. So how—or better yet when—had Lily slipped out of the house without Rose hearing her?

"Ma'am, I'm Officer Harris," the older of the two policemen said. "And this is Officer Jacobson." Harris stood a few inches shorter than Jacobson and had at least fifteen years on him. His short-cropped hair was shot with gray and his hazel brown eyes showed little emotion as he recited the events of the evening.

"We received a complaint about a loud party with underage persons allegedly consuming alcohol. When we arrived at the residence and after a cursory investigation we ascertained that your daughter had no alcohol in her system. For her own safety, we felt it prudent to escort her home and place her in your custody, personally."

Stunned into speechlessness, Rose looked from one man to the other, wondering when the joke would be over. Of course it had to be a joke. Someone else would be ringing the doorbell any second now and when she went to answer it, one of her friends would laugh and tell her it was all in fun.

Rose waited . . . One second . . . Two seconds . . . Three seconds . . . The doorbell didn't ring again as the clock loudly ticked off the passing time.

"Oh God," she whispered softly as she looked down at Lily, who was still texting away on her cell phone. Rose reached over and stripped the device out of her daughter's fingers.

"Hey, what the hell? I was talking to someone!" Lily said furiously as she launched herself from her seat. She grabbed for the phone as Rose held it out of her reach, glaring at Lily.

"Enough young lady," Rose growled at her before turning back to the policemen who were looking on with intense interest. In a choked voice, Rose said, "Thank you for seeing Lily safely home."

Rose brushed away a wayward tear that had slipped down her cheek. "Is she in trouble? Will this go on her permanent record?"

The fear that this episode might prevent Lily from receiving the full academic scholarship she had applied for, and was pretty much guaranteed, had Rose's anxiety ratcheting up several more degrees as she

chewed fervently at her left thumbnail. The coppery, salty taste of blood stung her tongue, but didn't halt Rose's gnawing.

"No ma'am. From what we found, your daughter had only just arrived and hadn't had the opportunity to join in the festivities." The smirk on Officer Harris' face and the doubt in his cold eyes told Rose he doubted that would have been the case had the complaint not been called into the precinct.

Another silent tear found its way down Rose's face. She brushed it away with the side of her hand. She cleared her throat and said, "Thank you again. I promise you this will never happen again."

"Have a good night, ma'am," Harris said, nodding to Rose. She escorted Officers Harris and Jacobson to the front door and after they exited, Rose turned the locks and slid the chain back into place.

She stood facing the door, wondering how her perfect life had come to this. The man she had loved since she was sixteen years old and the father of her child, had lied to her about his business for the entirety of their marriage and was now spending the rest of his life in prison. She had never doubted that he loved her, and that he still did in spite of the bars that separated them. She had never once imagined he'd been unfaithful to her. Lord knew she had loved him completely throughout their time together and had serious doubts that she would ever again find another man that she could give her heart to.

Rose's beautiful, carefree, teenage daughter, the light of her life and her greatest joy, hated her with every fiber of her being. Although Lily's grades had suffered the first year after Ben's incarceration, Lily had thrown herself into her studies once more, announcing that she was going to become a lawyer and free her father from the false imprisonment and then sue the state for millions in punitive damages, citing mental anguish as her case.

Now, the police were bringing Lily home after she'd sneaked out of the house.

Rose turned to face the fury that was sure to come. She couldn't seem to make the cursed tears stop flowing as she looked into the angry brown eyes so like Ben's. It always infuriated Rose when she couldn't seem to stop her tears. She hated being the weepy type of woman. It made her look weak and vapid, even though she knew in her heart that she was stronger than that. But she could never seem to win the war with her tear ducts.

"Don't even fucking start on me, Rose," Lily stood with her hands on her slender hips as she glared at her mother. "And give me back my fucking phone! You have no right to take it away from me. It's mine, Daddy gave it to me, not you."

"Go up to your room, Lily. We'll discuss this in the morning," Rose said softly and turned away.

"What about my fucking phone?" Lily demanded.

"I've asked you before not to use that kind of language in this house. And I've told you I don't want you calling me Rose." Resignation and desolation weighed heavy on her slumped shoulders as she spoke. "We'll talk tomorrow."

Without another word, Rose made her way up the stairs to her room and gently closed the door behind her, leaving a gaping Lily standing at the foot of the steps staring at her.

Lily was stunned. When she couldn't get out of having the cops bring her home, she'd steeled herself and was armed for a free-for-all battle. Sure, she'd snuck out of the house after being told she couldn't go to the party. It wasn't like she'd planned to disobey her mother or anything. It was a school night and Lily loved her classes. It was just that Mercedes Gonzalez had called her from the party begging Lily to come get her. The boy Mercedes had gone with had dumped her because she refused to have sex with him in one of the upstairs bedrooms at the house where the party was in full swing. So Lily climbed out her bedroom window, shimmed down the rose arbor and hailed a cab. She was loyal to her friend and Mercedes, like Lily, was a virgin. They had taken a vow that they wouldn't have sex with anyone until they were either married or had at least graduated from college. Neither girl wanted to be trapped with an unwanted pregnancy or worse, contract a sexually transmitted disease.

They'd heard some pretty gruesome stories from their peers about both cases. Lily and Mercedes were too smart to fall for the lies some boys told to get into a girl's pants. Besides, Lily's father had warned her about boys for years before he went away. And Mercedes was the youngest of five and the only girl in her family. Her brothers were very protective of their baby sister, and by association, protective of Lily as well.

The fact that Rose hadn't yelled at Lily or tried to make her feel like a real shit about sneaking out, had thrown Lily off balance. But what had really struck a nerve was the look of pain on her mother's face. And the tears. It was as though something inside of her mom had been shattered and it hurt Lily to think that she had been that cruel to her. It was true that Lily blamed Rose for not standing beside Lily's dad when he was in trouble. And when she'd filed for divorce, Lily was devastated. How could Rose have just given up so easily on the man she'd loved and married? Was she really that shallow that she ran at the first sign of trouble? If Lily were in trouble, would Rose come to her rescue or would she just walk away from her too? That was a scary thought. What if her mom—Rose—she corrected her inner voice, walked away from her too, the way she'd walked away from Daddy? The very idea didn't bear thinking about. It was too terrifying.

"I need my phone," Lily fumed. "I have to know that Mercedes got home okay." Running up to her room, Lily closed her door and booted up her laptop. Hopefully, Mercedes would be online and they could chat. If not, then Lily would have to risk a landline call to her friend's house. That wouldn't be a good idea because the phone was right next to her parents' bed and it would definitely wake them up. What excuse could Lily possibly give for calling Mercedes at that ungodly hour of the morning? There was no way Lily was going to wait until school started to find out.

After a few clicks of her mouse, Lily entered a private chat room. When Mercedes responded to her, Lily slid back in her chair in relief, and tucked her sock covered feet beneath her. Mercedes was safe at home, but her parents had grounded her for a month. The cops made sure that she made it home safe and informed her parents that the hosts of the party had provided not only beer, but several bottles of whiskey as well.

The two chatted for more than an hour, disparaging boys, parents, and authorities of every ilk. Finally, Lily closed down her computer and collapsed on her bed.

When the alarm clock sounded a mere two hours later, Lily decided she was taking the day off. No way was she going to make it through her classes with her eyes open and her brain in gear to learn. She hated missing school, but sometimes you had to do something for the greater good. Wasn't that what Rose was always preaching? The greater good? What the hell was that anyway?

She slapped at the alarm clock until the screaming guitars and heavy bass of some old-time rock band finally silenced. Lily rolled over and before drifting off into oblivion once again, the fleeting thought that Rose would be pounding on her door to awaken her for school, drifted through her mind.

Hours later, the urgency of a full bladder finally dragged Lily out of the comfortable nest of her bed. After taking care of her personal needs, she headed down the steps to face the music of the night before. She bolstered her nerve and lifted her shoulders as she mentally prepared herself for the coming encounter.

As she pushed the swinging door open and stepped into the kitchen, Lily opened her mouth to blast Rose with her first pre-emptive volley. "I will . . ." Lily's words stopped cold. The room was just as they had left it the night before. The light over the stove was on, the marble top counter was wiped clean, and the dishes from last night's dinner were still in the draining wrack with a clean towel draped over them. Even the coffee pot was clean.

Rose must have either left hours before without her normal pot and a half of coffee, or she was still asleep. Lily glanced at the digital clock on the stove. It was after ten thirty. There was no way Rose would have slept that late nor would she have allowed Lily to sleep in either.

"Oh my god! What have I done?" Had she finally pushed Rose to the limit and she really did walk away from Lily like she had walked away from Lily's dad? A cold fear sliced through her. "Mom?" she called out, her rebellious use of her mother's name forgotten as the scared little girl inside came to the surface.

"Mom? Are you here?" Her voice echoed through the empty kitchen and Lily's heart raced in her chest.

"Mommy?" she called out once again as she glanced around the room. The soft morning sun filtered through the white linen curtains casting light across a piece of paper lying on the table. She picked it up and read the note from her mother.

Lily,

Something came up. I'll be back in a few hours and we'll talk then.

Pack your suitcases, we're going on a trip.

Love, Mom

Squashing the sense of relief that threatened to overwhelm her, Lily wadded the note into a tight ball. "What the hell?" Her sense of indignation was back in full swing.

"If she thinks I'm going anywhere with her she's out of her mind," Lily said to the empty kitchen.

She dropped the crumpled, pink note paper back onto the table and shuffled to the refrigerator to see what she could scrounge for breakfast. She found a plastic bowl with two hard boiled eggs. Deciding that would be good with some toast, Lily snatched the bowl and a bottle of water from the fridge and set them on the counter. Before closing the door she grabbed a jar of organic strawberry preserves from the shelf in the door for her toast. After dropping a slice of nine-grain bread into the toaster, she bit into one of the eggs and chewed slowly while she waited for the bread to brown.

Maybe if she took her time with breakfast Rose would come home and see her just sitting around, not packed yet. That would piss-off the old witch royally, Lily decided as she smeared the preserves on her toast with a smile on her pretty face. Okay, she told herself, Rose wasn't really a witch but man she could be a pain in the ass. When would her mother realize that she, Lily, was an adult? Lily was perfectly capable of making her own decisions now and it was about time her mom—dammit—Rose, realized that.

From the moment Rose informed Lily that her dad was no longer a part of their family and that she was divorcing him, Lily had done everything she could to change Rose's mind. When that didn't work, Lily tried everything from threatening to quit school and run away from home to outright rebellious behavior. Skipping school, missing curfew, smoking—which Lily didn't care for and gave up after the first couple of drags—and cursing in front of her mother. If Lily was really angry and wanted to get to Rose, she used the F-word in public. The first time Lily had done that, the look on Rose's face was priceless. Her eyes grew to the size of small saucers, her mouth hung open, and her face turned six shades of crimson. The best part of all was that she had said it at the grocery store right in front of the minister of the church they used to go to before Daddy had gone away.

It wasn't that she didn't care about Rose, she loved her mother. Lily just couldn't seem to get past the fact that Rose had turned her back on Lily's dad when he needed her the most. Other than Aunt Janet and herself, there was no one else to fight for him.

He was innocent! Lily never believed he did the things they said he did. Her father would rather cut off his right arm than harm a living soul. How could they possibly think he had killed someone? Over drug money, no less! It was preposterous. Inconceivable.

Just thinking about the injustice of it all had Lily's blood ready to boil. She snatched up the nearly empty bottle of water and drained the last drop. She dropped the empty plastic into the recycle bin, tossed her napkin into the trash and dropped the dirty knife into the dishwasher. She looked up at the coffeepot-shaped clock on the wall beside the back door.

"Ten forty-seven and she's still not back? Where the hell is she?" Lily ground out. She wanted to get the battle over with so she could get out of the house for a few hours. Maybe she'd go see her dad. It wasn't a regular visiting day but maybe they would make an exception since she was his kid and all.

Deciding it was best to keep busy, Lily went back to her room and pulled a fresh pair of jeans and a hot-pink T-shirt with sparkly butterflies emblazoned across the front out of her closet. Pulling open the top dresser drawer, she grabbed fresh underclothes and headed for the bathroom down the hall.

An hour later, showered, dressed, and coiffed, Lily made her bed then plopped down in the middle of it, crossed her legs and booted up her laptop. After half an hour of surfing the net, she was bored and her mother still wasn't home. It was odd how sometimes she thought of her as mom and other times as Rose. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to it so far as she could tell.

She set her computer aside and slipped off the bed. She gathered the damp towel and the clothes she'd slept in and dropped them into her overloaded laundry hamper.

"Might as well toss a load in while I have the time," Lily said to herself, then grabbed the clothes from her mother's hamper as well.

It was a struggle, but Rose wrestled her way into the kitchen through the garage door, her arms loaded down with shopping bags.

"Lily," she called out as she set them on the kitchen table. She dropped a set of keys onto the ceramic inlaid table with a rattle as she untangled the strap of her purse from her arm. When she received no response from her daughter, she called out again, a little louder. "Lily, I'm home, come help me carry in the groceries."

As Lily sauntered through the door leading from the living room to the kitchen, Rose pulled another set of keys from her pocket and dropped them onto the table in front of Lily.

"Those are yours. Don't lose them," she said as she started pulling boxes and packages of dried goods from one of the bags.

Lily picked up what was obviously a set of car keys with a small black key-fob that automatically unlocked the doors.

"Mine? Where did these come from?" Lily asked. Her brow furrowed at the unfamiliar, blue Ford emblem on the head of the key. She glanced to her left and saw the clock on the wall read 5:45.

"Lily," Rose said as she looked into her daughter's precious face. Not even the frustration that crashed around her when Lily was being difficult, could dampen the love Rose felt for her little girl. "I know things have been tough on you since your father went to prison, and I'm so sorry for that. If there were any way that I could have prevented it, I would have. But I had no idea what he was up to. I didn't know."

The plea for understanding in Rose's voice was evident and she hoped Lily would someday understand how hard it had been for her to face raising a child alone.

"Mom," Lily hated it when she was reminded that her dad didn't just go away, that he had been sent to prison and it hurt her deeply that he would never be free. "Daddy is innocent," she said adamantly.

"I don't want to fight with you, baby girl," Rose said using her pet name from Lily's childhood. "I want us to be a family again—"

“Well that’s not going to happen, is it? You divorced him.” The sharp edge of her tongue pierced Rose’s heart, as Lily crossed her arms over her small breasts and tapped the toe of her left foot on the cool tile floor.

“Oh Lily, I really wish you would try to understand why I had to do it. I know you think I deserted him in his time of need, but it wasn’t something I wanted to do. I had to do it for both of our goods. I hope someday you will see that.” Rose picked up one of the bags and handed it to Lily.

“Here,” Rose said hoping to change the subject before another fight began.

“What’s this?” Lily asked.

“It’s an early birthday present from your dad and me.” Rose could never seem to separate herself from Ben even though the divorce had been final for over a year. She still visited him regularly at the prison, though Lily didn’t know, and she talked to him as often as possible on the phone. Telephone privileges had to be earned and though he said he tried to stay out of trouble, sometimes the other inmates just wouldn’t let him be.

That morning, Rose had made the trip to Sing Sing Prison and was waiting at the gate for visiting hours to begin. She’d had to get special permission from the board to make her off-day visit.

Lily cautiously took the bag from Rose and peered inside. She let out an exultant shriek, “Oh my god! A new iPad, a portable DVD player, and DVDs?” Lily looked up at her mom with a look of joy that Rose hadn’t seen in quite some time. It brought a smile to Rose’s face to see her little girl happy again.

“Thanks Mom, but how can we afford this?” Lily said in a voice barely above a whisper, then wrapped her free arm around Rose’s shoulders for a quick hug.

“You’re welcome, baby girl, and don’t worry about the money. Now, help me bring in the rest of the groceries. I want to show you the new wheels I bought today for our trip.”

“New wheels? How did you . . . Wait, what trip?” Lily asked. Rose heard that note of defiance in her daughter’s voice and let it pass.

“I’m not going anywhere yet,” she said to Rose. “School isn’t out for another two weeks and a bunch of us are going to the shore for the weekend after classes end.”

Rose straightened from where she’d been unpacking things from one of the bags and turned to face Lily with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Yes, Lily, I know school isn’t out for two more weeks. But, I spoke with your principal this morning when I called to let them know you weren’t going to be in today. I arranged for you to have early dismissal and still pass to your senior year. Your grade point is a 4.0 and you’ve already completed all of your tests, so they agreed. Your school counselor agreed that this trip might be just what you need to help you get your focus back. She told me about the trouble you’ve been having in some of your classes.”

“My teachers hate me, Mom,” Lily stated bluntly.

“No, honey, they don’t hate you. They know what an intelligent girl you are and they only want you to reach your full potential.”

“Bullshit. They hate me because they think Daddy is a criminal and they’re all thinking that I’m going to end up in jail too because I’m his daughter. Well they need to just go piss up a rope ’cuz Daddy is innocent and I’m going to prove it.” Lily was seething by the time she finished her tirade, her breath heaving out of her and her face flushed an angry red.

“Baby, they don’t think anything of the kind. I promise you, they don’t. I’ve spoken with your teachers and they all agree with me. You need to get away for a little while to find your center again.” Rose reached up to run her fingers through Lily’s short cropped curls, but the girl jerked away from her mother’s touch.

“Let’s just get this stuff put away and pack up the coolers and get on the road. You don’t even know where we’re going,” Rose tried to smile again.

“I said, *Rose*, that I am not going anywhere. I have plans to go to the shore with my friends after school is out.”

This was getting them nowhere and Rose was getting tired of rehashing the same old argument. It was time to put her foot down and let Lily know exactly who was boss.

“Lily, I have told you many times before. I am your mother and you will not address me as Rose. And you will watch your language young lady. It’s rude and disrespectful.

“Your father and I never used that kind of talk around you while you were growing up and I will not stand for it now. You will go upstairs and pack your suitcases for this trip. We will be gone for the summer so pack accordingly. I’ll finish unloading the car and packing the cooler.”

When Lily just stared defiantly at her mother, hands on her narrow hips and her eyes burning with anger, Rose lost her cool. “I said move your butt now. If you don’t go pack your bags I will pack them for you and if I have to I will physically toss your rear end in that car. Do you understand me?”

“You lay one hand on me, *Rose*, and I’ll have the cops here in less than a minute and your *ass* will be thrown in jail for child abuse!” Lily informed her, filled with the hubris of a teenager.

“Lily,” Rose replied as she tried desperately to hold on to what little patience she still possessed. Her day had been crammed with running all over the city and now the last nerve in her body was ready to explode from the stress of trying to get everything settled so they could leave town as soon as humanly possible.

“If you—” Rose cut off her own retort before she truly lost her temper and said something that she knew she would regret. She took a deep breath then let it out slowly. Rose closed her eyes and when she opened them a moment later she saw the fleeting look of concern cross Lily’s face only to be replaced by a self-satisfied smirk.

“I didn’t have the chance to tell you this before.” She knew her next words would elicit a firestorm of rage in her daughter, but Rose knew she had to tell Lily the truth about where she had been. “I went to Ossining this morning.”

Lily stared at her mother with eyes wide in disbelief and her mouth agape. “What?” she finally asked as anger leaked out of every pore. “And you didn’t wake me up to go, too? How could you? I haven’t talked to Daddy in over a week! It’s not even our weekend.”

“Lily give me a chance to explain—” Rose pleaded.

“No! You had no right to go there without me.”

“Lily Ann Bradigan, stop!” Rose rarely raised her voice, but her patience had snapped. “I had to talk to him about last night and discuss what to do about you. He loves you more than life itself and you know that. When I told him I wanted to take a vacation after you got out of school for the summer, it was his idea not to wait.

“He insisted that we leave today if possible, tomorrow at the latest,” Rose informed her as she pulled a chair out from the table and fell into it. She propped her elbows on the table and dropped her head into her palms.

“I don’t believe you and now it’s too late for me to go see him and let him tell me himself. You did that on purpose, didn’t you?” Lily accused.

“No, Lily, I didn’t. He said that if at all possible he would call you this afternoon and talk to you about it. But you know how difficult it can be for him to call you sometimes.” She pulled out the cell phone she had confiscated the night before and handed it to Lily. “Here.”

Just as Lily’s fingers reached for the phone, as if on cue, it belted out the first bars of the latest Buckcherry song.

Lily checked the caller ID and saw the area code 914. Knowing that to be Winchester County where Sing Sing prison was located, she answered it immediately.

“Daddy?” she asked. After a short pause, Lily said, “You won’t believe what Mom wants to do!” She glared at Rose as she spoke, then turned and walked into the living room to speak to her father in private.

Rose could hear the low pitch of Lily’s voice as she pled her case to her father. Rose stood up and walked back out to the garage to retrieve the cooler and the remaining few bags from her pre-vacation shopping spree. As she set the large red Coleman cooler next to the refrigerator, she was grateful that she had opted for the wheeled model with the longer handle. It was big enough to hold a lot of bottled water and fresh fruits and veggies that Lily was so fond of.

Lily was strict with her diet most of the time, believing that only organic substances should be consumed and never should caffeinated, nor carbonated beverages invade her system. She had been strictly a water or real fruit juice drinker since she was eleven years old. Lily hadn’t eaten a single morsel of red meat since that age and, in the beginning, Rose had worried that she wasn’t getting the protein a growing child needed. After speaking with the pediatrician on the subject, Rose made sure there were always plenty of high protein snacks in the house. She had even developed better eating habits herself and dropped the twenty-two extra pounds she had carried around since Lily’s birth. Rose had kept her weight at a slim, firm one hundred

and thirty-five pounds. At five feet seven inches tall that was not only a healthy weight for her, but she was solid muscle. She didn't work out often at a gym but her job at the hospital as an ER nurse kept her on the run constantly. The rock-climbing wall that she and Lily visited helped keep her arms and legs toned and sculpted. They hadn't been climbing in over a week and Rose missed that bonding time with Lily. Lately, Lily had been insisting that Mercedes accompany them, and Rose resented the intrusion a little.

It was truly an oddity that the rock wall didn't induce the panic attacks Rose normally felt when she was more than a few feet off the ground. Perhaps it was the fact that she was equipped with every safety restraint required by law that kept the fear of falling at bay. Whatever the reason, she hoped that someday she would be able to completely overcome her fear of heights. Rock climbing was the first step.

She had started only two years ago at Lily's insistence. At first, Rose refused to try, but she finally agreed to strap on the supporting ropes and, with the assistance of a trained spotter, Rose took the first step to conquering her phobia. She'd only made it three feet off the ground that first try, and when she saw the pride in Lily's eyes at her minute but significant accomplishment, Rose vowed to make it to the top of the wall one day.

"But Daddy, that's just not fair!" Lily's high-pitched whine from the other room broke into Rose's thoughts. "I have to go to the shore with Mercedes and . . . Yes, Daddy . . . Yes, Daddy . . . Yes, Daddy . . . I love you too. Goodbye, Daddy."

Rose listened to the thundering footsteps as Lily raced up the steps. A door slammed with a force that echoed through the house and then all was quiet once more. She glanced up at the clock on the kitchen wall.

"Wow, it's almost six o'clock already?" She couldn't believe the entire morning and most of the afternoon had already slipped away. There was no way on earth they were going to be able to get on the road today. They would just have to leave early in the morning and hope they beat the morning rush hour traffic as they crossed into Jersey to hit Interstate 95 south.

Rose reached into her oversized Hobo bag that she had draped over the back of the chair when she'd first come home. She pulled out a hand full of brochures and looked through them. She knew Lily had always wanted to go to Disney World and Rose supposed this would be the perfect time to go. She had discussed it with Ben when she'd gone to visit him to let him know about their daughter's latest escapade.

Ben then revealed one of his own secrets. He'd informed Rose of the stash of money he had hidden away before he was arrested and where Rose could find it. He'd told her to take all of the money and use it to get Lily out of the city and find a place to make a new life for the two of them. Rose vehemently refused to leave New York for good and take Lily away from her father. It just wasn't right.

In spite of the fact that Ben would be in prison for the rest of his life and they had been divorced for over a year now, Rose still thought of Ben as her husband and a large part of her life. She didn't want to put that part of it behind her yet. She wasn't ready.

Before leaving him that morning, she had grudgingly agreed to make at least an effort to move on with her life. It was a promise she wasn't sure she would be able to keep. Ben had been the love of her life and his betrayal of her trust had wounded her deeply. Not by infidelity, but by deception and hidden truths. Her belief in herself had taken a substantial hit when he'd finally confessed his guilt to her. How on earth could she love another man? How could she trust him not to betray her as Ben had?

As she turned away to leave the large room where only a few other visitors were, Ben had said to her, "I will always love you Rose. You and Lily are the only things that matter to me now. I am so sorry for what I have put you both through. If I had it to do over again, I would do things differently. But there is no such thing in life as a do-over. I hurt you and I hurt Lily and I will never forgive myself for that. Ever.

"I want you to have a good life and I will not fail you or my daughter again. I swear it."

Her throat had clogged with emotion that prevented her from saying anything else. She just smiled at him as love and doubt twisted around her heart like barbed wire. She nodded and left the prison as quickly as she could.

She was able to contain her tears of heartbreak until she had reached the parking lot and the four-year-old Taurus Ben had gotten for her before their lives fell apart. Then she let the dam break as she sat in the sweltering car sobbing for several minutes.

After the waterworks subsided and Rose got her emotions under control, she drove to where Ben had told her the money was hidden away. He'd told her where to look for three small flat keys. They were in a small pouch that he'd sewn into the upholstery of the driver's side seat of the Taurus. Ben had made Rose promise that if she ever decided to get rid of it to let him know beforehand. Now she knew the reason behind his peculiar obsession with that particular car.

What she had found in the three bank safety deposit boxes—all under her maiden name in a bank in New Jersey—nearly made her fall over in a dead faint. Each box contained \$100,000. Why hadn't the police found this when they froze their assets two years ago? They had to have known Ben had money stashed away somewhere. It would have been common sense to check across the state line, wouldn't it? Rose didn't want to dwell on the fact that things were more complicated than she had ever dreamed.

She had decided to leave two of the deposit boxes untouched. She would decide what to do with the money at a later date as she stuffed the wrapped, hundred-dollar bills into her bag. She had gone to several different banks to purchase four cashier's checks in the amount of \$9,000 each. It was time consuming but necessary to get around the red tape of buying a new \$35,000 vehicle—a 2014 Ford Escape—with cash. After spending several more hours at the department of motor vehicles, going to the post office to have her mail delivery halted, and canceling the daily newspaper, the day had pretty much been shot. One last stop at Mount Sinai Hospital Queens to request a leave of absence and a quick trip to Target for trip necessities and Rose was ready to drop. The promotion she had been in line for as ER nursing supervisor, was pretty much out the

window after the leave was granted, and that was something Rose regretted. It couldn't be helped. She had worked hard for that position, but her daughter came first.

As she shuffled through the brochures in her hands, she looked back up at the clock. All in all, it had been a very productive day since she'd left the house at 6:45 that morning.

She rose from her chair and slowly walked up the stairs carrying the colorful papers imprinted with Cinderella's castle and cheerful Disney characters. She slipped them, one at a time, beneath Lily's bedroom door, then went back to her room to pack her own suitcases.

It was well after eight pm by the time Rose had lugged her two bulky suitcases down the stairs. She smiled when she saw two equally bulky, bright purple suitcases plastered with big yellow daisies, sitting in the middle of the living room. Lily had apparently conceded to the trip after all. Either the talk with her father or the anticipation of finally visiting Disney World had changed the obstinate girl's mind.

It was getting late and Rose had to start supper. It would definitely be something easy. Perhaps a salad with some of the leftover grilled shrimp from last night's shrimp-fest at Red Lobster would be a nice treat for them both.

When Rose reached the kitchen, she saw the brochures laying open on the table. There were several items circled in bold red marker that she assumed meant Lily was interested in them. The brochure on the top of the pile spread open fully. It had not only a big red circle around the event, but the words THIS ONE written in bold capital letters that read with an arrow pointing to the Epcot Dive Quest activity. The girl swam like a fish. Of course she would want to go scuba diving while they were in Florida. It would be a good time to let Lily take classes to become a certified diver. She would love that and so would Rose. Maybe it would become another of their mother-daughter activities. And they could give up the rock climbing.

One could only hope.

The trip would take them, at least sixteen hours and was already programmed into the navigation system that came with the small SUV. The dealership had even synced her cell phone to the car so she could talk hands free while she drove if it became necessary. All the high-tech devices, bells, and whistles thrilled Rose. She went next door to let Mimi know they would be gone for several weeks, and to give her the spare key to the house so she could go in and water the plants and check on things while they were away.

With assurances from her neighbor and best friend that she would look after things, Rose coerced Lily into the car and they were off on a grand new adventure that would, hopefully, bring them closer together.

Lily promptly plugged her iPad into the lighter adapter, stuck the earbuds in her ears and tuned out Rose's cheerful chatter. Lily had no interest whatsoever in what her mother had to say. She hadn't wanted to go on the stupid trip anyway but since they would finally be going to Disney, and Daddy had said that he wished he could go too, she would try to make the best of it. That didn't include making nice with Rose.

She kicked off her sandals, parked her bare feet against the dashboard, and admired her fuchsia tipped toes that set off the silver band wrapped around the second toe of her right foot. A gift from Mercedes who sported its twin on her own foot.

The scent of new leather and the unfamiliarity of the large front seat had Lily glancing around in admiration. The tan seat was butter soft and cradled her body in comfort. If she was going to be trapped in a car for three days of driving, at least it would be in style. Her mother's deathly fear of heights negated any argument she could make to fly to Florida. Rose couldn't even climb a step ladder without turning pale as skim milk and sweating profusely. Lily used to laugh hysterically at her mother's phobia until she realized just how badly it terrified Rose. Lily was curious why her mother was so scared of heights and the one time she broached the subject, Rose refused to discuss it. The real shocker was when Rose had finally agreed to try the rock wall. Her mother had only made it a few feet off the floor, but it was a start at facing her fear.

Rose had always told Lily that running from fear only made it stronger. Facing it was like confronting a bully; they always backed down if you stood your ground.

A sharp smack against her denim clad leg had Lily snarling and glaring at her mother.

"Feet on the floor, Lily. Let's not get dirty footprints on the new leather," Rose instructed before backing out of the driveway.

With a grimace on her pixie face, Lily dropped her feet to the floor. "My feet aren't dirty. I took a shower before I went to bed last night," Lily stated pointedly, then cranked up the volume on her iPad, bobbing her head to the thumping base.

Knowing it would do no good to yell, Rose pulled one of the buds from Lily's ear and said, "Turn that down before you burst an eardrum."

Lily thumbed the volume down a single notch before replacing the bud and tuning out her mother once again. "Happy now?"

Chapter Two

The first hour of driving was a nerve-wracking battle as Rose maneuvered the Escape through the morning rush hour traffic. Unaccustomed to the larger vehicle, it had taken all her concentration to get them to Interstate 95 in one piece. She was truly grateful that Lily had decided to be antisocial. Rose wasn't sure she would have been able to cope with her daughter's surliness on top of the rudeness of the commuters who kept cutting in front of her and flipping her their middle finger, without putting the car in a ditch or wrapping it around a utility pole.

With a heavy sigh of relief, she finally spotted the exit sign and crept along with the slow traffic to the interstate. Once on the multilane highway, Rose set the cruise control and headed for points south in relative silence.

Their first stop for gas and a bathroom break almost three hours later, had seemed to refresh Lily's attitude somewhat. When they'd returned to the car, Lily grabbed fresh bottles of water and a plastic baggie of sliced apples for them to snack on.

"You want anything else from back here, Mom?" Lily asked before closing the cooler lid.

"No thanks, sweetie," Rose said, noticing Lily had called her mom instead of Rose, and a tiny tilt of her wide full mouth betrayed her giddiness. It was a start. Hopefully a sign that things might be looking up.

Lily let the cargo door close and resumed her place in the front seat. She didn't immediately grab her iPod this time but took a long swig of water before popping an apple slice into her mouth. As they made their way back onto the interstate, Rose tried to make small talk with Lily, hoping they could find some common ground where they could meet and perhaps make the trip a little more pleasant for both of them. It wasn't long before Lily pulled the portable DVD player from the backpack at her feet, plugged it into the car's utility

outlet—Rose remembered when they were called cigarette lighters—where the iPad had been and immersed herself in one of her favorite movies.

With the earbuds in her ears, the soundtrack of the movie didn't bother Rose as she drove through the afternoon traffic, reaching Richmond Virginia by 4:30. She was tired of driving and decided, though it was still pretty early, that they could stop for the night. They weren't punching a time clock so why rush the trip?

At the next exit she saw signs for a large hotel chain and several restaurants. She slid the SUV smoothly into the far-right lane and made the exit with little effort. Rose was already used to the new vehicle and was beginning to love the handling and the comfort of the seat as it cupped her behind and supported her lower back as she drove. The Escape had been a very good choice, she decided, and a bit ironic. She and Lily were *escaping* the turmoil of the past two years and seeking refuge at one of the *happiest places on earth*.

As she pulled into the lot of the hotel, Lily put her DVD player away. "Does this look okay for a night's stay to you, Lily?" Rose asked, hoping that if she gave Lily some say in where they stayed, it might appease the resistance to the trip just a little bit more.

"Sure, whatever," Lily said with a wary sigh.

"If you'd rather stay somewhere else Lily, just say the word. This is your vacation too, you know."

"Good, then let's go back home so I can go to the shore with Mercedes and the rest of my friends," Lily said with a raised brow and a smirk.

"God, Lily, will you please give me a break here?" Rose beat her palms against the steering wheel. "We both needed to get out of the city and your father agreed this was the best thing. Try to make the best of it. You might find out your having fun if you just stop being a pain in the butt."

Rose turned away and climbed out of the car. Leaving Lily sitting where she was, Rose made her way to the lobby to get them a room for the night.

When she returned to the car, Rose silently pulled around to the side of the two-story motel and parked in front of room 17. She climbed out of the car, pulled her overnight bag from the back seat and walked to the door of their room, letting Lily decide whether to follow suit or sit in the car and pout for a little while longer, like the spoiled brat she was rapidly becoming.

It only took a few moments for Lily to grab her backpack, lock the car doors and meet her mother in the large room with two queen size beds. As far as motel rooms went, this one was fairly new looking and clean. A fresh citrus scent permeated the air around them and the eggshell painted walls exhibited mass-produced landscape prints. A small four-cup coffee maker sat atop a mini-fridge next to the long dark wood dresser. A twenty-four-inch flat screen television was bolted to the wall directly across from the beds and the remote control sat on the table that separated them.

"Not too bad for a spur of the moment decision, wouldn't you say?" Rose asked, receiving one of Lily's "whatever" eye rolls as her answer. Undeterred, Rose tossed her bag on the bed closest to the door and said, "Well, let's get settled in and go find someplace to grab some dinner. I'm beat from driving."

“Yeah, I could eat,” Lily conceded.

“Great. Hey, maybe tomorrow if you want, you can drive for a while. Would you like that?” Rose asked with a wide grin.

Trying to maintain her ambiguous attitude and tamp down the excitement that had boiled up inside of her at the mention of driving, Lily dropped her bag on the other bed and said, “Sure, why not.”

The light in Lily’s eyes at the mention of driving the new Ford SUV did not escape Rose’s notice. It was obvious that Lily was trying to hold on to her nonchalance. What teenager could really resist an invitation to be behind the wheel of any car, let alone a brand new one?

“Good. Let’s wash up and find some food,” Rose was afraid to push the issue any farther and turned toward the bathroom.

It didn’t take them long to find a Denny’s. It was a place they could both get something they liked and not have to waste a lot of time or effort. After a relatively pleasant meal that had the fragile flame of contentment sparking to life inside of Rose, the two returned to their hotel room to veg out and watch silly movies on television before they retired for the night.

Rose awoke to the sound of running water. The flicker of confusion at waking up in unfamiliar surroundings had her glancing around until the full weight of sleep cleared and her eyes landed on the travel clock sitting on the table between the beds. Eight-thirty, it was later than Rose normally slept and as she glanced over she saw that Lily’s bed was empty. The running water ended abruptly. After another moment, Lily stepped out of the bathroom wrapped in a fluffy white towel and followed by a misty aura from her steamy shower.

“Hey, you’re awake finally,” Lily said with a tiny hint of the happy child she used to be. “I figured I’d go ahead and grab a shower while you were sleeping. It’s all yours.”

“K,” Rose said as she stretched her arms over her head, rolled out of bed and headed toward the bathroom. “Thanks for letting me sleep in. I guess I was more tired than I realized.”

By the time she was showered and dressed, Rose could have sworn she’d caught the smell of coffee brewing. That was impossible, though, she hadn’t brought any with her and she wondered if the hotel provided it as an amenity along with the coffee pot. When she pulled open the bathroom door and made her way back to her bed, sure enough, the small coffee pot was full of the dark brown liquid that Rose craved upon waking. There was even a real, honest to god, ceramic coffee mug sitting next to the coffee pot, with the Denny’s logo emblazoned across the front. Rose turned to Lily, who was busily searching through her backpack as though the secrets to the universe were hidden within its depths.

“Thank you, Lily,” Rose said softly. After all the tension between them, Lily still had the generosity of heart to not only make coffee for Rose but also to provide something suitable to drink it from. Of course, for

most of the girl's life, Lily had been hearing Rose grouse and complain about the Styrofoam cups that takeout coffee was served in. Still, this was unexpected and precious to Rose.

"What? It's just coffee not ambrosia," she stated sarcastically, still not looking at her mother.

"That's a matter of opinion, daughter of mine. Coffee is the elixir of the gods."

"Are you ready to get something to eat so we can get on the road again? Remember, you said I could drive today," Lily tried to put on her mantle of teenage `tude, but Rose saw through it.

"Right. Let's get checked out and find some breakfast. We could stop at Denny's again, it's right before the interstate." She drained the cup and eyed the still half full pot with longing. Oh well, she would grab another cup at the restaurant, she decided and set the cup down.

"Okay, whatever, let's just go." Lily grabbed the straps of her backpack and headed for the door as she spoke.

"Lead the way, Lily Ann," Rose said. Nothing short of a national disaster was going to ruin her incredible mood.

"Don't call me Lily Ann. I hate that."

Rose grabbed the empty coffee cup, swiped a napkin around the inside of it, and then dropped it into her bag. She didn't want to forget it. Lily had made the effort and Rose wanted to hold on to it as a souvenir of that event. How the kid had gotten a Denny's mug without Rose seeing, was beyond her, but she was truly happy that Lily had done it.

By the time they were seated at the restaurant, it was going on ten o'clock and Lily's mood had returned to its previous obduracy. Being in the medical profession—not to mention going through them herself when she was Lily's age—Rose understood the constant teenage hormonal surges that sent Lily swinging to opposite ends of the emotional spectrum in a matter of seconds. It was enough to drive Rose to distraction. Despite that, she was determined to find that middle ground where the two of them could enjoy each other's company and not end up in another of their screaming matches. If not enjoy then at least coexist amicably.

Rose's euphoria over the coffee mug evaporated almost from the moment the waitress came to take their order. She'd set two glasses of ice water on the table in front of them, with fresh slices of lemon perched on the rims.

"What the hell is this?" Lily demanded of the waitress as she pointed to the lemon slice. "I didn't ask for lemon. Take it back and get me a clean glass of water, no ice and no lemon. And don't just take the fucking thing off and bring it back. I want a clean glass or I'll throw it in your fucking face!"

Rose's mouth was agape in shock at not only Lily's verbal abuse of the waitress, but of her language as well.

"*Lily Ann Bradigan!* How dare you speak to this woman like that!" Rose erupted. Lily had gone too far this time. She'd had enough. There was no excuse good enough in Rose's mind to treat anyone in such a

manner. Rose seethed. Her face had paled to the color of the paper napkin crumpled in her white knuckled fingers.

“It’s rude and uncalled for. Just because you are angry with me doesn’t mean that you can take it out on other people who are doing their job. Do you understand me young lady?”

“I’m not a kid anymore, *Rose*. I’m sixteen now, I’m an adult. In many cultures I’m old enough to even get married if I wanted to. Why don’t you start treating me like one, for fuck’s sake?” Lily demanded loudly, unrepentant of her actions.

The entire establishment had silenced as mother and daughter clashed; the only sound heard was the infuriated breath as it pushed out of Rose’s constricted lungs.

Rose dropped her clenched fists into her lap to keep from reaching across the width of the table and slapping the attitude out of her daughter. She had never been so mortified in her life. What type of mother would these people think her to be, to have a child so cruel and vulgar?

Finally Rose had regained enough control to grind out between clinched teeth, “When you start acting like an adult I will start treating you like an adult. So long as you continue to act like a spoiled little brat in a temper tantrum because you don’t get your own way, I will treat you as such. And furthermore, you understand this Lily Ann,” Rose’s ire had been stoked as she glared at Lily, her voice raising several octaves.

“I don’t care who is watching or if I’m carted off to jail. If I ever, *ever*, hear you using that kind of language again, I will smack you so hard you won’t be able to speak a syllable for a week. You never heard that kind of talk growing up, from your father or from me, and you *will not* use it. I am your mother and you will treat me with respect. And you will treat others with civility and respect as well.” Rose pointed her finger in Lily’s flushing face, only inches from the girl’s nose.

“Don’t call me Rose again. And you will apologize to this young woman and the people around us that you offended and upset with your atrocious display.” With each word she’d spoken, the volume of Rose’s voice increased and by the time she’d finished her lecture she was panting as though she’d just run a marathon.

After three seconds of blaring silence in which no response from Lily had been uttered, a thunderous applause broke out over the dining room, adding to Rose’s embarrassment.

Someone in the far corner of the dining room blurted out, “That kid needs a butt wuppin!”

Lily’s face suffused with color as she jumped up from her chair and threw her napkin on the table. “Fine. I’m not hungry anyway. Let’s get out of here,” she said, refusing to look at her mother as her cheeks burned.

“Sit. Down,” Rose commanded, loudly. “You started this scene, little girl, now you suffer the consequences. We will have a nice breakfast and you will behave yourself.”

After a very brief staring match, Lily dropped back into her chair, crossed her arms over her chest, and slumped as low as possible. “Sit up straight, Lily,” Rose said as she picked up the menu.

The waitress, who had been frozen to the spot by the table since the episode began, picked up Lily's glass of water, her face pink and her hands reaching with a slight tremble. "I'll bring a fresh glass of water for you. Did you say no ice?"

"Yes, no ice please," Lily said softly.

"See, Lily? That wasn't so hard now was it?" Rose offered, receiving a snort in response. "So what would you like for breakfast?"

Before she could pick up her menu to see what her choices might be, Lily watched the waitress place a glass of water in front of her, sans lemon slice and ice.

"Thank you, ma'am," she said, still unable to face the young woman.

With a smile that lit up her pretty face, the waitress said, "You're quite welcome. Are you ready to order yet?"

After a subdued meal of egg-white omelets with spinach and fresh tomatoes, whole wheat toast, and fresh fruit, Rose and Lily walked back to the car.

As Rose pulled the keys from her bag, Lily said, "You said I could drive, Mom."

With a lifted brow and a smirk, Rose informed Lily that she had lost that right when she decided to act like a delinquent and when she'd learned a little respect for other people's feelings, then she would earn the privilege of driving a car again.

"Driving is not a right," Rose informed her daughter. "It's a responsibility."

"That is so unfair! You promised," Lily argued, and stomped her foot.

The fury and pain that had dammed up inside of her for the past two years poured out of Rose like searing lava from an erupting volcano. She faced her daughter's accusatory scowl.

"No, Lily. What is *unfair* is your treatment of that waitress in there when all she did was place a glass of water on the table. What is *unfair* is your resentment of me because your father is in jail. What is *unfair* is that you think that you are the only one that has suffered since *all* our lives turned to a disaster. That is what is unfair.

"You lost your father and I'm sorry for that, but I lost my husband, my best friend, and the love of my life at the same time. I am now raising an ungrateful teenager alone, who thinks she is the only person on this earth with problems. You want to be treated like an adult, then start accepting that there are other people in this world that have just as much pain and suffering as you do."

Rose glanced around, trying to curb the tears of pain and frustration that she couldn't seem to hold back. She watched as a young woman, no older than her middle twenties Rose guessed, help a young man into a wheelchair. The scars on his face and the missing legs told Rose that he had probably been a soldier, wounded in action. She didn't have to see the disabled veteran's tag on the back of the van they'd exited to know it.

"Believe it or not, Lily, there are people who have it a whole lot worse than you can ever imagine.

“That sense of entitlement that you carry around like a crown has tarnished, Lily Ann Bradigan. You work for what you want. Don’t expect everything to be handed to you just because it’s what you think you deserve. Now get in the car.” Rose turned and jerked open the driver’s side door.

Wordlessly, Lily climbed into the passenger seat and buckled her seatbelt. They had traveled over half a mile before she finally asked in a meek voice, “If Daddy was the love of your life, how could you just divorce him like that? You turned your back on him when he needed you the most.”

“Oh Lily,” Rose whispered. She looked over at her daughter’s tear streaked face and her heart broke. It was time to tell her the truth no matter what Ben had deemed the right thing to do. Lily needed to know why things happened as they did. “I never turned my back on your dad. The divorce was more of a technicality. I didn’t want to do it, your father insisted on me filing for it. He said that if I didn’t he would. He said we’d be safer from the people that he did business with if they thought we were no longer together.

“We didn’t want to tell you about it because you were already taking everything so hard. You never believed that he did the things he’d confessed to.”

“I still don’t believe he did those things, Mom. Dad couldn’t have been the one that sold the drugs or killed that man. After all the lectures he gave me about saying no to drugs and staying clean, no way would he be a drug dealer, let alone kill someone over them. That’s how I know that he was set up,” Lily said, still refusing to believe in his culpability. “I’m going to prove that Uncle Jimmy framed him.”

“What? Uncle Jimmy? Lily, why on earth would you think Jimmy framed your dad?” Rose asked, shaken by the accusation. Rose had never liked Ben’s brother-in-law and never trusted the man. But to hear Lily state that her uncle was cruel enough to set up an innocent man to go to prison was so far out of left field, it was unimaginable.

“Of course it was him. Why do you think they found him face down in the river with his throat slit from ear to ear? Because *he* was the one that was selling the drugs and *he* was the one that killed that guy during the drug deal. The people Uncle Jimmy sold the drugs for got mad at him for the raid on the garage, and when Daddy went to jail, Uncle Jimmy tried to steal from them again and they killed him for it. Can you believe the cops tried to pin Uncle Jimmy’s death on Dad as well? He was in jail for crying out loud, and they still tried to say he did it. If that isn’t corruption, then I don’t know what is. And I’m going to prove it.”

Incredibly, Lily had woven her own theories to fit the few facts she was privy to. There would be no use arguing with her until she was ready to face the truth on her own. There was no way to force it and it hurt Rose deeply that Ben had done this to their daughter.

“How are you going to do that?” Rose asked, astounded at Lily’s absolute refusal to see any bad in Benjamin Bradigan, perfect father of the century, and hero extraordinaire. In her eyes at least.

“I’m going to go to law school, become the best lawyer in the whole state of New York, and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that my father was wrongly accused and sentenced to life in prison by a corrupt

police department. Then I'm going to sue the state and collect millions of dollars in punitive damages on Daddy's behalf. I'm going to be the next Clarence Darrow."

Okay, that went well, Rose decided. *Not!*

At least the girl had a plan for her future, misguided as it was. "Wow, a lawyer, you really plan on going through with that? I know you had mentioned it before, but I wasn't sure if that was still the plan." Rose decided to latch onto something that wouldn't cause another argument and hopefully law school was it.

"Yeah, well. I'm still going to go to law school. I'm going to minor in political science in college, too. When I get Dad out of jail, I'm going to go into politics. Who knows? Maybe I'll be president someday," Lily said, watching her mother's reaction to that statement.

"Holy macaroni," Rose said, remembering what Lily used to say when she was little and was excited about something. "My daughter, the President of the United States of America."

Faking wiping a tear from her cheek, Rose wept gleefully, "I'm so proud," she said, eliciting an unexpected squeal of laughter from Lily that seemed to erase every ounce of tension that had built between them. A delicate calm settled in the interior of the car.

By two o'clock Rose decided it was time to stop for a bathroom break and fill up the gas tank. It was still nearly half full but since they had to stop anyway, they might as well top off the tank at the same time. She moved into the far-right lane and when the next exit came up, she turned into the first gas station she came to. Her bladder wasn't willing to wait much longer. She pulled up to the pump, handed Lily her wallet and the car keys. "Here, you do the honors. I have to go before I wet myself."

"Do you want a snack or some coffee or anything?" Lily asked as she took the items from Rose.

"No coffee but I'd love a bottle of diet Pepsi, if you don't mind. I'll be back in a minute," Rose answered then took off in a fast walk toward the minimart entrance. Over her shoulder, Rose called out, "Don't forget to get more ice, too, Lily."

"Okay," Lily said as she slid her mother's credit card into the card reader on the pump. It didn't take long to finish the job and Rose hadn't come back to the car yet, so Lily decided to lock up and get the soft drink and ice while she waited. She wandered around the short aisles of the mini mart grabbing items off the shelves while keeping her eye on the extremely cute boy stocking the cooler with bottles of Coke, Pepsi, and assorted other drinks. Every so often he would turn her way and catch her watching him. A shy grin would grace her lips and her cheeks would turn a becoming shade of pink.

By the time Lily finally made it back to the car, Rose was waiting for her, leaning against the front bumper. A pair of dark sunglasses hid the expression in Rose's eyes as she watch the lanky boy follow Lily, carrying a twelve pack of bottled water and two bags of ice. As though Rose were invisible, Lily lifted her hand and pointed the key fob at the back hatch of the Escape to unlock it.

“You can just set those down there, Jake,” Lily said gesturing to a spot on the pavement beside the car. She shifted her own load to free her right hand and lifted the tailgate. “Thanks for the help, Jake. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem, Lily. It’s part of the customer service,” he replied with a sappy, puppy dog look in his big brown eyes. “So, when do you think you’ll be back this way?”

“Probably not for a while. We’re not going back to New York until September,” Lily informed him.

Rose couldn’t help seeing the crestfallen look on the poor kid’s face. She turned away to keep them from seeing her smile. He was evidently smitten with Lily.

“Lily, are you ready to go?” Rose asked, as she pulled open the passenger side door of the car.

“Sure, Mom. Let me put the ice in the chest and I’ll be ready.”

“Well, have a safe trip, Lily. If you get back this way, look me up. I work here after school too, not just during the summer. My folks own the place so it’s kinda mandatory,” Jake informed her. “Here, let me help you with the ice bags.”

He hefted the first bag up and poured the frozen chunks over the clear plastic bottles as though he’d been doing it forever. He repeated the process with the second bag, then crumpled the empty plastic in hands that looked large enough to palm a basketball.

That boy was definitely going to be a heart breaker when he grew into his maturity, Rose surmised. It was a good thing they didn’t live around here or she’d have a few more worries over Lily.

“Thanks, again, Jake. Goodbye,” Lily said as she let the hatch close. As was her habit when shyness overwhelmed her or when she was nervous, Lily played with the gold, heart-shaped locket she was never without. It had been a gift from her father on Lily’s tenth birthday and held a picture of each of her parents. On the back, he’d had it engraved with *For my Favorite Flower* with a tiny image of a lily-of-the-valley etched beneath the words. Embedded in the filigree design on the front was Lily’s birthstone, a flawless, one carat, square cut emerald. When she was nervous, scared, afraid or just plain bored, the feel of it brought her father closer to her.

“Bye, Lily.” Jake turned away and headed back to the store entrance at a slow trot, turning his head to peek over his shoulder only twice.

Once he was out of sight, Lily pulled a blue box of tampons from one of the bags and stuffed it into her overnight bag.

“Getting your period during vacation sucks, doesn’t it, sweetie?” Rose said with a sympathetic smile. “Mine comes next week. I just hope we’re already settled in our cabin by then.”

“Whatever,” Lily grumbled as she slammed the hatch closed.

“Get in, Lily. You can drive since you have the keys in your hand anyway,” Rose said as she pulled open the door and settled into the passenger seat.

“Really? Thanks, Mom.” With a smile that reached her bright chocolate eyes, so like her father’s, Lily hopped into the driver seat. When her feet didn’t quite reach the break-pedal, she said, “Where’s the seat adjuster button?”

“On the left side of the seat there’s a switch. Go ahead and set it for your comfort while you drive. I’ll reset it when I take the wheel.”

Lily played with the seat adjuster for several minutes laughing as it slid smoothly from one position to the next. “This is so cool. I want one of these so I can drive to school in the fall,” Lily said with a giggle.

“We’ll see how the summer goes. It might be arranged but then, knowing how you like to change your mind so often, you might decide on a pickup truck between now and then.”

“Oh, gross! I am so not a redneck kind of girl, Mother. I’m a city girl and a classy ride is what I want,” Lily said. Rose’s little girl sounded almost like the old Lily. The happy child without a care in the world and a future filled with nothing but bright shining stars. It was a good feeling.

“Not all pickup trucks are driven by rednecks, Lily. That is stereotyping and you know it. Anyway, you know what I meant. We’ll wait until the time comes and when you’re ready for a car we’ll discuss it then.”

“I’m ready for my own car, Mom, you just don’t want me to have one.” The exasperation was evident in Lily’s voice as she glanced at Rose. “That way you can control where I go and keep tabs on me.”

Desperate to keep the amity they’d reached on track. Rose gave Lily a wide grin. “Nope, that’s not it, Lily. I want you to be happy with the car you get because it’s not like a pair of shoes that doesn’t fit. You can’t just take it back to the store and get your money back. A car is a major investment that you can’t take lightly. Now, are you sure you want an Escape like this one? Or is there some other type of car you think you might like.”

“Hmm,” Lily said thoughtfully. “I guess I could go for a Bentley,” she said with the light of the afternoon sun mixing with the glow of mischief in her eyes.

“Oh now, hold on. That’s a little out of the price range, Lily Bradigan. Guess again,” Rose admonished with a laugh.

“Oh, if I must,” Lily said as she pressed the start button on the dashboard and the engine came to life. “Man this is too cool. I don’t even need a key to start this baby.” She grinned at her mother, checked the mirrors and pulled out of the gas station.

As they cruised down the interstate, mother and daughter chatted like the best of friends and it felt like the past two years of strife and pain had been put upon a shelf. The respite was like a balm to them both, breathing new life into their relationship. Rose just hoped it lasted for a little while longer.

As Lily crossed the state line into North Carolina, a sign for the Biltmore House in Asheville, loomed ahead. “Hey, that looks cool, can we go see the Biltmore House?” Lily asked.

“Sure, why not? We’re not punching a time clock,” Rose quipped. “Pull off at the next rest stop and I’ll reprogram the navigation system and we can change seats. I’ll drive for a while.”

“Okay, I’m getting a little tired and I have to pee anyway,” Lily said. It was another three and a half miles before they spotted the public rest stop signs.

The bathroom break took only about fifteen minutes before they were back on the road. Rose followed the mechanical voice of the navigation system as it announced each turn.

By the time they’d reached Asheville, it was still early enough to take the tour of the Biltmore House. Lily took, what Rose assumed, a hundred pictures of the historic mansion with her phone. After the tour, they decided to call it a day and found another hotel to spend the night. After settling their things in their room, they searched out a place to eat.

After the fiasco at Denny’s earlier that day, neither Rose nor Lily wanted to venture through the doors of another one for a while. They spotted an Applebee’s and after a unanimous vote, decided that was the place for them.

When they returned to their room after the meal, Lily pulled out the handful of brochures she’d collected at the last rest stop. Spreading them over the bed she’d chosen for herself, she looked through them for things they could stop and check out on their way to Orlando.

“Geez, would you look at this one?” she said with a deprecating chuckle. “There’s a place called Gaffney, South Carolina that has a water tower painted like a giant peach. That’s so lame.”

“Gaffney, South Carolina? Is it on the way?” Rose asked.

“It’s not too far south of where we are now, according to the map, why?”

“Maybe we could make another little detour and check it out. What else is on the way?” Rose asked as she settled on the bed beside Lily.

“Oh please, who wants to see a giant peach?” Lily scoffed.

“Hey, a lot of famous people come from South Carolina, young lady, so don’t make fun?”

“Really? Name some,” Lily challenged.

“Let’s see,” Rose said, tapping her finger to her pointed chin as though in deep concentration. “Ah, Darius Rucker, for one.”

“Darius who?” Lily frowned.

“You know, Darius Rucker? Hootie and the Blowfish? Remember them?” Rose pointed out.

“Oh brother. Is that really a band name?”

“Yes and they are quite good, too, miss smarty pants. He does some amazing country music too, now.”

“Country? Please Mother, don’t make me barf. I hate country music.” Lily pretended to stick her finger down her throat and gag at the mere thought of it.

Ignoring her daughter’s antics, Rose continued. “Let’s see, who else.” After another moment Rose said triumphantly, “Andi McDowell! She’s from Gaffney, South Carolina, where that giant peach water tower is that you wanted to see.”

“I didn’t want to see it, you did.”

“Fine, let’s get some sleep, I’m beat. I want to get on the road early tomorrow.”

“Okay. You want the shower first?” Lily asked.

“No, you go ahead. I’m going to look through these and see if there’s anything else we might be interested in,” Rose said, holding up one of the brochures.

After her shower, Lily came out dressed in an oversized T-shirt and her underwear. “It’s all yours, Mom.”

“Thanks, honey. I won’t be long.”

By the time Rose had finished her shower and turned off the bathroom light, Lily was huddled under the covers of her bed texting on her cell phone. “I’m going to turn off the light, Lily. Are you ready for bed?”

“In a minute, I’m talking to Mercedes. Her brother Hector joined the Marines.” Lily answered.

“Oh, that’s nice. I always liked Hector. The other two though, I’m not so sure about.”

“They’re okay. Hector’s the middle boy but Javier and Rico are really full of themselves. But, in all honesty, Mom, they treated me like their other sister since Mercedes and I were in second grade. If anybody tried picking on me, whether Mercedes was there or not they came to my rescue. They’re all like the big brothers I never had.”

“Okay. Well, don’t stay up too late, Lily. Remember, we want to get an early start in the morning.

“Alright, don’t worry,” Lily said, her voice laced with barely contained frustration.

When the travel alarm clock went off at 7:00am, Rose felt well rested and lighthearted. Most of the drive the day before and throughout the entire evening, she and Lily hadn’t shared a single cross word. Her spirit soared with the hope that this day would be just as wonderful.

“Wakey, wakey, Lily-kins,” Rose called out. It was the wakeup call she’d used every morning to get Lily out of bed for school.

With a grunt and a grumble, Lily dragged herself out of her bed and slunk to the bathroom. When she reemerged fully clothed in her usual uniform of jeans and a glittery T-shirt—this one teal colored with brown and yellow butterflies—Lily’s mood had not improved, and Rose’s bliss slipped down a notch.

Try as she might, Rose couldn’t bring Lily out of her mood. “What did Mercedes have to say, when you were talking to her last night? Is she upset about Hector leaving for the Marines?”

“Not really. Just . . . nothing, forget it,” Lily grouched.

“Lily, tell me what’s wrong. Everything was great last night, what’s happened? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine, Hector’s fine. Her mom and dad are fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“Come on, sweetie, it always helps to talk things out,” Rose prodded.

“I said nothing’s wrong so stop asking, okay? Geez,” Lily said as she pulled her iPad out of her backpack and plugged it in. Before placing the earbuds into her ears, Lily paused and let out a heavy sigh.

“Mercedes said that Tony has another girlfriend. I’m not even gone three days yet and he found someone else.

“She said that he told her that since I’m not around anymore he’ll find a girl that will give him what he wants,” Lily finally confessed. “He told her that since I wouldn’t sleep with him he’d find a girl that will. So that’s what the rat-bastard did. Sorry, I didn’t mean to cuss again.”

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry. I know you liked him a lot.” Rose didn’t know what else to say.

“Yeah, whatever. He’s a big jerk anyway. Who needs him?” Lily stated.

“That’s right, Lily. You deserve better than that ‘rat-bastard.’ And I forgive you this once for the cussing.”

Rose gave her daughter a grin hoping that it would be returned. When it wasn’t, she added, “You’re smart, pretty, and you have a bright future ahead of you. Besides, when you go off to college to become that super lawyer, you won’t have time for big jerks like him anyway, right?”

Lily didn’t answer. She plugged her ears with the buds and cranked up the volume. Matchbox Twenty’s *Push* blasted through her head as she watched the city of Asheville, pass by.

Chapter Three

Beep . . . beep . . . beep . . .

What is that god awful beeping?

That was the first thought that came to Rose's mind as she struggled from the dark abyss. Her second one came almost simultaneously: "Why do I hurt so badly?" Every molecule of her body felt like it had been pulled apart, turned inside out, and then jammed back together in the wrong places.

Beep . . . beep . . . beep . . .

"Will someone please stop that incessant noise?" Rose screamed. Or at least she tried to scream the words. What came out was a whimper that was barely heard by the other two occupants of the room. She tried desperately to force her heavy eyelids open.

Something was terribly wrong, and panic had started to set in. Lily. Where was Lily?

"Lily?" she called out just a little louder than the whimper.

"Lucas, I think she's waking up now," said a soft voice that Rose didn't recognize. It sounded like she was in a cave.

"Thank God," Lucas said. "I was afraid she wasn't going to make it. She looked like she was in pretty bad shape when we brought her in here last night."

The deep, masculine voice sounded closer, to Rose's ears. It too, was unfamiliar and worry niggled at her fog shrouded brain.

"Ma'am? Can you hear me?" The woman's voice was closer now. Rose could feel the warm, mint scented breath against her skin as she spoke. There was a kindness in the tone of the voice. Along with something that might have been deep concern.

“Lily,” Rose said again. Her throat was parched, and her mouth felt like she’d been chewing on cotton. “Where’s my daughter?”

Her voice was a little stronger this time as she forced the words out between dried, cracked lips. Her eyes opened slowly but they couldn’t seem to focus on anything. A blur of light blue moved to her side. With a soft, mechanical hum, Rose felt the head of the bed she lay in, slowly rise. The bright lights in the room hurt her eyes when she opened them, and she closed them again.

“Here, take a small sip of water if you can,” the kind voice said. Something small and cylindrical touched her lips and Rose realized it was a plastic straw. She took a tentative sip and when the icy liquid hit her tongue, the water tasted so wonderful she gulped it greedily.

“Not too much so fast, ma’am. We don’t want you over doing it your first time, now do we?” The woman’s voice had a very pronounced southern drawl that added to its charm, Rose finally noticed as the shroud began to clear.

Rose ran her tongue over her lips trying to moisten them. Her throat felt a little less raw and she asked again, “Where’s my daughter?”

“Ma’am, can you tell us your name?” It was the man’s voice that asked the question. It was deep and low with that same southern quality to it that Rose found intriguing. It reminded her of church hymns and country music from years ago. She wondered if he would sing Amazing Grace for her.

What an odd thought to have.

Rose blinked her eyes several times as she tried to adjust to the harsh glare of the florescent lights. Her vision blurred again, then finally focused on a very large man standing at the foot of the bed. He must have stood at least six feet two or more. His linebacker shoulders stretched the seams of the chambray shirt he wore with faded jeans and worn boots.

“Rose. Rose Bradigan. Where am I? Where’s my daughter?” Rose asked for the third time. The fact that no one would answer her questions had fear igniting a fire in her chest. Something was wrong. Lily needed her. She was in danger and Rose had to get to her now.

“You’re at Gaffney General Hospital, Ms. Bradigan,” the man said. “I’m Sheriff Lucas Manning for Cherokee County, South Carolina. Do you remember how you got here?”

Lucas spoke in a gentle voice as he took a step around to the side of the bed to get a better look at the woman he’d nearly run over the night before. A white bandage was wrapped around the top of her head, leaving dark tendrils of matted hair, falling across the snowy pillow cover. Half of her face was swollen and smeared with dark purple and deep red bruises. Worried blue eyes searched his face as he spoke.

“Hospital?” Of course, she thought as she looked around the room. It was small and the antiseptic smell was as familiar to her as the scent of her own perfume. It was almost second nature to her since she had spent ten to twelve hours a day, five days a week in a hospital emergency room for the past twelve and a half years.

“No, I don’t have any idea how I got here. Was I in a car accident? Please will someone tell me where Lily is? I have to find her.” Rose’s voice had become shrill with terror as she tried desperately to lift herself off the bed. In her weakened state it didn’t take much for the slim, long-fingered hand of the nurse on the other side of her bed to push her shoulder back until Rose was lying flat in bed once again.

“Now, don’t you go getting all worked up, Miss Rose. Lucas will find your girl,” the nurse assured her.

Rose’s wide, terrified eyes scanned the pretty face of the nurse dressed in pale blue scrubs. She wore a stethoscope around her neck and a name tag that read Jill Manning, RN, Gaffney General Hospital. She must be related to the sheriff. Perhaps his wife since she was wearing a wide, gold wedding band on her left ring finger.

As a nurse a wedding ring and a functional watch were pretty much the limit of jewelry allowed in a hospital. Germs tended to hide in the crevices and facets of ornate jewelry and liked to spread themselves around.

“As far as I know, ma’am, there was no car wreck that I saw,” Lucas said in his quiet voice. It was a little unsettling to Rose to hear it coming from such a big body. He looked like he might be in his mid or late forties with short black hair and the most stunning blue eyes she’d ever seen, giving him the look of what she’d always thought of as black-Irish. The badge clipped to his belt and the holster that sat on his hip gave the man a very intimidating presence.

“Please, Sheriff,” Rose pleaded as she lifted her hand to him as though she could impart the urgency she felt through touch. “Lily’s only sixteen years old, you have to tell me where she is. If she’s okay. I have to know.”

“I’m sorry Ms. Bradigan, but we don’t know anything about your daughter. My son and I found you walking down the middle of the road yesterday in the dead of night and we brought you here. You were alone,” Lucas told her. His sapphire eyes never left Rose’s face as he spoke.

Lucas shuddered as the memory blasted through him again.

He and David, his nineteen-year-old son, were on their way home from Lucas’ brother’s house when they’d come across Rose walking down the middle of a dark country road. It was well after midnight and Lucas had just barely missed striking the woman by running his truck into a ditch. She’d looked like she had been through hell. Her clothes were caked with mud, blood, and God only knew what else. Her face was bruised, and blood had matted her dark hair from a deep laceration on the side of her head . . . And her bare feet were cut so badly, Lucas was sure there was no meat left on the soles of them.

The woman was in a trance like state and unresponsive when he tried to find out what had happened to her. Thinking he could get her to the hospital faster if he took her there himself, rather than waiting for an ambulance, Lucas had bundled her into a blanket that he kept in his pickup, and carefully placed her across the back seat. He’d pulled out his first aid kit and with David’s assistance, wrapped what little gauze he had, around the woman’s bleeding feet.

“Lily’s missing? Oh God, you have to find her! She’s just sixteen,” Rose repeated in desperation. She couldn’t seem to stop the flood of panic induced tears as they streamed down her face. “You have to help me find my daughter! She’s in danger,”

“Ms. Bradigan, I will do everything in my power to find your girl. But you have to give me a place to start looking. I’ll need to know every move you and your daughter have made. What’s the last thing you remember before waking up here? I need a starting point, ma’am. Help me help you find your daughter. Can you do that for me?”

Lucas’ soft, coaxing tone was filled with confidence and a subtle prodding that generally got him what information he needed. In his experience, when a child was missing the first place you looked was at the parents and the immediate family. If that didn’t pan out, then you widened the circle to include friends of the family and friends of the friends of the family. But in most child abduction and assault cases, it fell on someone close to home.

Nurse Jill held a tissue out to Rose, and she grasped it with shaking fingers. She dabbed at her swollen eyes.

“Yes. Okay. The last thing I remember was . . . I don’t . . . wait! We, um, Lily and I were looking at this huge peach shaped water tower,” Rose said with a small chuckle. “Lily said it looked like a giant butt.”

Lucas and Jill both gave a brief laugh at that. The smile on the sheriff’s face had tiny lines crinkling the corners of his eyes and deepening the dimple in his left cheek. Even his laugh had a musical quality to it, Rose thought.

“Yeah, we get that quite often,” Lucas said. “The county had it repainted a few years ago to make it look less like a big a—butt,” he corrected. A slight flush tinged his tanned face at the slip he’d almost made. His southern manners, instilled in him by his parents practically from the womb, were so deeply ingrained in him, it was second nature for Lucas to censor his vocabulary in mixed company.

“When was that, Ms. Bradigan?”

Was it this morning? No, the sheriff said last night he’d brought her to the hospital. Why was her brain so fuzzy now? Her brow furrowed as she tried to think but nothing came immediately to mind, and her head began to throb. She began rubbing her temple with the first two fingers of her left hand.

“Um, what day is today?” Rose asked.

“It’s Sunday morning, ma’am,” Lucas said in that ever so gentle voice of his and the words echoed inside of Rose’s head as though he’d bellowed them at her through amplifiers.

“Sunday?” she asked, shaking her head in denial. “No, that can’t be right. It was Tuesday morning when we got to the water tower. That was five days ago. We left New York on Saturday morning for an extended vacation and we took a detour. Lily wanted to see the Biltmore House.”

The panic that had been simmering inside of her chest had turned to a raging boil, causing her heart to pound fast and hard. The incessant beeping that annoyed her upon first waking, kicked into a rapid squeal.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God! Where is she? Where’s my daughter?” she demanded and tried in vain to pull at the IV line in the back of her hand. She had to get out of here and find Lily. Her daughter was in danger and Rose had to get to her now.

The pain that wracked her body was nothing compared to the fear for her daughter. She struggled against Nurse Jill’s fingers as she tried to keep Rose from ripping the IV needle from her skin and the huge, strong hands of Sheriff Manning as he tried to keep her from harming herself in her need for escape. Rose tried to kick her feet out at them but when her right foot met the foot of the bed, the pain that shot through her nearly had her passing out. Her breath caught in her throat and bright white spots dotted her vision. It took several long moments before she was able to draw breath again and when she did, she couldn’t help the scream that erupted from her.

“Oh, Miss Rose, please try to stay calm. I know it hurts but your feet are in really bad shape,” Jill said as she helped her patient to lie down again. “I’ll get you something for the pain.”

Jill hurried out of the room for the prescribed medication, leaving the door open behind her.

“Ms. Bradigan, you have to calm down. This isn’t going to help find your daughter.” His voice was a little gruffer than before but still had not risen in volume. The harsher tone was what Rose needed to focus her mind and center her thoughts enough to do what needed to be done. The sheer agony that emanated from the bottoms of her feet to the back of her head had caused nausea to roil in her stomach.

“I’m going to throw up,” she said and slapped her free hand over her colorless lips. Lucas grabbed the first thing he could find, the small pink basin the nurse had given Rose a sponge bath with and shoved it in front of her just in time for Rose to vomit into it.

By the time her stomach was emptied, Jill had returned with the pain medication in a syringe. Rose felt so weak. She fell back against the pillow, her ashen face making the bruises more evident.

Jill slowly injected the medicine into the IV line. “There you go, Miss Rose. You’ll start feeling it take effect in a minute or two,” Jill cooed. “Let me get you a washcloth to wipe your mouth. Okay?”

Rose just nodded her head and closed her eyes as she tried to breathe through the pain, praying the meds took effect fast, quick, and in a hurry. “You said my feet were in bad shape. What happened?”

Rose looked from the nurse to the sheriff as they looked at each other silently debating whether or not to tell Rose what happened.

“I think I’m gonna let Lucas, I mean the sheriff, answer that for you, Miss Rose,” Jill said as she gently patted the cool, damp cloth over Rose’s face, wiping away the drops of sick that had clung to her lips. “I’m going to go check on another patient. If you need anything you just press that buzzer for me and I’ll come quick as I can.”

Jill patted Rose’s hand, checked the IV flow once more, and slipped out of the room.

“Well, Ms. Bradigan,” Lucas began slowly. “Like I said, David and I were on our way home last night when we found you walking down the middle of the road. It was dark and I almost ran over you. When we got

you into my truck, I realized you weren't wearing any shoes and your feet looked like raw hamburger. All I can think is that you must have been walking barefoot for miles."

"Barefoot? Where were my shoes?" Rose asked.

"Well, ma'am, I was hoping you could tell me that."

Rose closed her eyes as she tried to think what could possibly have made her walk down a dark country road, barefoot, and alone. Something terrible had to have happened and her fear for Lily's safety intensified. She had to pull herself together. She was in no shape physically to go out and search for her daughter and Sheriff Manning looked more than capable of doing the job he was elected to do. She shored up her courage, looked deep within herself for the strength she needed, and turned back to face the man she hoped would find her daughter quickly. "I don't remember, Sheriff."

Her eyes filled with tears and panic. Hysteria wasn't but a fraction away and Lucas needed the woman calm enough to remember as many details as she could. It wasn't looking hopeful at the moment, but he had to get moving. Too much time had already been lost if the girl had been missing since Tuesday.

"You feel like going through with this Ms. Bradigan? I don't want to make you feel any worse than you do, but the sooner we get started looking for your girl, the sooner we'll find her," Lucas said to her with another one of those smiles that had the dimple peeking out again.

When she nodded her head in agreement, Lucas pulled a small notebook and a short, stubby pencil from his shirt pocket and poised to make notes. "Atta girl, Ms. Bradigan," he said, his smile putting a twinkle in his eyes.

"Okay. You're right. Calm. I need to stay calm for Lily," Rose whispered. She drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. A warm sensation was starting to wash over her and the pain in her feet and legs had begun to subside. She was growing tired and had to fight to keep her mind focused on the man in front of her.

"Like I said before, we left New York on Saturday morning."

"How were you traveling? Car? Bus? Did you fly into Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport?" Lucas asked.

"How is that going to help find Lily?" Rose asked, frustrated at the questions. He should be out combing the streets for Lily, not standing by her bedside asking stupid questions.

"Every detail, no matter how insignificant it may seem, is part of the puzzle. We put all those details together and we have the final big picture. That's how we're going to find Lily, Ms. Bradigan. But we can't do that blindfolded which is exactly what I'm doing right now."

"Right," she said. "I'm sorry. I watch *Criminal Minds*; I know that details matter. I can do this," she vowed. "We were driving a 2014 Ford Escape. White. I'd just bought it the day before we left."

Rose rattled off the car tag number before Lucas could ask for it. He scribbled furiously in the little notebook at the wealth of information she was giving him.

“I don’t like to fly.” Her eyes shifted away from Lucas for a moment, then down at her hands as she confessed the depth of her phobia. “I’m actually terrified of high places. I can’t even use a step ladder without getting dizzy. I was also hoping that this trip would bring Lily and me closer together.”

“That’s always good. Being a parent myself, I never get to spend much time with my son. Now that he’s off to college, I see even less of him than before.”

“Well, Lily’s been having a pretty rough time the past couple of years since her father went away.”

“I’m sorry. Divorce is hard on kids,” Lucas said.

Another avenue to check out, Lucas thought to himself. Maybe this was a child custody case and the father didn’t like the fact the mama was leaving with the kid.

Rose debated, internally, whether to tell the sheriff that Lily’s father was sent to prison for the rest of his life. Would that make him less inclined to help Rose find her daughter or would it matter to him at all? It was so hard to think what to do with everything that was muddled around in her mind and the pain meds fogged things even further.

It took a moment for her to finally decide that honesty was the best policy in this instance. If he was any kind of lawman, he would find out about Ben anyway.

“It wasn’t just the divorce that has Lily so upset, Sheriff. Her father, my ex-husband, is in prison. He was sentenced to life without possibility of parole two years ago and Lily refused to believe that her father was guilty. Even after he confessed.”

Rose finally looked up at the man towering over her bed to see if she could read what his next step might be. His face was expressionless, and his eyes never left her face. Rose lifted her left hand to her mouth and started frantically chewing on her thumbnail.

Okay, not a ticked off daddy stealing his kid. But there was more to the story and Lucas needed to hear it all. He reached over and gently tugged her hand away from her mouth.

“If you’re that hungry, I’m sure Jill can rustle up a food tray for you. You don’t have to gnaw on your own hand.” Rose was sure it was meant as a diversion to give himself time to think of what to say next, but for some reason, he kept her hand in his. “What exactly did your ex-husband confess to that Lily doesn’t believe he did?”

“Um, first degree murder, drug trafficking, conspiracy to commit murder, assault with intent, and a couple of other things.” Rose’s voice broke as she finished with the list of Ben’s crimes.

“Hmm,” was all Lucas Manning said as his intense stare never left Rose’s face. She felt a small pressure on her fingers as though he were trying to comfort her.

“Had you had any idea about the drugs?” he asked. The case was going to take a whole new direction. One Lucas didn’t really want to go, but knew he had to. If drugs were involved, the DEA would have to be informed.

His eyes finally looked down at their joined hands. As though he'd just realized he was holding it, Lucas released Rose from his grip and took a small step back from her bed.

“No. I had no idea. He lectured Lily about saying no to drugs from the time she was six years old. That’s why it was such a shock when the police raided his garage, our home . . . they led him away in handcuffs . . . in front of his fourteen-year-old daughter. At first I didn’t believe it either. I was sure he’d been set up and someone else had been using his place of business without Ben’s knowledge.”

Rose’s breath caught in her throat as she remembered the conversation that not only ended her perfect little world but destroyed her faith in her husband. Ben had never showed her and Lily anything but love, affection, kindness, and respect the whole time they had been together. Two years after the fact, Rose was still reeling from the blow.

“But then, when his lawyer said the prosecuting attorney was going to indict him on first degree murder charges along with the drug charges, Ben agreed to a plea bargain that took the death penalty off the table. I told him we could fight it. That we could mortgage the house and the business to pay for the best legal counsel in the state, but he said not to bother.

“He finally confessed to me that he did all of those things and that he didn’t want Lily or me to be hurt because of his crimes. He said that we were the most important things in the world to him and he wasn’t going to let anything happen to either of us. He told me he still loved me and would until the day he died.”

The hard, deep ache that slithered around her heart at the memory of his words had her breath shuddering out. She steeled herself to finish her story before she lost what little nerve she had left. Rose wanted to curl up into a ball and scream out her rage and pain until she was nothing more than a hollowed-out shell, devoid of all feelings.

“But then in the next breath he insisted that I file for divorce or he would. He was afraid that some of the people that he’d done business with would try to hurt us to get to him. If everyone thought that there was nothing but hatred between us then they’d not bother with us.”

Rose focused her unblinking eyes on the clock above the sink on the opposite wall from her bed. The second hand ticked away the time until half a minute had passed in a tense silence before Sheriff Manning spoke in his low timbered drawl.

“I’m sorry, Rose,” he said. “That had to be a hard thing for you to deal with.”

How could a man who professed to love a woman, lie to her and hide his true colors from her? There had to be something else, but Lucas couldn’t put his finger on it yet. Either Ms. Bradigan was hiding something, which Lucas couldn’t sense at that moment, or her ex was one hell of an actor. He prayed it was the latter but prepared for the former, just in case his gut was wrong . . . a rare event, in his career.

She gave a forced burst of laughter, glanced quickly at him then looked away again. She let the fact that he’d used her given name pass without comment.

“You could say that,” she said, then stuck her thumb between her lips and began chewing on her nail again. Lucas grinned and shook his head at her before reaching over and pulling her thumb from her mouth.

“Sorry, that’s a bad habit that I really can’t seem to break,” she said as he gently rubbed a tiny drop of blood from the cuticle of her thumbnail.

“We all have them,” Lucas said, then dragged in a rough breath. “I need to ask you something, Ms. Bradigan.” The impersonal mask dropped over his features once more.

Back to being professional. This couldn’t be good, she decided. “Why don’t you call me Rose since you insist on holding my hand,” Rose joked.

His cheeks flushed as he gave her fingers a quick squeeze before letting them go. “Like I said, Rose, we all have our quirks. Holding your hand seems to be one of mine.”

“Chewing my thumb until it bleeds is a bad habit, you holding my hand is a cute quirk,” Rose said as her smile widened, and his blush deepened. “What did you need to ask me, Sheriff?”

“If I’m supposed to call you Rose, I guess it’s only right that you call me Lucas,” he replied. She nodded at him as he continued. “I need to know if maybe some of your husband’s—”

“Ex-husband,” Rose corrected. Why it was necessary for her to clarify that fact, was beyond her reasoning at the moment. Perhaps later, she would be more capable of sorting out her scrambled thoughts. Now, it was too much trouble.

“Ex-husband’s prior business associates,” he amended, “might have followed you here from New York, and when they saw an opportunity they took it by kidnapping your daughter in hopes of getting back at him?”

After a moment of stunned silence, Rose said in a trembling voice, “I suppose that could have been what happened. Oh God, I don’t know.”

Her eyes burned as she fought back another bout of tears. This was not the time to break down. She needed to be strong and focused for Lily. Her daughter’s life might depend on it.

“Why can’t I remember anything?” she cried out in rage as the dreaded tears slipped down her face. “I just wanted to get Lily out of the city. This whole trip was a spontaneous adventure.

“One night, Lily was escorted home by two police officers.” The words began falling out of her mouth of their own accord. She had no control and at that point didn’t even try to hold them back.

“She’d slipped out of the house without my knowledge and gone to a party I’d forbidden her to go to. The kid’s parents were out of town and there was no way I was going to let her go,” Rose said feeling that she had to defend her actions. “I’d just checked on her an hour before the cops arrived and she was in her bed sound asleep. Or so I thought, anyway. I was so shocked at what she’d done, I couldn’t put two words together to discuss the incident with her. I sent her up to bed, went to my room and decided right then that we had to get away.

“The next morning, I got up early and started putting the trip together. She didn’t like the idea and argued the entire time we were packing. The day we left Queens she didn’t say a word for hours. She just listened to her music or watched her portable DVD player. Maybe I shouldn’t have forced her to come. Maybe we should have stayed home and tried to work it out some other way. But Ben agreed with me. He made a great argument that it was the best idea in the world to get her away from New York.”

Rose didn’t tell Lucas about the hidden stash of money Ben had given her access to. In her heart, she didn’t feel that it was relevant at that point. But, if it turned out that Ben’s enemies were the ones who had taken Lily, she would tell Lucas. Until that time, it wasn’t important.

“Rose, you have to know this is not your fault. Looking back and saying, ‘if only,’ never does a lick of good,” Lucas chided. “Neither does feeling weighed down by guilt for something that no one could have ever imagined would happen. People don’t wake up each day thinking that they might be victimized. If they did, no one would ever leave the safety of their own homes. Life wouldn’t be worth living, now would it?”

“No, I guess it wouldn’t,” Rose answered softly. She wiped away the stream of tears but didn’t look at Lucas.

He glanced at his watch, gave a low whistle and said, “Wow, it’s after 10:00. Look, Rose. I have to get things moving on looking for Lily. Do you have a recent picture of her I could use? I’ll need to know every stop you made along the way. Every stop, Rose. And every move you made the days leading up to when you left the city. It could be that you were followed from New York and if that’s the case, then we’ll need to find out if there may be security footage from stores, motels, rest stops, and wherever else you might have stopped. If we’re lucky, we might be able to spot a suspicious vehicle in a couple of them.”

“Um, yes of course. I’ll put together that list as soon as possible. There’s a picture of the two of us in my wallet,” she said.

“We didn’t find a wallet on you when we found you. That’s why we had to wait until you woke up to tell us who you were.”

“Oh.” That was a surprise to her as she looked around the room. “Well, I don’t—wait, my neighbor, Miriam Sanders—Mimi. She can scan and e-mail a picture of Lily to you in just a few minutes. Her cell phone number is 718-555-1624.” Rose chuckled and added, “She’s not the most trusting soul so you might have some trouble convincing her that you are the sheriff here. Maybe I should call her myself and try to explain what happened?”

“I’ve heard that about Yankees,” Lucas said with a wide smirk and a glimmer of humor in his eyes. He pulled his cell phone from the holster clip on his belt and handed it to her. “Here, go ahead and make the call now, if you don’t mind. Maybe by the time I get back to my office it will be there, and I can get the ball rolling.”

“Okay,” she said as she took the cell phone. It was very similar to the one she’d gotten for Lily a few weeks before on her sixteenth birthday, May sixteenth. It had been pricey, but Rose had wanted to make it

special for Lily. Her father wouldn't be there and a girl's sweet sixteen was a turning point in her life. So, Rose splurged, plunking down several hundred dollars for the latest in cell phone technology.

"Wow, this is nice!" she said. "They must really like you here to spring for a gadget like this."

"Very funny, just make the call," Lucas said.

Rose giggled up at his embarrassed flush and tapped in the phone number of her best friend and neighbor. The phone rang several times before Mimi finally answered with a breathless, "Hello?"

"Mimi, it's Rose. Listen," Rose said cutting off Mimi's chatter before she'd spoken more than a few words. "I don't have time to explain but I need a really big favor." Rose paused to listen for a moment, then spoke loudly into the phone. "Mimi, please, you have to listen to me. Something's happened and I need your help."

Rose paused to listen for another few seconds before continuing. "You still have your key to my house, right? Good. I need you to go to my house, get that picture of Lily that's in the frame by my bed. Use my computer to scan and e-mail it to the sheriff here in South Carolina. I'm going to give him the phone so that he can give you his e-mail address . . . Mimi, please calm down. Lily's missing and I—I don't know where she is but—Mimi please do this right now! I don't have time to go into it. We have to have that picture as soon as possible so they can start looking for her. No I don't want you to come down here now. I'm handing the phone to Sheriff Manning. You do whatever he tells you to do. Okay, Mimi? Please—thank you." Rose handed the phone back to Lucas, her fingers trembling, and added, "She's a little high strung. She's known Lily since the day she was born and is her unofficial godmother. Mimi loves my daughter as if she were her own child. She wants to get on a plane and bring the picture to you herself."

Lucas took the phone and held it to his ear. He spoke clearly, spelling out his e-mail address and asked her to repeat it back to him to make sure she'd gotten it right.

"No, ma'am, there's no need for you to trouble yourself like that. Miss Rose will let you know if she needs you to come all this way . . . yes ma'am, we're gonna do everything in our power to find that girl, I can promise you that . . . she's at the Gaffney General Hospital. . . G-a-f-f-n-e-y. That's in South Carolina, ma'am . . . Yes, Miss Mimi, I won't call you ma'am again."

When Lucas finally ended the call he laughed out loud. "Wow, from just talking to her these few minutes, I'll bet she's a holy terror when she's riled."

"You have no idea, Lucas," Rose agreed. "But she will do whatever she can to help find Lily. We can trust her on that. Whether we can trust her to stay in New York is another story."

"Okay. I'm going to head back to the office and put out a BOLO—be on the lookout—for your vehicle and as soon as I get that picture, I'll get an Amber Alert going for Lily. I've also got to call the state police and SLED—State Law Enforcement Department. We'll get our best people on this so don't you worry. We will find your daughter, Rose. I promise you that."

As Lucas made his promise, he took Rose's hand into his once more. Just as he grasped it, Jill returned to the room in a flurry of chatter and a tray of food in her hands. "Well, I'm guessing you might be a little bit hungry, Miss Rose, so I went down to the cafeteria and grabbed you some breakfast."

Lucas dropped Rose's hand as if it were a hot coal that burned his fingers and took a quick step back as the tips of his ears pinked. What the heck was wrong with him? He didn't need to be making promises to the mother of a missing child, no matter how much he wanted to comfort her. At the moment, she was still a possible person of interest. Albeit way down on the bottom of that list, but until she was completely cleared of any wrongdoing, he couldn't let himself become emotionally involved with the woman.

"I'll check in with you later, Rose," he said and walked over to Jill. He whispered into the nurse's ear for a moment and then pecked a kiss on her cheek.

Jill nodded her head at Lucas and gave him a warm smile and pat on the arm before he left the two women alone, closing the door behind him.

"Here you are, Miss Rose," Jill said as she set the tray of food on the bedside table and rolled it closer to her patient. "Let me just pull this table up where you can reach it."

As Jill lifted the dark colored, heavy plastic cover from the plate, Rose said, "I take it you know the sheriff personally." That idea gave Rose's chest a quick squeeze. Her reaction to the idea didn't make a bit of sense to her. After all, she'd just met the man and had no idea if Nurse Jill was his wife, sister, or if they were even related.

"Oh yeah. My husband, Mike, is Lucas' younger brother. One of them anyway. I've known the Manning boys since grade school," Jill informed Rose with a mile-wide, pride-filled smile.

"That's nice," Rose said, as she lifted the paper napkin-wrapped cutlery from the tray and began to open it. Without warning Rose dropped the silverware, placed her face in her hands and burst into tears. Again.

"Oh sugar, don't you cry," Jill soothed as she rushed to the bedside stand and pulled several tissues from the box sitting on the edge of it. "We're gonna find your girl before you know it. If need be, he'll get the tracking dogs out looking for her. Lucas has got a way about him that can make anybody do pretty much anything he wants. He seems to have taken this whole thing personally and by goodness he won't leave a stone unturned, you mark my words, Miss Rose.

"I know it'd be useless for me to tell you not to worry, being a mama myself. Mike and I have two boys of our own. Andrew, he's 10 and Dylan, he's 8. If one of mine went missing, I'd be crazy as a loon hunting for 'em. So would half the county." Jill pulled Rose's hands from her face and dabbed at the tears streaming from the woman's eyes as she spoke.

It took a moment for Rose to regain control of herself and take the damp tissues from Jill's caring hands. She patted her lashes, blew her nose, took a ragged breath and wadded the shredded mass into a ball.

"Thank you, Mrs. Manning." What else could she really say to the nurse who seemed to be taking her situation as if she'd known Rose for years, rather than a few hours of hospital care? It was rather comforting

to have a friendly shoulder to lean on. Rose sniffled again and looked around for somewhere to dispose of the soggy mess in her hands.

Jill picked up a small trash can and held it up for Rose to toss the tissues into. “You can call me Jill. Mrs. Manning, bless her heart, is my mother-in-law.”

Rose laughed at that. “Okay, Jill.” Rose looked down at the tray of food and her stomach churned. She knew she had to eat to keep up her strength. She had to get out of that hospital bed and get out there to search for her daughter. But the reconstituted scrambled eggs, cold toast, limp bacon, and something that looked white, lumpy, and gelatinous did nothing to improve her appetite. Being from New York, Rose had never had the opportunity nor the inclination to eat grits. Her first experience with seeing them on the plate in front of her left little desire to change that fact.

“Miss Rose, I know it’s hard. I don’t know what I’d do if I were in your place right now. I can tell you this much though. Lucas and his son David were the ones who brought you in last night,” Jill informed her.

“Yes, I remember Lucas mentioning that to me,” Rose said as she picked up her fork and speared a lump of egg. She lifted it to her mouth and chewed slowly. The taste was bland, but Rose forced herself to swallow the food. She followed that with a sip of tepid coffee to wash it down.

“Yes, ma’am, I think he did. Anyway,” Jill continued as she pulled a chair next to the bed and settled into it while she spoke. “They were on their way home from our house when they found you. We had a little family get-together. It was Mike’s birthday you see, and we always have these family cookouts to celebrate just about anything they can think of. I’ll tell you, Miss Rose, it doesn’t take much to get the Manning men excited enough to fire up the grill and burn a few burgers and weenies. And I do mean burn,” Jill said, laughing heartily.

Rose joined her with a forced giggle of her own and lifted another bite of food to her mouth as she listened to Jill talk about her family. The nurse’s pronounced drawl and bright, unending smile did more to put Rose at ease than just about anything else at the moment. Whatever Jill had, the woman should patent it, bottle it, and market it to the pharmaceutical companies as a natural antidepressant. She’d make a fortune. As Jill rambled on about the cookout, her boys, her husband, and her in-laws, Rose mindlessly scooped food into her mouth. Before she realized it, her plate was nearly empty, and her stomach was full. The grits remained untouched, however. She wasn’t about to put that in her stomach.

“Jill,” Rose said. “You are amazing. I can’t believe I ate all that food. When you set it down in front of me, I was sure I wouldn’t be able to choke down a single bite.

“Oh pooh, Miss Rose, you were just hungrier than you thought, and I just can’t seem to stop rambling on about my kin.” Jill paused for a moment as she studied Rose’s face. In a softer voice she said, “Lucas said that he was afraid that if they waited for an ambulance to get to you, you might not have made it. He said your head was bleeding badly and he didn’t know how you kept going the way your feet were all cut up. They bundled you into the truck and carried you here to the ER. He called Mike as soon as he got you settled and told him

what happened. He asked me if I'd come over and help out. I'm not an ER nurse, I mostly do floor work, but seeing as how Lucas asked, how could I say no?"

"That was very nice of you," Rose said. "I'm a nurse, too. I was in line for ER nursing supervisor before I left the city." Jill was such an easy person to talk to, Rose couldn't keep the words from spilling out.

"Well isn't that something? I knew we were kindred spirits the minute I laid eyes on you," Jill said with another of her tinkling laughs. "If you believe in that sort of thing. Well, I better go see to some of my other patients. I'm sure Dr. Nagle will be in to see you soon. If you need anything you just buzz me, and I'll be right in. You try to get some rest, Miss Rose. I know it'll be hard to do but just try. If you need something to help you sleep, just ask the doctor and he'll make sure to prescribe something for you. I'll come back in and check on you before I head home for the day. I usually leave at 3:00 so I can go pick up my boys at school. But since it's Sunday, Mike took them to church and Sunday school this morning, so I don't have to worry. He says he never gets to spend enough time with the boys so this gives him the chance to wrangle them for a while. So I'll be able to visit with you for a little while after my shift if you'd like the company."

"I'd like that," Rose said, honestly. She had, in spite of the situation, enjoyed Jill's company and looked forward to getting to know the woman better. Being born and raised in the Big Apple, Rose had never been the kind of person that trusted someone at first meeting them. But for some reason, she trusted Lucas and she trusted Jill. Perhaps it was because she had no one else on whom she could depend. Or maybe she just had a sixth sense that told her to put her faith in these strangers.

Whatever the cause, she just hoped that Lily was found quickly.

"That's great. I'll see you later," Jill said as she moved the chair back to its original position, smiled at Rose as she picked up the tray, and left the room.

Rose settled back into the bed and closed her eyes. Her feet throbbed with every pulse beat and she prayed the doctor would be in soon with something stronger for the pain. No sooner had she thought the words when the door opened once more and a tall, rail thin man with stooped shoulders and a mahogany complexion entered the room.

"Good morning Mrs. Bradigan, I'm Dr. Nagle. How are you feeling this morning?" he asked. His Creole accent and rich chocolate eyes had Rose smiling up into his narrow face.

"I feel like I've been walking on razorblades and then waded into a pool of alcohol," Rose told him with a grimace as she accidentally bumped her left foot against the bed rail.

"Well, I think we can do something about that." He scribbled notes in her chart before performing an examination, asking pointed questions as he did so.