



*Time
Served*
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Chapter One

“Next up for auction is the honor of naming the naked mole rat recently born at the North Campbell Zoo...”

The silent room fills with intrigued murmurs, and I polish off my second glass of wine, trying to keep my expression neutral. If it’s anything like the previous items, this particular “honor” will go for an embarrassingly high amount. Paddles fly up in rapid succession, the auctioneer rattles off extravagant numbers and people have a grand old time. And that’s why we’re here, isn’t it? A wonderful early summer day spent at the annual Ensley Golf & Country Club fundraiser for some cause no one in attendance knows or cares much about.

I glance around the well-appointed dining room, taking in the faintly sunburned crowd in their linen pants and navy jackets, pearls and heels. When I’d first started at Sterling, Morgan & Haines, I’d been desperate to attend this high-profile fundraiser, and now that I’ve been given the chance, it’s taking everything I’ve got not to fidget in my seat.

“Should we bid?” My boyfriend of six weeks, Todd Varner, is the perfect date. Unlike me, he grew up in this white-collar world and doesn’t have to feign enthusiasm for the proceedings. In fact, he spent most of the morning explaining the finer points of golf, making me wonder why we’d started dating in the first place.

“Why not?” I reply. People are going crazy for this thing. Have they never seen a naked mole rat? I saw a picture once, and its hideous little face is burned into my brain. Todd squeezes my fingers, and I feel bad for doubting him. He’s an accountant at the firm, handsome, smart and good in bed. I catch him eyeing me and smile eagerly, like I really hope we win.

He bids and I blanch at the number. “You’re having fun, right?” he asks, squinting at me. “You’re not thinking about work? On a Saturday?”

“No,” I lie, “I’m not thinking about work.” I am absolutely thinking about work. The firm is planning one of the biggest class action lawsuits in its history, and one fourth-year associate will be asked to second chair. I’d much rather be in my office, eating pad Thai and preparing my interview notes than sitting in this swanky dining room trying to win the right to name a rodent.

“Sold!” the auctioneer finally shouts, and the room explodes into applause. That’s when I realize Todd is beaming and nodding graciously—like a winner.

“You won?”

“That’s right,” he replies, leaning over to kiss me on the cheek as I grin dutifully. Is there a time I’ve smiled today that hasn’t been forced? I’m living the life I’d only dreamed of, the one I’d given up everything for, and I’m acting like an ungrateful jackass. I give myself a mental kick in the head and tune in to the conversation at the table.

“...such a whimsical gift,” the elderly gentleman—a retired city councilman—seated on Todd’s right is saying. “Do you have a name picked out?”

“Of course,” Todd answers, reaching for my hand. “I’m going to name it Rachel.”

My smile freezes. “Really?” I manage.

“Absolutely.”

“That’s adorable,” the councilman’s wife coos. “Naked Mole Rat Rachel.”

I laugh weakly.

“You know,” Todd continues, “I actually had an unusual pet growing up.”

The councilman looks delighted. “You don’t say.”

“Yes, it was a rare cat called the Kurilian Bobtail...”

I take a guilty sip of my wine. We’re at this fundraiser because we can afford to give back. I make good money at the law firm and Todd grew up wealthy. Spending a small fortune on a name is actually something he’s done before: he’d once paid ten grand for a letter signed by Winston Churchill. And that wasn’t even the gem of his signature collection! Somehow I’d found the story charming. I’d even admired the fact that Todd had interests outside of work, and had been making a half-assed effort to achieve a better work-life balance myself.

I realize that Todd is now showing the councilman photos of his favorite signatures on his phone. It’s one step up from showing him pictures of his special cat. I pinch the bridge of my nose and take another sip of wine, but I can’t tune out Todd’s extraordinarily dull story of the time he almost bought a fake Bob Dylan signature. I’d heard it before but told myself it wasn’t as boring as I’d thought. And if Todd found it interesting, then I should be supportive. I should be interested in things other than work.

But I'm not.

I'm not interested in Todd. As kind as he is, as tall and fit and handsome as he is, he doesn't distract me from work. Nothing does, and nothing has, for a very long time. I tell myself to keep going through the motions, that this ennui will pass, that Todd will become appealing again.

I have a good education; I'm a smart, ambitious, twenty-eight-year-old woman who knows what she wants and goes after it. When was the last time I'd even had a boyfriend? It had certainly been too long since I'd been in... Well, anyway. I'll stick with Todd and visit this naked mole rat and look at his signatures and pretend I care about golf and...

"I guess that's it," Todd says, pushing back his chair and standing. He helps the elderly councilman's wife from her seat and we say our goodbyes. "Time to go home." He smiles at me hopefully, and I see a tiny glimpse of the man I'd found sexy six weeks ago, with his floppy dirty-blond hair and perfect white teeth. And then he picks up his sweater, ties the arms around his neck as if he's finished a successful round of water polo and holds out his arm.

Yeah, I'm going to break up with him.

* * *

"There's going to be a naked mole rat named after you?" Parker laughs uproariously.

"Well...not anymore." I try and fail to hide a smile. Breaking up with Todd had been awkward, but it wasn't without its upside.

I glance at Parker Finch, my favorite work friend, across the backseat of the company car the partners hired to schlep us out to the middle of nowhere. Parker is ten years older than me, though we'd been hired on the same day almost four years ago. He got married young and stayed home to raise his two kids while his surgeon wife worked her way up the ranks. When she was established in her career he returned to school and became an attorney, and my frequent partner in crime.

"Seriously, Rach. This place is dreadful." He squints out the window as we approach the town of Camden, just outside the Chicago city limits, on a sunny Monday. Unfortunately, *dreadful* is an accurate description of the area. For better or worse, Camden is mostly lumpy swaths of concrete with the occasional dead tree tossed in to

add visual interest. It's gray and hopeless, as we have learned from our near-daily visits over the past several weeks. We're here signing up potential clients for a class action lawsuit against a company that used a carcinogenic cleaner to degrease its machinery, knowing full well it had been outlawed years earlier. As a result, thousands of innocent families are suffering as the latent effects of the chemical unleashes its fury on the central nervous system.

"First stop," Jose, our driver, announces, parking in front of a run-down blue house with a tilting picket fence. Parker and I exchange a look before climbing out of the car and heading up the gravel driveway. The gutter hangs at a dangerous angle from the corner, and, though it's June, the grass is patchy and yellow. Parker holds the gutter as I duck under, climbing up chipped concrete steps to knock.

The inner door swings open instantly, as though the household is as punctual as we are. "Good morning." A little girl, maybe four, greets us, peering up through the screen. She's wearing pink cartoon-print pajamas and her dark hair tumbles around her shoulders.

I smile down at her. "Good morning. Is your mom home?"

She turns to holler over her shoulder. "Mama!"

"Judy?"

If I squint into the darkness I can see the faint outline of a stooped woman hurrying toward us from a dim hallway. She wipes her hands on her apron and chastises Judy in Spanish, warning her about the dangers of opening the door to strangers.

"They're not strangers," Judy pouts.

"Go," the woman orders, pointing up a narrow staircase. "To your room."

When Judy's out of sight the woman warily pushes open the door, her worn face and prematurely gray-streaked hair making my heart pound. I know from her file that Pilar Castillo is twenty-eight, the same age as me, but she looks at least ten years older. Deep grooves are etched on either side of her pursed lips, and crow's-feet radiate from her dark eyes. She looks tired...and suspicious.

I sigh inwardly.

"Mrs. Castillo?" I ask, extending a hand as she cracks open the door. "I'm Rachel Moser from Sterling, Morgan & Haines. This is my coworker, Parker Finch. We have an interview this morning?"

She gives my hand a light squeeze and glances between Parker and me, sizing us up.

“We’re here about the Fowler Metals case,” I add. Her expression doesn’t change, but she knows what I’m talking about. Her husband worked the night shift for Fowler, a massive manufacturing company that produces parts for refrigerator motors. Two years ago he’d woken up one morning, unable to move his arms and legs. That night he’d died. Chronic exposure to an unnamed chemical—known then and now as perchlorodibenzene—had wreaked havoc on his nervous system, and one day his brain gave up. He was twenty-seven. And he is just one of the five hundred and eleven cases Parker and I have been assigned; less than one-eighth of the cases our firm is investigating in the class action suit against Fowler.

Pilar wants to let us in, I can see it in her guarded eyes. “We’ve already spoken to many of your neighbors,” I tell her quietly, though she knows this too. “This is just a preliminary interview. You don’t have to sign anything today or make any promises. We’d just like to talk about your husband.”

Her eyes well up with tears that she blinks away. “My English...” she says cautiously, her accent heavy. “I don’t...”

I switch to Spanish. “That’s okay,” I tell her. “Whatever you’re most comfortable with.” Before starting these trips to Camden, I hadn’t spoken Spanish in ten years, but now the words roll off my tongue easily. I’ve worked so hard to shape myself into someone better than my upbringing foretold, and it’s scary to see how easy it is to slide back into old habits. I shake my head and focus on the task at hand. The scrappy girl who grew up in a trailer park has been methodically replaced by a well-groomed, refined woman who promised to never look back, and never, ever will.

* * *

“Jesus,” I moan, dropping into the backseat of the sedan an hour later.

“Don’t you mean *hay-seuss*?” Parker replies, buckling his seat belt. “I don’t know what the hell you two were discussing in there.”

Up front, Jose smothers a laugh.

“How many of these have we done?”

It's a rhetorical question and Parker knows it, but still he answers. "Fifty-one. Just...four hundred and sixty left to go."

"I'll never make it." Not through hours upon hours of brutal interviews, having the inner workings of these poor families' lives revealed, splayed out as facts and figures that just get worse and worse the more we pry.

"You're Rachel Moser," Parker reminds me, patting my knee. "Nothing gets to you."

I force myself to straighten in my seat, smoothing my dark hair into its standard chignon and touching up my lipstick. "I don't know why I care so much," I admit, squinting into my compact mirror.

"Because you're human?"

I shoot him a look as Jose pulls away from the curb to take us to our next interview a few blocks away. Camden alone is home to one hundred and twenty of our potential cases, and I know I'm being melodramatic, but I can't help imagining that every cracked sidewalk and pockmarked building, broken window and stray dog is a result of that damn chemical.

"You know what'll make you feel better?" Parker continues as we turn down Camden's main drag, a nearly deserted strip consisting mainly of cheap restaurants, pawnshops and storefronts promising cash advances with low interest rates.

"What?"

"Food."

"It's ten o'clock."

"You're not going to believe this, Rachel, but people eat at ten o'clock. Jose, pull up here, please. The one with the red sign. Thanks."

"Jose," I counter. "Keep driving."

But Jose, no doubt hungry, parks at the curb and gets out of the car to stretch after he opens my door.

"I told you not to bother with the door," I scowl.

He ignores me.

"You want some empanadas, Jose?" Parker calls, heading into the small, dingy shop. Through the open door I can make out a glass display case holding an assortment of potentially delicious food. My stomach rumbles, the traitor.

“Yes, sir,” Jose replies.

“He’s going to get murdered,” I mutter, hustling in after Parker. In his eight-hundred-dollar suit, shiny, tasseled loafers and coiffed—yes, coiffed—blond hair, he’s a walking ATM. One that requires no pass card.

“Yes, ma’am,” Jose answers.

I hear Parker greet someone, but it’s so dim inside the bodega that it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust, even as I’m bombarded with the mouthwatering smells of fried food and spice.

“What can I do for you?” the skinny teenager manning the counter mumbles. He’s wearing a pristine white wifebeater and the requisite baggy jeans. His scrawny arms are covered in skull-and-dragon tattoos and he looks bored out of his mind.

“A dozen empanadas.” Parker beams.

The kid looks him up and down before grabbing a brown paper bag and a pair of tongs, following Parker’s instructions to include a “decent variety of flavors.” I don’t need to be a mind reader to know what the kid is thinking—everyone who meets Parker assumes he’s gay, but he’s not. He’s just a friendly guy with a standing date at his pedicurist. And artfully coiffed hair.

“Here,” Parker says, jarring me out of my analysis. He thrusts a fifty-dollar bill into my hand and gestures to the back of the store where a sign reading Restrooms hangs vertically, one nail lost to the elements. “I’ll be right back.”

I hold up the money. “How much do you think empanadas cost?”

“Fifty dollars,” the kid tries.

I smile as I fiddle in my pockets for something smaller. I normally have cash on me but today’s search turns up only a business card, an old mint and a wet wipe. I set them on the counter and dig in my other pocket, looking up when a shadow falls across my strappy black pumps.

I squint into the gloom and feel my heart stop. Because there, more unlikely than fifty-dollar empanadas and Parker emerging from the bathroom without a fungal infection, is a massive hulk of a man, big body silhouetted in a misleading halo.

Dean Barclay had nothing to do with my decision to flee Riverside Trailer Park ten years ago, but he is 100 percent of the reason I vowed to never look back.

Chapter Two

Dean enters the shop, all six-foot-ten, nine hundred pounds of him—okay, fine, I don't know that those numbers are correct, but he's huge, much bigger than the boy I left behind—clad in a dark hoodie, gray sweats and sneakers. The dark hair that used to fall to his shoulders is gone, cropped close to his head, making his wide cheekbones even more prominent.

I know I should be doing something right now, moving, speaking, reacting, but I'm frozen in place. A million thoughts run through my mind. They crash into one another, fracturing into a billion tiny pieces, the shrapnel of my past finally catching up to me. It's a struggle to regain the control I've sought all these years, but no matter how hard I try, I can't latch on to a single idea. *Run*, comes to mind. *Oh God*, pops up more than a few times. *Oh no* is in there too.

My breath snags in my throat as he stops in front of the till, eyes raking me up and down like talons, so sharp and judgmental it stings. Finally he turns to the kid behind the counter and says, "It ready, Marky?"

Run, I decide, a minute too late. That's the smart choice. *Run away. Again*. I've got framed degrees as proof of my intelligence, my purported common sense, but they're useless in this dusty bodega. Despite my brain's best efforts to encourage my feet to move, I remain rooted to the spot, mere inches away from the man I assumed was living in a run-down trailer park a hundred miles south of Chicago not buying mysterious items thirty miles away in Camden.

A combination of Dean's dangerous gravitational pull and my own misbegotten sense of curiosity keeps me in place. What does he look like, sound like, smell like, feel like? It's a rabbit hole of questions I can't afford to fall down, but watching him approach, my senses are on high alert. It's as if I'm sixteen again and every piece of me knows he's near and wants him to come even closer.

Marky passes Dean a large paper bag, already packed, and Dean hands him a small wad of folded-up bills, the soft sleeve of his sweatshirt brushing my arm as he does so. I shrug deeper into my unbuttoned suit jacket, wishing I'd stayed in the car. I haven't seen

Dean since we were seventeen and madly in love. Since I disappeared in the middle of the night without so much as a goodbye.

I swallow anxiously and realize he hasn't moved. I glance up and he's staring down at me, his eyes dark and cold. I'm unprepared for how much it hurts. I'd long ago convinced myself my feelings for Dean had vanished much the way I had; that our teenage love affair was nothing out of the ordinary, that we'd both get over the way I left things and move on with our lives. And I really thought I had. I'd even convinced myself that he had. But maybe that scenario only works in a world in which we never see each other again, which had been my plan all along. A plan that has just had a giant, hoodie-wearing wrench tossed into the mix.

"You want your empanadas?" Marky prompts, jolting me back to reality.

"Ah, yeah," I say, awkwardly handing him the fifty and accepting the grease-stained bag. "Keep the change."

Marky opens his mouth to argue, then shrugs and stuffs the money in his pocket. The lawyer in me wants to insist that he deduct the cost of the empanadas from that bill, but I bite my tongue. There are more pressing matters to deal with. Like, *what in the hell is taking Parker so long?* Which is promptly followed by, *dear God, please don't let Parker come out and see Dean.*

Dean's eyes are locked on the fine gold chain that disappears under the lacy trim of my camisole, and they slowly sear their way up my chest until our eyes meet. It's hard to hold his gaze, but I've dealt with more intimidating men in my career—don't ask me to name them, but I'm sure I have—so I do.

"Let's go outside," he suggests quietly.

"No."

"No?"

He glances over his shoulder where Jose leans against the car, arms folded on the roof, watching our exchange.

"No."

"That your bodyguard?"

"No. Driver."

One eyebrow rises incrementally. “Excuse me.” It may be phrased as an apology, but nothing in his tone is apologetic.

I feel my cheeks heat and glance away, annoyed. I fold my arms then quickly unfold them when I realize I’ve merely created a shelf for my breasts, something both Marky and Dean notice.

“I have to go,” I say tightly.

“Where?”

“Interviews.”

“You looking for a job?”

My breath whooshes out on what might have been a laugh in any other instance. “I’m working.”

“I’ve got a lot of questions for you, Rachel.”

Oh God. I’m not prepared for the frisson of combined guilt and arousal that zips up and down my spine at the sound of him saying my name. I’d always figured that the overwhelming lust he’d inspired in me as a teenager was one of the perks of young love, attributing the fact that I hadn’t felt it since to simply having yet to meet the right man. But all of a sudden I’m too hot, my thighs are clenching together and my heart is racing.

“I know,” I say uncomfortably, avoiding his gaze. “I’m sorry.”

He rasps out a mirthless laugh at my ten-years-too-late apology. “You know the gym on the corner of First and Arthur?”

I force myself to nod. Titan’s Boxing Gym is one of the few concrete structures in this neighborhood that regularly has people coming and going; we’d passed it on our previous trips.

“Meet me there at noon on Saturday.”

“I’m busy,” I say automatically.

Dean leans in, reaching past me to pick up my business card from the counter. He strokes his huge finger over the embossed lettering, reading my name, the firm’s name, our address. “Come find me,” he warns, “or I’ll find you.”

* * *

I dislike doing the interviews because they're so depressing. I like doing them because I know they'll eventually add up to something meaningful, something that will make a difference. And because there are so many interviews and they all follow the same sad lines, the week normally passes at a predictable, even clip. But not this week.

Saturday dawns before I'm ready. I wake up at six, too anxious and wired to stay in bed. I wasn't lying to Dean when I said I was busy. I have interview notes to organize, reports to write, phone calls to make. Ordinarily I'd get into the office early to get this stuff done and give myself some time later in the day to run personal errands, but today I do things in reverse order. I drop off suits at the dry cleaner, pick up a few groceries I doubt I'll be around to eat, then go for one of the rare runs I'm always promising myself.

By the time I get home it's a little after ten, which gives me enough time to shower, change and map out the transit route to Camden. Three buses and an hour and a half later I'm standing in front of Titan's heavy metal door, just ten minutes late for my meeting with Dean.

The clouds overhead are low and gray, much like my hopes for this reunion. Despite the dank weather, it still takes a second for my eyes to adjust when I step inside, and in that time I'm greeted by the sound of leather smacking flesh and leather smacking leather, grunts and breaths and the overwhelming smell of perspiration and something medicinal. I stay by the door and peer around cautiously; with the exception of a woman with two tightly woven braids beating the hell out of a punching bag in the far corner, everyone is male. And with the exception of two heavysset men in polo shirts, I'm the only person not dressed to fight.

This is a bad idea. I've known it all week, so why am I here? *Because*, my conscience pipes up. *You're guilty*. This much I know is true. Dean has a right to be angry, and he's got a lot of questions that only I can answer. We'll meet, I'll apologize, tell him whatever it is he needs to hear and say goodbye for real. Unless he's given up on me and is already on his way downtown, ready to take the elevator to the thirty-second floor of the gleaming silver King Building where he'll tell everyone that Rachel Moser isn't the well-bred young woman she pretends to be.

"You're late."

I jump and turn to see Dean coming out of the shadows, gym bag slung over one broad shoulder. He's wearing the same thing he had on Monday, only this time the hoodie has a zipper. I can't decide if he's dressed up or down.

"I didn't know how long it'd take to get here."

He gives me a critical once-over, and it's a struggle to keep my hands at my sides and not cover myself. I'm wearing jeans and a white T-shirt. Flip-flops that I got for ten dollars. I'd purposely dressed down for this meeting, but without a word he tells me he's not buying it. He resents me as much in Levi's as Louboutins; the clothes are the least of our issues. I shift uncomfortably when he finally meets my eyes, gaze drilling into mine.

"You nervous?"

"No," I lie.

"You want a massage before we go?" He jerks his head toward a door on the opposite wall, just visible behind one of the rings. There's a piece of paper affixed with duct tape, *Massage* written in what looks like red crayon. Peering through the slightly open door is a single eye, fixated on me.

I glare at Dean. "Maybe later."

His lips quirk at the corners, but the humor doesn't reach his eyes. "Whatever you say."

I turn and push out the door, blinking in the gloomy afternoon light. Despite the humidity, Dean yanks his hood up over his head, casting his eyes in shadow. "This way," he grunts, striding down the sidewalk without waiting for me.

My flip-flops smack noisily as I try to catch up, and after two blocks I stop. "How much farther?"

"Almost there."

"Dean."

"What?"

"Stop."

He takes a few more steps then pauses, turning to see me about ten yards behind. "What are you doing back there?"

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" I counter.

He shrugs. "I'm hungry. You're the one who was late."

But he slows his pace when I catch up, and we walk side by side until the silence grows uncomfortable.

“Is that where you work?” I try. “At the gym?” He’s certainly big enough to fight professionally, though his face is unscarred, no cuts or bruises to suggest he gets hit very often.

“No.”

We turn onto the deserted main strip and he stops in front of a corner restaurant, pushing open the door and waiting for me to enter before him. The room is unexpectedly large, kind of a mix between a diner and a cafeteria, with rows of unadorned tables paired with mismatched chairs. It’s surprisingly full, and servers in pink aprons hustle around with trays of food and drink.

Dean waves briefly at an older lady stationed behind the lone cash register, then leads us to a four top in the middle, dropping his bag on the floor and taking a seat. I’m aware of the appraising stares he garners from female diners, but if he notices, it doesn’t show. And I get it. If I wasn’t here for what feels as if it might be my last meal, I’d give him a second look too. I don’t know who Dean is anymore, but he’s the hottest man I’ve seen in a long time, simmering rage notwithstanding.

I pull out the chair opposite him and sit down, grateful that I no longer have to hear my footwear alerting people to my every move. I tug my shirt away from my chest, slightly sweaty thanks to the cursed humidity, and lift my dark hair off my neck to cool down.

A waitress drops off two laminated menus and immediately disappears, and Dean leans back in his chair to survey me, eyes flat. Long gone is the sheepish, guilty smile he’d shot me a thousand times as a teenager. The one that was half apology for whatever would happen that night, the only apology he’d ever issue, the one I’d never, ever asked for. I’d been a very equal participant in his stupid, often perverted little games, desperately curious to know what came next. Nothing had been off-limits, not when it came to Dean. Not when he smiled at me like that.

The smile is a thing of the past, clearly. The faint lines carved on either side of his mouth mark the frown as a permanent fixture, the chill in his eyes unrelenting. It would be different if this man refused to apologize, I think. This man knows no remorse.

I wipe my damp hands on my jeans as he takes in my hair, my throat, my chest, not meeting my eyes until the end; that seems to be his way.

I'm about to say something when a different server returns, order pad at the ready. "Know what you want, Dean?"

"Yeah." He glances at me. "You hungry?"

I'm starving, but I'm too anxious to eat. My mouth is dry and I know it'd be a struggle to choke anything down. "No," I say. "Just water—"

Dean jerks his head toward a water cooler in the corner, a stack of plastic cups teetering precariously next to it. "Go grab a couple."

I bristle at the sharpness of his tone, but stand and go to the cooler, mostly grateful that he'd interrupted me before I managed to add "with lemon" to my order. I fill up a couple of glasses and return to set them on the table, the server long gone. Dean picks one up, nearly draining it in one swallow.

I take a sip of mine.

"So talk," he says with a shrug. He's so big it's a wonder he can fit on a single chair; even now it's hard to see the second seat past the span of his shoulders. His legs are bent but his knees intrude on my space beneath the table, forcing me to sit angled inward so we don't touch.

"What do you want to know?"

His cold eyes turn glacial, and without moving a muscle he turns scary and intimidating. "What the fuck do you think I want to know?"

It's my first instinct to cut Dean down to size, to tell him I'm here as a favor, that if he wants answers he'll have to ask questions first. But I hold back. He's right to be angry. Ten years ago he was madly in love with a girl, and one morning he woke up to find her gone, no note, no phone call, no explanation.

Despite my best efforts, I'd spent the better part of the week trying to figure out exactly how I'd explain the past ten years, always coming up empty. I'd vacillated horribly about whether or not I'd even show up today, tempted to call his bluff. And, if we're being honest, it's only the fact that he stole my business card that tipped the scales in his favor. If there was no way he could track me down, I'd have cowardly disappeared again, never having to own up to my crimes.

Still, I know I owe Dean an apology. If I refuse to acknowledge what I did then I'm no better than the bigwigs at Fowler Metals, doing what's quick and dirty and easy, hurting people and turning away, hiding behind the shiny shield of success.

And while no part of me thinks that escaping in the middle of the night was the brave thing to do—and maybe not even the right thing—I do feel with a bone-jarring certainty that it was the only thing.

I start with something he already knows. "I'm a lawyer."

He nods, unimpressed, and finishes his water.

"I got a scholarship," I continue, "and when I left Riverside I drove straight to New York to go to school." I omit the part where I arrived a month before student housing opened up and spent my days pounding the pavement looking for a part-time job and nights sleeping in my car.

I take a nervous sip of lukewarm water, hating the fact that my hand is shaking. I realize that Dean's holding the pilfered business card, flipping it carelessly between his fingers. "I did my undergrad, finished law school and got hired at Sterling, Morgan & Haines." I gesture at the card. "That's where I am now."

Dean opens his mouth to speak, but closes it when the server arrives with his mountain of food. There's soup, a sandwich, a plate of steak and eggs, and a side of French fries. "Grab me some more water," he tells me, flicking his fingers in the general direction of the water cooler.

My eyes narrow. I'm sorry I left without saying goodbye ten years ago, but this is a restaurant—if you want a beverage, flag down a waitress. "Get it yourself."

Dean, dumping pepper on the fries, freezes. "What did you say?"

"If you want more water, go get it."

He stares at me a second, then shoves back from the table, snatches up his cup and returns twenty seconds later with two full glasses. He drops back into place and picks up a quarter of the clubhouse, biting it in half and chewing as he watches me.

Finally he swallows, drinks half a glass of water and the stare down ends. "So you're a lawyer," he says. "You rich?"

I shrug. "What do you do?"

“What do you care?” He picks up another piece of the sandwich and shovels a forkful of eggs into his mouth.

“Is that all you wanted to know?” I ask, fingers curling around the strap of my purse.

Dean shakes his head and again I have to wait for him to finish an improbably large mouthful of food. “You married? Kids?”

My spine softens slightly. “No. You?”

He laughs harshly. “When would I have had time for that? You think I married some prison groupie?”

So it *is* out there. Three weeks after I fled Riverside, Dean and two of his friends were arrested for an armed robbery that turned violent. He’d been sentenced to ten years and gotten out in eight for good behavior. He’s watching for my reaction, and when the surprise doesn’t come, he nods to himself. “You knew.”

I nod.

“Eat some fucking fries. You’re too thin.”

I want to argue at the bossiness in his tone, but I’m famished, so I steal a few fries, shake off the pepper and take a bite.

We eat in silence until he asks, “That scholarship pay for everything, then? Books, rent, groceries?”

I take a deep breath. I’d never told a soul at college I was there on a scholarship. No one at the firm, not even Parker, knows I grew up dirt-poor in a one-bedroom trailer. “No. I had the scholarship, a part-time job, and...”

Dean waits.

“My mother gave me some money.”

He looks startled. “Renee? Where’d she get money?”

It had come as a shock to me too. I’d buried the papers beneath my mattress on the pull-out couch, too stunned to believe I’d earned a full scholarship anywhere, never mind an out-of-state school where I’d be guaranteed not to run into anyone who’d know about the old me. I hadn’t dared breathe a word of it to anyone, not my mother, not Dean, for fear the bubble would burst and I’d be stuck in Riverside Trailer Park for the rest of my life. I’d secretly enrolled and had been halfway through planning my escape when my

mother woke me up one night at quarter past two, shoved an envelope full of money into my palm and told me to take off.

“What?” I’d mumbled, confused.

“Get lost,” she ordered, her normally slurred words coming out clear and determined. “Pack up all your shit, put it in your car, take that money and go to New York. Don’t come back. And don’t look back, neither. Get gone and stay gone, you promise?”

I was too shocked to do much more than follow her orders, cramming my few belongings into a duffel bag, tossing everything else into the trunk of my rusted-out station wagon and driving out of Riverside without a second look.

To this day I don’t know where my alcoholic mother got three thousand dollars. Or how she’d managed to *save* three thousand dollars, when every penny we’d ever gotten from the government had gone to the nearest liquor store. I’ll also never know how the woman who’d spent seventeen years largely ignoring me figured out my dream and kicked me out of our filthy nest to achieve it. She’d never said she loved me, and this final act was the only sign she’d ever cared at all.

“Huh,” Dean says, when I finish the story. “That doesn’t sound like Renee.”

“Agreed,” I nod. “But that’s what happened.”

“So then you became a big shot.”

“I became something I was never going to become if I stayed in Riverside.”

“You couldn’t call? Send a note? A fucking smoke signal to tell me you were alive?”

“You knew I wasn’t dead.” My phone rings then, a blessed interruption, and I pull it out of my bag to peer at the display. Parker. Probably wondering why I’m not at the office.

I ignore the call but send him a quick text, promising to turn up by two o’clock.

Two? he writes back immediately. What do you think this is, the weekend?

I smile and put the phone in my bag, only to find Dean watching me with narrowed eyes.

“So you’re not married,” he says. “You got a boyfriend?”

I start to shake my head, then freeze, remembering Todd, who had taken my “It’s not you, it’s me” speech stoically, if sadly. “No,” I say finally, truthfully, then change the

subject. “What do you do at the gym if you don’t work there? You don’t look beat-up enough to be a fighter.”

He shrugs, flexing his hands, subconsciously showing his bruised knuckles. “Just work out.” Well, that’s the understatement of the year. Dean was pushing six-two back when I knew him and he was fit, but he wasn’t massively strong like he is now. This new Dean looks like the guy who ate the old Dean.

“And for work?”

He finishes his second glass of water, watching me over the rim as he drinks. “I work in the warehouse at Carters. The grocery store.”

I nod. “Okay. Good.”

“Is it? You’re happy to hear that?”

I purse my lips. Whatever modicum of pleasantness we’d been working toward appears to have vanished. “I know I owe you an apology, Dean.”

He keeps his eyes on the final vestiges of his food, but I hear him pull in a breath.

“I’m sorry I left like I did. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you goodbye, or...or ever come back.”

“Or call. Or write. Or visit me in prison.”

I nod, though I’m not sure I could have stomached seeing him in an orange jumpsuit. “I’m sorry. I loved you more than anything but I wanted a better life, and I think I was afraid that if I returned to Riverside, I’d lose everything I’d been working toward.”

“You thought I’d hold you back?”

You went to prison! I want to point out. But I just shake my head. “I was afraid.”

“You talk different.”

I shrug. “I am different.”

“I can see that.”

“Well...”

He arches a brow. “Well, what?”

“Is there anything else you want to know?”

“You always this uptight?”

Of course the question only results in me clenching my teeth in frustration. “Maybe.”

“You still run in the morning?”

“Not as much as I’d like.”

“Where do you go?”

I shrug. “North Avenue Beach, sometimes. On the weekend. Early.”

“You should come by the gym, let Oreo give you a massage.”

“What kind of name is that?”

Dean barks out a laugh. “He just likes Oreos.”

“Whatever. I have to get back.”

“What do you do to relax?”

I sigh. “I am relaxed.”

“No, Rachel, you’re fuckin’ not. You got somebody? Who was that on the phone?”

“You’ve already asked me twice. What does that have to do with anything?”

Dean shrugs. “The girl I used to bang was a lot more laid-back than this one. A lot nicer too.”

I ignore the deliberately demeaning reference to our former relationship—he’d done a lot more than “bang” me—and shove back from the table. “I’m not nice? What do you want from me? You want me to buy you lunch?” I grab up my bag. “Fine. Eat all day, for all I care.” I toss sixty bucks on the table, and Dean snatches my hand in his big fist so tightly I swear I can hear the bones crunch together.

A strangled, startled cry escapes my lips and Dean instantly releases me, still angry, but obviously surprised by his own reaction. “Pick up the fucking money,” he growls.

I want to argue, but my hand is throbbing and more than anything, I want to leave. My phone rings again, and again it’s Parker. I send the call to voice mail and take a final, steadying sip of water.

“The girl you used to *bang* doesn’t exist anymore.” I push back my chair and stand up, cradling my sore hand. “Obviously the guy I used to *bang* doesn’t exist, either. Have a nice life.”

Dean doesn’t say a word, doesn’t follow me out of the restaurant and I don’t turn around as I stride out, tears pricking my eyes. Too rattled to bother negotiating the awful transit system, I flag down a cab, slump into the backseat and ask the driver to take me home.