CHAPTER ONE

Briana never cooked breakfast. But today, she vowed, was different. Her eyes narrowed as she sent the roasted red peppers in the jar swirling with the stab of a fork. She would make it. She still had a few minutes.

“Hey, Bree!” The lyric baritone voice bounced down the stairs. “Do you know where my tablet is? I’m going to be late.”

Briana’s body stuttered, torn between the eggs on the stove and her husband’s bouncing voice. She turned her head toward the entrance to the kitchen, her arm poised with a fork of red pepper.

“In the den in your bag,” she informed. “And Derek, later tonight, if you get a minute—”

“Smells good in here!” Derek bounded into view as he pulled on his suit jacket. “What’s the occasion?”

Briana turned her attention back to the eggs and sacrificed the red pepper on the fork to the heat of the pan.

“Oh, no occasion,” she said. The edges of her hair brushed subtly against her jawline as

she attempted to verify her words with an almost imperceptible movement of her head. “Just thought we all could use some good fuel for the day for once, is all.”

Derek came around to her side and gave her upper arm a quick rub up and down. His lips grazed her cheek before they made way for a bite of warm toast.

“You nervous?”

She gestured with her fork toward the cabinets. “Plate, please.”

He rolled his eyes, then complied.

“And no, I’m not nervous,” she went on. “It’s a big case, but I can handle it.”

“Big enough to finally make partner?”

The spatula cut timidly into the eggs, then sped through the sea of white as if to make up for loss. “We’ll see,” Briana answered. “If they vote me in, well, then we can—”

“It’s the least they can do,” Derek insisted, “considering all the work you’ve been dealing with.” He curled the fingers of one hand around the handle of the fridge, pulled the door of the appliance open, and snatched a container of orange juice. “Should’ve happened a long time ago, if you ask me.”

Briana half smirked and widened her eyes. “Yeah, well, we couldn’t have afforded it a long time ago. And that’s the ladder, you know? And with Corey more independent now, it wouldn’t be so bad if we—”

“John told me the other day he might look into Caltech,” Derek interrupted. He claimed a glass and opened the juice container. “I might, too.” He moved his arms outward in a gesture of mild annoyance and surety. “Companies these days, it’s all about their bottom line. I wouldn’t put it past Donervan to start piling it on me, too.” He filled the glass halfway.

“I keep telling you, *options*,” Briana said. She turned off the stove burner, grabbed the

pan, and shoveled some of the eggs vigorously onto Derek’s plate. “With your tech skill set, there’s no reason—”

Derek glanced at his watch, then turned abruptly and walked back to the kitchen entrance. “Corey! School! Now!” He stared up the stairwell. “We’ve gotta go!”

Briana shot a glance at the rooster clock that hung on the wall. A voice called back down the stairs, but she didn’t process what it said. How could her time have disappeared so quickly?

“Oh, but the eggs . . .”

“Don’t worry about it,” Derek shoved her worry away with a flick of his hand. “I’ll just hit the drive-thru by the parking garage. What was it you wanted for tonight?”

Briana frowned as she set the pan and spatula back on the stove, then immediately smiled as a scrawny teenage boy thundered down the stairs and into the room.

“Good morning, honey,” she said. “You ready?”

Corey grabbed his father’s glass of juice and downed it. “Yeah.” The single word revealed a voice that was awkwardly too low for the rest of Corey’s lean body. He jerked his head to get his long bangs out of his eyes, but he didn’t look at his mother.

“Hey!” Derek scowled and grabbed his empty glass back.

“What? I thought we had to go.”

“We do.”

“Well, then let’s *go* already.”

Briana’s eyes darted from boy to man before settling on her husband. She shrugged, then tentatively closed the fingers of her right hand around the tip of her left index finger. “I just thought maybe after work it might be nice to just—”

“Tomorrow, I promise,” He shook his head, then buttoned his jacket as he leaned in to

plant another quick peck on her forehead. “I can’t tonight. I promised John I’d stay late to help, remember?”

Briana nodded. “Sure. Yeah, tomorrow will be fine. And you know, with everything today, I probably won’t make it home early, anyway, so—”

“Dad, *school*.” Corey shifted his weight from his right leg to his left, bored.

Derek lifted his hands in front of him, palms outward, and pumped them a few inches twice in self-defense. “All right, all right. Just let me get my tablet from the den, for heaven’s sake.”

Derek half jogged out of the room. Briana stared after him for a moment, then turned her attention back to Corey.

“Math test today, right?” She picked up Derek’s plate, grabbed a fork from a drawer, and presented both the plate and the fork to her son.

“Yeah. But it’s after study period.” He took the plate without questioning and shoveled in a bite of the eggs. “I’ll just hook up with Adam and get his notes.”

Briana barely stopped herself from letting loose a concerned, Marge-Simpson style *hrrrmm* of disapproval. “What have I told you about that? You need to start taking your own notes. That’s how the brain works, you know. You write it down, it helps.”

“I know, I know.”

Briana was about to slip into full lecture mode, but the street-side door to the kitchen opened. A woman in tight cheetah yoga pants and an oversized wrap sweater was suddenly in the room. Her dark hair glistened just as brightly as her perfect teeth. She brought her stainless-steel travel mug above her head as if she were about to make a toast.

“I am *here*,” she announced. “I know I don’t have creamer, but I made it the whole way

and haven’t spilled once, and I didn’t have to deal with Gufterson’s arse of a dog, and the sun is

out, and I am *ready.*”

Briana stared at the woman, flustered.

“Diane, what are you doing here? It’s Wednesday. I’ve got the hearing today.”

Diane kept her mug poised above her head for a few more seconds, then let her arm drop and half snorted. “Well, hell. I’m sorry. I must’ve selected the date wrong on my phone or something. You know I can't get the hang of all that stuff they have now. I should just buy a paper planner and be done with it.”

Corey snicker-mumbled as he inhaled the last of the food. “It’s just a calendar, Diane.”

“Corey, be nice.”

“No, Briana, admit it,” Diane closed the door behind her in defeated resignation. “He’s right. Other people use this stuff all the time.” She waited, musing, then said, “But you know, I read a study just the other day where—”

“Okay!” Derek breezed back into the kitchen, bag over his shoulder. “All set!” He took surprised notice of Diane. “Oh, hi, Diane. Just on our way out.”

“Morning, Derek.”

Derek turned briefly to Briana. “I’ll text you at lunch,” he said. In a flash, he moved on to his son. “Come on, Corey. We’ll just make it.”

“See you later,” Corey informally saluted as he and Derek breezed past Diane.

“Sure. Later.”

Derek opened the door, and Briana looked again to the rooster clock as he and Corey bailed. She let her air out in one quick sigh.

“Well, that’s that, I guess.”

“What’s what?” Diane asked. She brought her mug to her lips and took a long sip.

“Oh, nothing,” Briana replied. She grabbed the empty plate and fork and deposited them in the dishwasher. “I just have to get going.”

“I won’t keep you,” Diane said. She fished in her shoulder bag and pulled out a wad of envelopes. “But here. Before you go, take your mail.”

“Why do you have my mail?”

“Duh, because your mailbox was wide open again.”

Briana made a face. “I’ve told Derek so many times—”

“Hey, don’t sweat it. You guys are busy. It takes time to fix and replace things. I get it. What am I here for if not to stop thieves from knowing Publisher’s Clearing House has made you a winner?”

Briana’s brow relaxed ever so slightly. “That’s true,” she smiled. “I can count on you for that.”

“Of course you can,” Diane chuckled. She thrust the wad of envelopes out to Briana, who took them without thinking.

“It probably *is* Publisher’s Clearing House,” Briana asserted. “Either that or more bills.” She started to cycle quickly through the envelopes to find anything important. “Either way, I’m not interested.”

“Tell me about it. I just went a week straight and all I got was an ad for a life alert bracelet. I’m only 38, you know. I exercise. I eat right, I—” She gestured with her mug. “I even drink right. I’m *very* vital, thank you very much.”

“Oh, don’t take it so personally. I’m older than you are, remember.”

“Only by two months,” Diane retorted.

“Two months and a day.”

Diane’s features shifted as though she had had an *aha* moment. “See, you should do my calendar. You remember specifics. I should just have you do it.”

“I do not have time to do that,” Briana said. “And even if I did have time, I wouldn’t, because then you wouldn’t learn to . . .”

Her voice dwindled to silence as she stopped her cycling of envelopes. She stared at the gray envelope she had brought to the top of the stack. Diane let her gaze fall to the envelope and then looked quickly back up to Briana.

“What is it?”

“I do forget,” Briana said, the reply slow. “It’s just an invitation to my reunion. I completely forgot it was coming up.”

“Law school?”

“High school,” Briana corrected.

Diane squealed. “High school! Oh, you totally should go! It would be so fun!”

Briana raised her right eyebrow into a severe arch. “Seriously? Diving back into cliques while also pretending they never existed? Your idea of fun, maybe, not mine.”

“Oh, come on! I bet part of you wants to see some old friends, tell some old stories. You can at least brag about your partnership and have a drink.”

“I’m not a partner yet, Diane.”

“Yeah, well, you will be. And besides. After workingso hard you need a break. This is the perfect excuse to take a week and not think for a while. Just decompress, you know? Get a change of pace and scenery, get your confidence up.”

Briana tapped the envelopes absentmindedly on the countertop.

“A break might be nice, but not now.”

“A weekend rather than a week, then,” Diane pushed, her intent pure. “What have you got to lose? And you never know. Maybe there are some people who hope you’ll be there.”

Briana halted her tapping. She stared blankly, then put the envelopes on the counter. “I’ll decide later,” she said. “Right now I have to go.”

“Say no more,” Diane sang. She turned and waved over her shoulder. “I’m leaving.”

“Bye, hon.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Diane left the way she had come, and Briana stood, suddenly alone, by the counter. The gray envelope glared more brightly than it had been. She knew she ought to throw it away. She had things to worry about. *Big* things. *More important* things.

The last thing she wanted to do, after all, was face the love of her life who had broken her.

CHAPTER TWO

Briana pushed with all her weight against her carry-on and shoved it with the channeled strength of a boxer into the overhead compartment. Her lips tightened into a line of near nothing as she closed the compartment and planted herself firmly in her seat. Flying was bad enough on its own. Flying with an additional jumble of nerves about the reason for the entire trip was a million times worse.

She was, at least, in an aisle seat, which she preferred. *Look at the positive,* she reminded herself. *There’s always a positive.*

A woman with two preschool-aged children ushered her offspring down the narrow aisle. Briana prayed they would go past. Instead, they found their seats directly across the aisle. The older kid, a girl with bright blonde curls, asked for Oreos. The younger kid, a toothpick of a boy, whined about a book he had left behind.

Briana looked around the cabin, desperate for diversion. Her brain focused only on the

fact that a sizable percentage of the passengers appeared as sardines in too small cans, their extra

pounds squeezed into their seats in a seeming sheer defiance of physics.

She glanced down at her waistline. Was she stuffed like them? Snug, maybe, compared to before she had gotten married. But no, she decided, not stuffed, and certainly still slender enough not to take even a word of crap from the bulk of people at the reunion who undoubtedly had let the years expand more than just their minds. She flushed with embarrassment at her honest wish for them all to be monstrously, unrecognizably rotund. The desire was too mean, and she knew better than to be so unkind.

Bridget would not have thought it too mean. Of their close-knit group, she always had been the quickest to assert what was permissible and what was not. Briana pressed her earbuds into her ears and started her playlist to hear a familiar voice, still growing in maturity.

“It’s like someone sewed a carpet on her back, *seriously*,” Bridget shoved her science notebook into her locker, smiled, and threw her glance over her right shoulder again. “I mean, I’m all about taking chances, but that’s just a stupid drunk squirrel in front of a semi-truck.”

Briana leaned against the row of lockers. The cold of the metal seeped through her T-shirt and cut into her shoulder, but leaning looked better than standing. “It wouldn’t be the first time,” she agreed, “but I don’t think she can help it.”

Bridget rolled her eyes. “Of course she can help it. *Everybody* can help it. They just choose not to. That’s why it’s so sad.” She tossed her head for emphasis and slammed her locker shut.

A group of three boys made their way down the hallway toward Briana and Bridget. Their voices boomed with intent as they discussed the soccer game from the previous evening. The tallest of the three, who sported a letter jacket and who was clearly the leader of the trio,

laughed and scratched through his hair, and his laugh earned overlapping echoes from the other

boys.