

CHAPTER TWO

February 12, 2020

“Pip.”

It was a single syllable, formed by lips painted red and stretched across a too-white smile. Penelope noticed her teeth first: the snaggle-tooth canine straightened, the sheen bright and unnatural. Then, faint creases in her skin, around her mouth and eyes, caked with makeup. The raised topography of her cheek, the furious pink scar screaming from her left ear to the sharp angle of her chin (this was also new; the Willa she knew had a gentle swell, a pad of fat under each cheek, the wholesome grin of a cheerleader). Then the bright blue of Willa’s eyes, framed by spidery fake eyelashes, familiar and blinking. Happy to see her old friend Pip.

Penelope’s knees buckled underneath her. Almost gave entirely away, and she gripped the doorjamb and, despite being a long-lapsed Catholic, mentally crossed herself in thanks that Brett was still at yoga, and Linc, their son, was at a friend’s house, and Tara, their daughter, was at school late (for what, she couldn’t remember). It was a miracle Penelope was home at all, seeing how it was barely four thirty on a Wednesday.

No one had called her Pip in twenty years.

The nickname had come about in a deliberate way, unlike most nicknames that were bestowed accidentally, haphazardly. They'd been sitting around the common room, Jack on Bree's beanbag, a joint pinched between his fingertips, the smoke sweetly curling. They all had short, perfunctory names: Bree, Jack, Flynn, Willa (sometimes just Will). Penelope had always been Penelope, a mouthful as a child, stiff and too proper for a college student. Too much to say when your tongue was thick with vodka and weed. Jack had a laptop—gray, space-age looking and clunky, and he'd googled “nicknames for Penelope,” and the fledgling internet had churned out *Pippa*. Long before the Middletons made the name household common, Penelope was anointed Pippa, and they had all screamed with laughter. *A dog's name*, Bree had protested half-heartedly, which only made things worse, thereby cementing it as fact. Penelope, with her white oxford shirts and sensible flats, was as far from a Pip as possible, and she'd spent the whole year pretending to be annoyed by it, hating how everyone orbited around Jack and even hating herself a little when she felt her head dip coyly, her cheeks warm, and her mouth betray her in a smile when he said *Pip* singsong from the common room, always beckoning to all of them the way mermaids sang to sailors.

And now, here was a reminder of her old self back on her doorstep. Pip. A single word, uttered and dropped in front of her like a steaming pile of dog shit in a bag left on her porch in an adolescent joke. She swallowed back the sick in her throat, felt the sharp twitch of a muscle in her bicep, her fingertips curled that tightly against the wood. If she had asked Brett, her husband of eighteen years (let's not even get into the timeline, how quickly she had married after the fire), or her children who Pip was, they would have laughed and said, *Who?*

It felt like an eternity before she said, “Willa.”

“I had nowhere else to go. I'm . . . sorry to drop in on you like this.” Her voice had retained its youthfulness, soft and high, a slight

southern twang betraying her Louisiana roots. She had shoots of gray at her temples now, blended expertly in with the blonde.

Penelope stood dumbfounded longer than was considered polite, her mind unable to remember basic manners, human decency. She studied her old friend-turned-stranger for signs of recognition, her memory handing her snapshots of a younger girl, fresh and too happy, too eager to please, a *yes, ma'am* slipping out when she got too drunk, her eyelids drooping shut, and Jack carrying her up to bed.

There was only a small trace of this girl in the woman before her. Then, instantly, this new version of Willa and the Willa in her memories snapped together to form a singular person.

An expensive black sweater, no coat, even though it was February. Dark fitted jeans tucked into black boots. A heavy gold chain around her neck.

And then: faint blue imprints, round like marbles, underneath foundation a shade too dark, dotted along her collarbone.

Penelope knew, instantly, how Willa came to be standing here. Some women, she thought ungenerously, gravitated toward a certain kind of man, seeking protection, and only realized later, when it was too late, when they'd already let themselves become property. Willa, with her easy smile, her puppy dog geniality, her long-gone father and alcoholic mother, aching to fill a hole, would have accepted a love like that in a way Penelope would never have.

Only then did Penelope step aside, hold the door open, and let her old friend in, a faint smell of woodsmoke trailing behind her. That might have been Penelope's imagination, and she fought back an intense nausea. She thought of it then: that creased letter hidden in her sock drawer. Why was it always twenty years later when the past came back? What was so special about that number—just enough time to make a full grown-up kind of life? To feel, with certainty, the moment your old decisions crept back.

Willa stood in the hall—gazing up at the chandelier (it hadn't been dusted in probably years, and stupidly, Penelope searched for something to say to distract her)—Willa's eyes then flicking to the expansive staircase, the formal sitting room to the right that they never used, the sofa as plump and firm as the day it was delivered, and finally settling on Penelope's face, the understanding dawning between the women as to why Willa had to come here, and only here. What happened to the others? Penelope had spent two whole decades avoiding the answer to this question. She'd always assumed they'd all kept in touch. At least, at first, they did try to reach out to her. After the fire.

Which was why it made a cosmic sort of sense: why Penelope's house was the perfect place to hide out (later Willa would plead *only for a few days, I promise*) and why no one would ever find her. Penelope had deliberately cut herself off from them.

No one in Willa's life had ever heard of Penelope Ritter Cox. Penelope would have given anything to have it stay that way.