

NOW

CHAPTER ONE

Molly

“What if it’s a scam?”

“It’s not a scam.”

“But it could be, Mom. You don’t know everything.”

There was a sneer in Alex’s tone, and Molly realized her teen-aged son was baiting her. Instead of responding, she gripped the steering wheel, focused on the curving road ahead. She still hated this stretch of the drive. These last few miles before they passed the mouth of that narrow dirt trail. When she was a child, someone had erected a white cross in the ditch beside it. A glaring reminder for her, her father, and the entire town of what happened there.

“If it’s real, this place better not be a total dump,” Alex mumbled as he unwrapped a hard candy, tossed it into his mouth.

This place was a cheap furnished rental that Molly had found online. Several overexposed snapshots suggested it was bright and clean. In no way luxurious, but choice was limited in a town this size. The owner was flexible with dates, mid-September to whenever,

and the location was ideal, only about a twenty-minute walk from her childhood home.

"There's a roof and running water. How bad can it be?"

"Are you serious?" He slumped down in his seat. "I should've stayed with Dad."

A pain prickled through her chest. Since Leo left a year ago, Alex had seen him only a handful of times. At first calls were sporadic, unreliable, and before long they tapered off altogether. Then last spring, Leo purchased a one-bedroom condo with his latest girlfriend. Purposefully, Molly suspected, so there was zero room for a sweaty sullen teenager. Especially one who needed to monitor his food intake, his blood sugar, his insulin.

"I was joking," she said. "If it's awful, we'll pack up and head over to your grandfather's."

"We should have done that anyway."

She sighed. If they stayed with her father, she knew she'd be swallowed by the sadness of him. He'd had a massive stroke six weeks earlier. A passerby found him crumpled on the front step of his home and called for an ambulance. He was rushed to the hospital in the city, and when Molly arrived, doctors explained that the damage to his cerebellum was extensive. Even so, Molly had fully believed he'd recover. That he was simply hidden beneath some gauzy layers of confusion. But when he finally opened his watery eyes, there was no glimmer. No recognition. Just a blankness that broke her in two.

"I thought it was better," she said. "For us to have our own space. You'll hardly be around, anyway. What with school. And, well, your hours." Two hundred of them, to be exact. Community service for a terrible error in judgment involving his cellphone camera and a girl.

Alex turned his head toward the window, folded his arms over his ribs. "You always do that."

“Do what?”

“Bring it up when I’m trapped. Not like I can get out.”

She glanced at the silver handle inches from his fist. Her mind spat out a scene. One fluid movement, unsnapping his seatbelt, shoving open the door, and rolling sideways. The dulllest thud as his slender body hit blacktop.

“Fair point, darling. I’ll try to speak only when you have a viable means of escape.”

He didn’t laugh, just unwrapped a second candy. The hard edges clinking against his teeth. She wondered if his blood sugar might be low. She wondered if she should ask. Nothing about their interactions seemed straightforward anymore.

Just ahead, a faded wooden sign said “Welcome to Aymes!” Beside the words was a ghost of a corncob with a bandana knotted around its kernel neck. Even though she tried to control her reaction, the sight still made her palms grow slick. They were nearly there.

Around the next bend, the yellowing fields gave way to a dense belt of trees. It was jarring, the sudden shift from vast openness to towering branches, rising up, pressing in, covering the road in leafy shadow. On the north side, the ground began to angle steeply, climbing higher and higher.

As though on cue, Alex bolted upright, pointed out the window. “And that’s where it all went down.”

The white cross had long ago decayed, and the once obvious road was now nothing more than an overgrown path, its entrance blocked by a red metal barricade. Years ago, men would drive through the brush to a drop-off point called the overhang. They’d lower their tailgates, toss trash into the deepest part of Rabey Lake. Bottomless, locals used to say. Things simply disappeared.

“I guess so,” she said.

“Nobody really knows the whole story, but that dude still went to jail?”

Molly sighed again. They’d had this conversation innumerable times. “Yes, Alex, he went to jail. Until his conviction was reversed.”

He was right, though, about no one knowing the entire story. A clear determination was never made about the location of her mother’s death. It was possible she’d died in the garage at their home. Or was killed on the overhang. She could have been dumped over the side while still alive, drowning in the lake. And her skeleton remained there, bare bones tangled up with stained mattresses, pieces of scrap, torn chairs with wild rusted springs. Nearly forty years had passed, and Molly still thought of her mother every day.

“How’s that fair?” he said. “All because you ‘guessed so.’”

Her spine stiffened. He was being cruel now. Itching for a fight. He knew she’d witnessed her mother’s death when she was a child. And that the following year she’d testified during the trial. Though proceedings were a blur, there was one moment she recalled with absolute clarity. The entire jury leaning forward as she’d whispered, “There was a man downstairs.”

Later, of course, she understood that the individual who’d entered their home was not a man at all but a skinny boy. A year or two older than her own son was now. She could still picture Terry Kage, seated beside his attorney, shaggy hair and acne-scarred cheeks. His gangly form floating inside a beige suit with massive lapels. He might have worn that outfit to his high school prom. If he had gone.

When Alex was younger, he’d often peppered her with questions about his grandmother, the boy, the murder, but it was out of concern for Molly’s well-being. Lately, though, his interest had intensified. He’d been snooping in her home office and found the one box she’d kept hidden. Her legs weakened when she discovered

him sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by pages of the police report, crime scene photos, trial transcripts. "Some of this is bullshit," he'd said. "You know that, right?"

As they rounded another turn, Molly slammed the car brakes. Alex lurched, smacking his palm on the dashboard.

"What the hell, Mom?"

"Oh, honey, look."

On the road in front of them, two deer had stopped. One larger, and one slightly smaller. Heads lifted to stare at them, the undersides of their tails white and flickering. Perhaps mother and son.

The doe stood her ground until her fawn had trotted down the shallow embankment on the other side. Then she darted behind him, the pair vanishing into the woods.

"Now you don't see that in the city, right?"

"Whatever," he growled. "Can we get going?"

"Doesn't hurt to pause and appreciate —"

"I told you a million times already. Quit trying your shrink garbage on me."

Annoyance bubbled inside her. How could this be the same boy she'd birthed, wore on her chest, played with for hours? Even slept on the floor of his bedroom when he was afraid of monsters. She'd desperately wanted to give him the intense dedication her own mother had once given her. Her father had often described it in detail when she was young, so Molly knew exactly how much she was loved. But instead of a similar bond, she could barely talk to her son.

Alex lay his cheek against his seatbelt. Hard crunch then, like crystal shattering, as his molars pulverized the sugar down to dust.

CHAPTER TWO

When Molly pulled into the driveway of the rental, a man was standing in the middle of the lawn. He was tall and gangly, the buttons of his plaid shirt misaligned. Behind him was the tiny bungalow she'd seen on the rental website. The wood siding had a deep chestnut stain, and the front was shaded by a steep roof.

As soon as she parked, the man began striding toward them.

"I guess that's our landlord, Mr. Farrell."

Alex groaned. "Why does he look pissed?"

"No clue." She rubbed at the dry patch on her left elbow. A tiny spot of psoriasis that persisted, no matter how many treatments she tried.

"Finally made it," the man said, as they stepped out. The lenses of his glasses were riddled with scratches, and it was difficult to see his eyes. "I'd expected you much earlier."

"Oh?" Though they'd been slow getting on the road, she couldn't recall giving him any indication of when they'd arrive. "Sorry about that."

“Well, we won’t dwell. How was your trip?”

She glanced at Alex. “Blissfully quiet, thank you, Mr. Farrell.”

“No need for formality, Molly.” He tugged off his glasses and rubbed them with the hem of his shirt. “I prefer Russell. Or Russ. Not Rusty, though, if you don’t mind.”

“Got it,” she said. “Russ, but not Rusty.” She put her hands on her lower spine and stretched. A joint in her back popped.

Russell clapped his hands together. “Should we get you folks unpacked?”

“We can manage. Thank you though. We’ll just need the keys.”

He put up his palms and shook his head. His comb-over was a pale and unnatural color. Like butterscotch smeared on his scalp. “I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said. “Consider it part of services provided.” Then he reached for the trunk latch.

When Russell turned his back, Alex rolled his eyes at her.

The screen door creaked when she opened it. The place was exactly as pictured online, though it appeared smaller. Cramped. The cupboards were basic brown, the countertop an uncluttered white. Pushed into a corner was a square table large enough for her and Alex to have dinner. It could also serve as a desk for when she connected with her young clients who’d opted to continue therapy through remote sessions.

When she walked through the kitchen and into the living room, she immediately took note of the oversized painting hanging above the couch. A basic landscape to most everyone else, but for Molly, the sight of the overhang on canvas was disturbing.

“Impressive, right?”

She jumped. Russell was right behind her, and she could feel the warmth of his breath on her skin.

“Did it myself,” he continued. “I’m a beginner, as you can tell.”

Molly could recall going there when she was a teenager. Traipsing through the woods until she reached that clearing. Always alone as friends were few and far between during those years. She'd usually stay until darkness rose around her, perched near the edge of the rock, wondering how it might feel to slip through the air the same as her mother had. Would she flail? Would there be a jolt of terror when she struck the water?

"You've certainly captured it," she said, turning her back to it.

"I hike over there fairly often. Set a few snares. Take in the view of Rabey Lake."

"I bet it's really something," she managed, as she envisioned a rabbit caught in a wire noose.

"Sure is. Especially in the fall."

"Which room's mine?" Alex yelled from the hallway.

"You choose," she called back.

While Russell went outside again, she continued exploring. Opened a closet to find a stackable laundry. Peeked into the bathroom. The fixtures were dated, but the shower curtain still had folds from the packaging.

"No pets, as I explained," Russell said over the top of the box he was carrying. "And I can't tolerate rowdiness." He glanced at Alex, who was dragging a bulging suitcase across the tiled floor. "If you could try to be light on your feet, that would be appreciated. Seeing as I'm in the apartment below."

He'd mentioned that in their email exchange. After his divorce, he'd created a "lower-level suite" and let out the upper level. Which was, he said, "much more appealing to clients."

"We'll do our best, won't we, Alex?"

Alex offered no reply as he went out for another load.

“Well, then. You’ll notice I’ve provided a few basics so you won’t have to rush out this evening. Seeing as you arrived late and all.”

“That’s very thoughtful, Russ.”

Alex bustled back inside and dropped the last box on the ground. “Trunk’s empty.” Then he dug his phone out of his back pocket. “What’s the Wi-Fi password?”

Russell pursed his lips, examined Alex over the top of his glasses. “A word about that, young man. As you may have surmised, the internet is shared by the entirety of the home. I expect you to be judicious with your streaming.”

“Of course,” Molly said, taking a step closer to Alex.

“And there are restrictions on the modem. Filters. To keep things appropriate, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m sure that’ll be fine, right?”

“Yeah, whatever. So, password?”

Russell nodded toward the fridge. There was a sticky note with writing on the front panel. Alex tore off the small paper, went into the bedroom on the left, pushed the door closed with the tip of his sneaker.

Russell raised his eyebrows. “I do hope we’re not off on the wrong foot, Molly?”

“Don’t worry. He’s a good kid.” Or he used to be. And she hoped he still was. “Besides, we’re not in town to watch endless hours of porn.”

Molly’s attempt at lightness made Russell scowl, and he brought his hand to the highest shirt button, twisted. “I wasn’t insinuating such a thing. I know you’ve got a lot on your plate. Regarding your father’s health.”

Her throat tightened. She’d have to get used to strangers with awareness. Aymes was no larger than a thimble, and most residents

knew her father. He'd been the town pharmacist, retiring only a few years ago. As a teenager, she'd spent innumerable afternoons at his drugstore, retreating from the cruelty of her peers. Her mother's death had given her an indelible stamp of otherness that did not fade as she grew up. "You're right," she said. "I do have a lot on my plate."

"Well, keys are on the counter. Garbage day is Wednesday. Make a note because I don't do reminders." Russell's mouth widened into a line. A smile, perhaps. "I'll be close by if you need anything."

Then, instead of going outside, he opened the door beside the fridge.

"That's not your actual entrance, is it?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm just being lazy. I have a proper door on the far side of the house."

After he'd gone, she went behind him and pressed her ear to the wood. His footsteps grew softer and softer, and then a distant click from below. She turned the knob, eased the door open a crack. A steep set of steps with another door at the bottom. The light switch had to be in his apartment, as the single bulb suddenly flicked off and the space dissolved into blackness.

Grabbing the keys from the countertop, she locked the door.

When Alex came back to the kitchen, he'd changed into a different hoodie, different track pants. "Can we order an extra-large pepperoni? I'm starved."

Opening the fridge, she saw apples and juice, bread and eggs. A package of hot dogs and one of ground beef, dripping blood onto the empty shelf below. After Russell had gone through the trouble to make their first night comfortable, he'd surely be offended at the sight of a pizza delivery man. "Give me five minutes."

She filled a pot with water and put it on the stove. Slit open the hot dogs, dumped them in. Waited for it to boil.

“Mr. Farrell seems friendly.” She peeled the safety foil off a bottle of ketchup.

“Yeah, if you vibe on weirdos.”

“That’s a bit harsh, Alex.”

“So what?”

He flumped down at the kitchen table and screwed a needle cap onto the end of his insulin pen. Lifted his T-shirt, injected the clear liquid into his abdomen. They ate their hot dogs in weighted silence. The instant he’d shoved the last bite into his mouth, he scraped back his chair, cleared away his plate, and returned to his room. Molly kept chewing, swallowing. Barely managing half before discarding the rest.

Before getting up from the table, she took several slow, purposeful breaths. Hoping to calm the sensation inside her head. It reminded her of the rising hum in railway tracks, well before a train barreled into sight. As she taught her clients to do, she tried to identify a single concrete thought that was causing distress. Then examine the evidence to determine if the thought was fact, or if it was a distortion rooted in emotion.

What Alex said in the car had really bothered her. “*Because you ‘guessed so.’*”

Perhaps he didn’t realize that was a trigger point for her. Perhaps he did.

She’d attended many therapy sessions as part of her training and gone over and over the afternoon her mother died. Relayed the events, answered questions, processed feelings, and reviewed. Her recollection of what occurred was pristine. And therein lay the problem. Though the psychologist had not explicitly mentioned it, Molly believed her movie-like memory was suspicious. The way each detail neatly stacked on top of the one before, and nothing

ever altered in her retellings. Based on Molly's experiences with her young patients, people often forgot aspects of a traumatic ordeal, or simply made mistakes. She, however, did not.

As she'd already completed the intensive work to heal, she tried to ignore baseless concerns when they crawled into her mind. That stone of grief hammocked inside her chest would be there for the rest of her life, but why continue to poke at it? Sometimes she told her patients that it was okay to simply accept aspects of a trauma and put those bits away. It was not avoidance; it was a strategy to cope.

Even so, she could still close her eyes and find her mother's killer there. In that moment he was standing in their driveway, he'd reminded Molly of a squirrel. A lock of black hair falling over his eyes, and both fists, like paws, pressed into his chest.

The trial made national news. Not so much for the murder; more for Molly's involvement. *Feisty girl takes down killer. Wonder child wows jury.* In newspapers, Terry Kage's droopy-eyed mug shot often appeared alongside her nursery school photo. Pigtailed, plaid smock, crooked, nervous grin. The owner of a local diner clipped an article, slid it into a plastic frame, and hung it on the wall until Molly's father asked him to take it down.

Due to depth, debris, and murky conditions, divers had been unable to locate a body, but there had been overwhelming physical evidence. Copious amounts of blood in the garage, in the car, stains in the soil on the overhang. Even smeared on the boy's hands, face, neck, T-shirt. A clump of long dark hair was tangled in a button on his jacket, and two straight lines marked the dirt, where her mother's heels were undoubtedly dragged toward the edge.

But when it came to the decision those twelve people made in a stuffy room, were Molly's words the most damning? Did hearing those vivid details slipping from the innocent mouth of a four-year-old

decide a young man's fate? It took less than an hour before Terry Jerome Kage was convicted in the death of Edie Margaret Wynters.

Several years later, that conviction was overturned. The appeal was based on the argument that the defendant had had ineffective counsel. Terry Kage's lawyer had opted not to cross-examine Molly. When prosecutors angled for a retrial, Molly's father refused to have her testify again, and they declined to proceed. Terry, then twenty- one years old, returned home to Aymes.

As she recalled what happened next, her muscles tightened. She was determined not to think about it, and took several additional deep breaths, exhales slightly longer than inhales. Then she got up, washed the few dishes from dinner, and made herself a cup of chamomile tea.

Carrying the mug into the living room, she sank into a worn wingback chair. Russell had placed a neatly folded wool blanket over the arm. Dry-cleaning tag still stapled to the fringe. As she sipped her drink, she examined the enormous artwork again. When she'd told Russell he'd captured the overhang, she wasn't exaggerating. The glistening trees, the clearing, the sharp edge of rock in the foreground. And in the background, an expanse of murky water. A handful of colorful cottages dotting the shoreline on the other side.

Though Alex had labeled Russell a weirdo, she figured he was just a kind but quirky man. Still, she could not understand why he would choose this as his subject. If he knew her father, then surely he knew what had happened to her mother. What type of person would spend hours painting the exact place where a local boy had disposed of a dead woman's body?