

## C H A P T E R

# 1

**T**HE MOMENT I switch the blow dryer to OFF I hear my father slam the front door. I follow the sound of his heavy footsteps into the kitchen. He's opening the refrigerator door. Pausing. Removing a glass bottle, hitting another one on its way out but not hard enough to shatter it. Another pause. He's considering grabbing two bottles so he won't have to get up again. Then he slams that door too.

One of these days a door in this old house is going to fall off its hinges.

I go out to the hallway and stop in front of his bedroom. It's a mess. His dirty work clothes strewn around the floor emit a stench of kerosene and chlorine and I remind myself to wash them tomorrow. I glance over at Dad's beloved red tool kit in the corner. His prized possession. It's the only thing in the room free of dust.

I step inside and pick up the pink and purple wildflower bedspread from the floor and lay it out across the queen bed, smoothing out the decades-old wrinkles as best I can.

I stand back and admire it then yank down the right corner so it's even with the left side. My mother loved the once-bright spray of colors, the dainty bend of the green stems. She said it made her feel like she was sleeping in a garden. Even after it started to fade and threads began to come loose she refused to replace it. After she died I asked my father if maybe he wanted a new one, something that wasn't so feminine. His head had snapped back as if I'd slapped him. I took that as a no.

As I walk through the hallway into my bedroom I catch the sound of artillery fire coming from the living room. He's watching *Apocalypse Now* again. I block out the explosive squall by humming to myself while foraging through my pathetically tiny wardrobe. It's mid-September and still warm enough for something lightweight. I pull out the blue cotton dress with a scoop neck and three-quarter cap sleeves that my fiancé Cal bought me to wear to meet his parents for the first time. After I do up the tiny white buttons along the bodice, I cinch a brown belt around my waist and slip on a pair of faux-leather brown sandals.

I go out to the living room and stand behind the couch, watching my father watch Martin Sheen shoot an innocent woman six feet from where he sits. I move around to the right side of the couch so he can see me out of the corner of his good eye. "Hi, Daddy," I say. "How was work?" I have to speak loudly to be heard.

He mutes the television and emits a sound somewhere between a burp and a grunt. "It was slow today, so they made me clean the toilets," he mutters without meeting my eyes.

If he hadn't gotten himself fired from his aviation mechanic job at Southwest Airlines, he wouldn't have had to stoop to taking a line service technician job at our small regional airport. I know he was grieving my mother's death, but he never should have gone to work drunk off his butt.

After a 737 landed at SMF, ground crew was notified that some passengers had seen smoke coming up from the floor during the flight. Dad was asked to troubleshoot the issue, and when he removed the floor access panels and activated the air-conditioning units, a cloud of superheated particles flew into his face. A man who was once a stickler for following rules, my father had stupidly ignored safety protocols by not wearing eye protection. Now, instead of maintaining 737s he's been reduced to driving a fuel truck and scrubbing urinals.

"I'm sorry," I say, feeling the sentiment deep inside me, but not knowing what other words to add.

He shrugs. "Why are you wearing that?" he says, noticing my dress. "Where you going?"

"The Coopers' house. Grant's coming home from rehab today, and Jean and Calvin are throwing him a party."

"Yeah, Cal told me about Grant getting out while I was fueling his plane."

"You saw Cal?"

"I did." He takes a swig from his beer. "He said he was flying down to Santa Monica to pick up his brother. He didn't mention anything about a party."

If not for being engaged to their son, Jean and Calvin wouldn't have ever invited me. But inviting Joe Rydell?

Never. "It's just a small dinner party. For the family," I say, trying to make light of it.

"The *family*," he says, looking at the frozen scene on the television as if the Coopers are characters in the movie. "Those people have bad blood running through their veins, Deni. I don't think you know what you're getting yourself into."

"I know exactly what I'm getting myself into," I reply, with as much conviction as I can summon. My father is right not to like Calvin and Jean Cooper. I don't like them either. They're cold, selfish, domineering people, but I'm not about to let that stop me from marrying their son. Cal is not like his parents. He is charming and thoughtful. Kind. "I need to swing by Marvin's and grab a pie. Can I make you dinner before I go?" I ask, wanting to change the subject.

Before he opens his mouth to answer, the monstrous rumble of a muffler-less car engine blasts through the open window. It's coming from Deez Yellen, the dopehead in the rental next door who, when he's not selling or snorting or shooting or smoking drugs, is working on busted cars. Last count there were four piles of metal littering his front yard. The sound is so grating I'm tempted to grab Dad's rivet gun and punch through my own eardrums.

People assume I'm marrying Calvin Cooper Jr. because I'm after his money. They're wrong. Beyond the fact that Cal is everything I want in a partner, it's the silence I want. The kind of quiet where you can hear the sound of insects buzzing past an open window. Where a dog's bark a mile away still reaches you across the shifting wind, as if there's nothing between you and him but space and light.

The kind of quiet only a lot of money can buy.

I rush over to the open window and slide it down, which merely dampens the noise. “I’ve gotta go,” I say, walking into the kitchen to find my keys. “There’s some deli meat in the drawer. Are you okay with soup and a sandwich?” I ask my father, who by now has unmuted the television and made it even louder. He doesn’t answer me so I plaster myself in front of the screen and wave my arms around like a teacher trying to get her students’ attention. “Hello? I’m leaving now, Dad. Are you okay to find food on your own?”

“I’m fine,” he says, shooing me away from the screen.

I give him a small peck on his cheek and leave him to his war. Just before I reach the door he yells, “Deni?”

“Yeah?”

He swivels his body around to the right so he can see me. “Promise me you’ll be careful,” he says. “Don’t let them hurt you, honey.”

“I promise, Dad,” I say, twisting the knob.

\* \* \*

I peer over at Deez Yellen, who’s presently leaning against one of his junk piles and staring at nothing. The engine is still running. Still unleashing a load of soot and stink. I unlock my mother’s old Honda Accord and get in, being careful not to wrinkle my dress. “Ten more months. Ten more months,” I repeat like a holy mantra as I back out onto Wilkins Street and head into downtown Prosperity, an oxymoron if ever there was one. I pass by The Owl’s Nest, a foul-smelling bar where I once worked for a grand total of five hours (I quit after a *patron* put his hand on my

butt) and see a huddle of men leaning against the wall having a smoke. Down a block next to the shuttered furniture store is Beauty's Best, which sells women's clothes my mother wouldn't have been caught dead in. The kind of candy-colored knitwear that even the yellowed mannequins in the window look embarrassed wearing.

Two more blocks and I'm clear of the city limits. Half a mile after that I reach the Osborne River Bridge, the demarcation line between the have-nots and the haves. On this side of the bridge lies my hometown. On the other side is Gold Hills, my home-to-be.

"Soon," I whisper as I speed over the churn and thrum of the water raging beneath me. "Soon."

\* \* \*

The moment I turn onto Main Street I'm hit with that feeling you get when you walk into someone's warm house after being outside in the snow all day and they tell you to take off your coat and come sit by the fire. I slow to the posted 25 mph and take in the brick and wood storefronts, where from every viewpoint along the way, you can see the changing shadows and hues of the high rolling hills surrounding the small town.

It's quiet today. There are only a few tourists and locals strolling along the wood-planked sidewalks. I pull over to the curb in front of Marvin's and park. Marvin's is only open for breakfast and lunch so I know they're closed, but I also know that Sue Marvin is in there, prepping for tomorrow. I peer in through the glass and knock. I can see the kitchen light on in the back and a second later I see Sue's smiling face.

Sue and Bob Marvin opened Marvin's back in 1990, and it didn't take long for the café to become a Gold Hills institution. I think some of that has to do with Sue's apple custard pies. When Bob died of a heart attack, a year after I started waitressing here, Sue carried on as if he'd never left. There have been times when she's flipping an omelet or rolling out a pie dough when I could swear I see her talking to him, like he's standing right next to her.

Sue walks over, wiping the sweat from her reddened cheeks and chest with a dirty kitchen towel. "Hey, Deni. Don't you look pretty in that dress," she says as she opens the door, breathing hard, as if the twenty feet it took her to cross the dining room was enough to wind her. "You here for your check?"

"Yeah, but I'm also wondering if you have any whole pies left from today."

"Pie?" She raises an eyebrow. "I left the water running. Come in."

I step inside where the smells of bacon grease and bleach duel it out inside my nostrils. Smells that have been a part of my existence for going on five years.

"Since when do you eat pie?" Sue asks after she returns from the kitchen, her hand on her hefty hip. "You hate sweet things."

"I need to bring something to the Coopers'," I say, ignoring her comment. It's not that I don't like sweet things; I just try to avoid them now that my body looks how I want it to. "Grant's getting out of rehab today, and they're throwing him a welcome home party."

"Well, good for him," Sue says with a sharp nod.

“I really wish I didn’t have to go,” I add, aware of the discomfort creeping into my belly.

“You’re about to be part of that family, Deni. In for a penny, in for a pound, even if that pound includes a bruised apple. Speaking of which—” she says, suddenly walking back to the kitchen. She comes out holding an apple custard pie in a cardboard box. “This gorgeous thing will sweeten any sour in that house.” She hands it to me and before I can ask her if she minds taking the twenty-five dollars out of my next paycheck, she adds, “This one is on me, Deni.”

“Thanks, Sue.”

“Anything for my star waitress who I am never going to be able to replace.”

“That’s so not true,” I insist, blushing. “And who says I’m going to quit just because I’m getting married?”

Sue laughs. “Now who’s taking drugs?” she says, then quickly slaps her hand over her mouth. “Oh, that was in bad taste, wasn’t it?”

“Nah. It was funny.”

“Okay. Well, anyway . . .” Sue waves away her faux pas and continues. “Once you’re a Cooper, you and your mother-in-law will go out together and you will be a ‘lady who lunches,’” she says, air-quoting with her fingers. “Do me a favor and make sure you bring her to Marvin’s every now and then.”

I picture Jean Cooper and me at Marvin’s, sitting at a small table by the window, plates filled with eggs and toast in front of us. I take a deep breath through my nose to keep from gagging. “I’m not so sure about that, Sue. Cal’s mother doesn’t exactly love me.”

“How can you say such a thing, Deni? Of course she loves you.” Sue runs the dish towel over a small splotch of grease someone must have missed on the empty table next to her. “Any woman would be proud as a peacock to have you as their daughter-in-law.”

I shuffle my feet a little and even though I can feel a splotch of something sticky beneath my right foot, I don’t want to alert Sue to the fact. I also don’t wish to get into the reasons why Jean is anything *but* a proud peacock.

The Coopers have lived in Gold Hills for six generations, and people think they know everything about them. They don’t. Most folks only see their philanthropic side; the money-giving, community-minded family. It’s only the few and far between who have been let into their inner sanctum who have witnessed their cold cruelty. I am one of those people.

“Just remember, Deni: you’re marrying him, not them,” Sue adds.

If only that were true.