

CHAPTER THREE

GRACE

AS I FOLLOW COOPER INTO THE CARETAKER'S COTTAGE, I HEAR the most irksome sound in the world: Magnolia Sutton's giggle.

Our houseguest is perched on a kitchen chair with her high, round belly pushing against her bottle-green dress. My boyfriend is opening her Coke bottle while he stares, mesmerized, at her overflowing bosom.

"Hi, Stanley," I say.

His guilty eyes snap to mine. "Gracie! There you are! You want a Coke? Some strawberry shortcake?" He plops down next to Magnolia and forks shortcake into his mouth without waiting for my answer.

Ma bustles around the cramped kitchen, pouring him a glass of milk, then one for Cooper. She's always serving somebody.

"Did you meet the Thorpe girls? What are they like?" Magnolia asks eagerly. She wanted to come up and see them for herself, but Dad forbade her. I guess he didn't think our pregnant "cousin" would make the best first impression.

"They seem nice," Cooper says.

"Did they?" I ask, skeptical. "They're very fashionable. I think they'll be awfully bored."

"How could they be bored *here*?" Magnolia asks, as though

the one-stoplight cow town of Greeley, Maryland, is some sort of paradise.

I put a hand on Stanley's shoulder, marking my territory. He brushes a kiss across my cheek. His breath smells like strawberries and beer.

Has he been drinking already? My heart sinks. It's barely one o'clock.

"Wanna go for a swim? I brought my birthday suit," he wisecracks. He's definitely been drinking. Ma clears her throat as she hands him a glass of milk. "Heh. Sorry, Mrs. Harrow."

"It's so hot." Magnolia swipes at the trail of perspiration between her breasts. Stanley's wandering eyes follow. "Gosh, I miss swimming at the lake back home. Guess I'll have to settle for putting my feet in."

She doesn't have a bathing suit that fits. It would be indecent in her condition, anyhow.

"Guess so," I mutter unsympathetically.

The boys guzzle their milk and scatter to change. Magnolia waddles outside.

"Grace," Ma says. "Can't you try to show her a little Christian kindness?"

Christian kindness. Is that what she and Dad call taking money from Magnolia's father to hide her away here till her baby's born, and then selling the baby to the highest bidder? *They* aren't the ones who have to share a bedroom with her. She gets up to use the bathroom every two hours, and she leaves her things all over the floor because she's used to having a maid pick up after her.

I carry Magnolia's and Stanley's dirty dishes to the sink. "She was just flirting with my boyfriend in my kitchen! Right in front

of me!” I seethe. I’m not jealous; it’s the principle of the thing. Stanley Grotowski is *my* ticket out of this house, not hers. “And she never cleans up after herself!”

Ma starts scrubbing the dishes. “She’s only trying to make friends. Put yourself in her shoes.”

Ma is always putting herself in other people’s shoes. She works her fingers to the bone, and never thinks of herself, and for what? So she can cook and clean for the people who stole her home out from under her? So Dad can find fault with every little thing?

“Maggie’s lonely,” Ma continues. “Her family hardly writes. Imagine how you would feel in her situation.”

Never. I have my share of faults, but I’m not careless.

“All right.” It’s not worth the argument. Magnolia’s the last wayward girl. We’re supposed to tell the Thorpes that she’s our widowed cousin. It’s a pretty thin ruse, but I don’t know. Maybe they’re so sheltered, they’ll buy it.

I hurry to my (our) bedroom and change into a modest red one-piece with a built-in brassiere and a swing skirt.

A pea-gravel path leads from our back porch through Ma’s vegetable garden to the new, rectangular hotel pool. It was filled a week ago in preparation for the Thorpes’ arrival. God forbid they spend the summer without their luxuries.

Magnolia is already sitting on the concrete, dangling her swollen feet in the water.

“I don’t know how I’m gonna survive till August, Grace,” she moans, as I throw myself into a lounge chair.

Should have thought of that six months ago. But I keep my mouth shut.

Christian kindness and all.

Stanley cannonballs into the deep end. Cooper follows. They wrestle around like overgrown otters: Stan dunks him, then lightning-fast Cooper dunks *him*, then Stan holds Cooper under for a minute before climbing out. He shakes like a wet dog, and I squeal and shy away like I'm afraid of a little water, because he likes it when I act dizzy.

I hear their voices before I see them. My shoulders tense. This is how it will be now, I remind myself. It's their father's property. They're free to come and go as they please.

"Come on, Rosie!" The little girl darts down the path from the hotel, tugging her sister by the hand. Lou is wearing a polka-dot swimsuit and a swim cap. Honestly, I'm not fond of children (Stanley's sister's boys are always sticky and shouting), but this one is pretty cute. She runs to the diving board, bounces, and leaps into the deep end.

"Can she swim?" Cooper asks, alarmed. Always ready to save a damsel in distress.

"Like a guppy," Rose assures him. "She's had lessons."

Of course she has. The Thorpe girls have probably had lessons in all sorts of things: Swimming. Horseback riding. French. Piano. Driving, for Rose. I would kill for driving lessons, but Dad forbade Cooper to teach me, and that was that.

Lou pops back up, paddles toward Cooper, and splashes him right in the face. He laughs and splashes her back. She screeches with delight. Children adore my brother. It's as though they can sense he's a safe harbor.

I guess I ought to make introductions. I stand. "These are the Thorpe girls: Rosemary, Ella, and Lou. Girls, this is my boyfriend, Stanley Grotowski."

Poor Stanley can't decide where to look. Rosemary's navy-blue one-piece isn't much more revealing than mine, but the fabric clings to the curves of her wide hips and full bosom. Ella's wearing a daring pink two-piece. She's flat as a board up top, but her legs are a mile long in that high-cut bikini bottom. She's like a foal, all wobbly limbs and bravado. Any cutting remarks I'd intended to make are forgotten. It'd be like slapping a baby.

"How do you do. Please, call me Rose. Only my teachers call me Rosemary. And only when I'm in trouble." Rose grins. I wonder how often she gets in trouble, and for what. I can't picture her sitting in detention. She's very polished, with her chestnut ringlets and rounded vowels and fine manners.

"Nice to meet ya. Your dad's doing a swell job with the place," Stan says.

Magnolia lumbers over. I sigh. "And this is our cousin, *Mrs.* Magnolia Sutton."

(That isn't her real name. And of course there was no husband.)

Ella's brown eyes go round as dinner plates when she sees Magnolia's belly, then fly to the gold wedding band on her finger. Dad has a dozen of them in a drawer somewhere.

"How do you do, Mrs. Sutton," Rose says.

"My friends call me Maggie." Which is why I call her Magnolia. "I do hope we'll be friends. I'll be here till September, and I'm absolutely desperate for some girl talk."

What am I, chopped liver? I make a face.

Rose catches it. She doesn't miss a thing, that one; she caught me rolling my eyes at Dad earlier, too. I'll have to be careful.

"Your aunt says you go to Miss Parker's," Magnolia says. "I was a Glenarden girl."

That's true. Till she got knocked up at fifteen and had to drop out.

"My roommate's cousin went to Glenarden! Do you know Sarah Bancroft?" Ella asks.

Artless as a newborn. I almost admire it.

Magnolia stares at her feet. What a dumdummy. She obviously mentioned Glenarden to endear herself to the Thorpes, to indicate they're of a similar station. But she doesn't want word of her condition getting back to Sarah Bancroft.

"I—I don't think I know anyone by that name," she mumbles.

"No matter. We won't breathe a word," Rose reassures her.

I wish she'd let her squirm for a minute.

"Thank you," Magnolia says fervently.

"Of course. I loathe gossip." Rose is equally fervent.

That's conviction borne from being the target of it.

What skeletons are hiding in Rose's closet? I wonder.

Magnolia giggles. "You have the prettiest eyes, Rose. They're so blue. Like the ocean."

Ugh. Although, to be fair, Rose does have pretty eyes. I've never been to the ocean, so I can't speak to that. But they're as blue as Ma's cornflowers, or the deep of the Chesapeake.

"Rose was destined to have blue eyes. I learned about it in my biology class," Ella says.

Rose laughs. "You learned about my eyes?"

"No," Ella huffs. "Eyes in general. We studied dominant and recessive alleles, and did those little charts . . . Punnett squares, they're called. If both of your parents have brown eyes, you'll probably have brown eyes, too, but you could have blue eyes if any of your grandparents did. If one parent has blue eyes and one

has brown—like me—you’ve got a fifty-fifty chance. And if both your parents have blue eyes—like Rose—you’re guaranteed blue. It’s science.”

I’m thinking of Ma’s slate-colored eyes and Dad’s pale gaze. “That can’t be right. Cooper and I have brown eyes, but our parents both have blue.”

Ella frowns. “That’s impossible.”

“Maybe you’re adopted,” Magnolia says.

“I wish.” What I wouldn’t give to know there’s nothing of Dad in me. Nothing of his hard-heartedness, the cruelty that seems to come second nature.

“Grace,” my brother scolds. “You don’t mean that.”

I scowl. I do, too. I guess he can’t fathom that his own sister (his twin sister) could be so unnatural. But Dad’s a bully, and Ma’s a doormat. It’s a poor combination.

“You must be mistaken, Ella. Maybe you missed part of the lesson,” Rose suggests.

“I did not,” Ella says, indignant. “I *like* science.”

I frown. I feel hot and resentful and cross.

“Rosie, watch!” Lou shouts. “Watch me dive!”

Rose turns as a cloud sweeps across the sun. I glance down at the pool.

The water, mirrorlike, reflects the blue sky (blue as Rose’s eyes) and the puffy white cotton-boll clouds. Then, quick as a flash, there’s a face. It’s *her*, beneath the water, peering up at me. White skin and dark, bobbed hair. Her red mouth is open, like she’s begging. Pleading.

Or screaming.

I blink and she’s gone. I shudder back from the edge of the

pool, trying to fix my face before Cooper can see, or he'll know.
He'll know I'm not all right.

That's the second time today that I've seen her outside the
main house.

I'm not safe here. Maybe I'm not safe *anywhere*.

I knock into Rose. She's stumbling, shaken. She's gone pale
as milk.

"Rosie! Rosie, did you see?" Lou calls.

My heart hammers. "Are you all right, Rose?"

She looks like she's seen a ghost.