

Chapter One

Wind shook the town car as it made its way along the winding road to Parsons Manor. The rain-blurred landscape darted passed, unseen by Alexis though she stared out the window. Her mind was haunted by the thoughts of her departed husband, Cole. Over the last few years, she knew his love for her had dwindled. He had given his love to scantily dressed women in tawdry rooms smelling of cigarettes and cheap wine, all because of one mistake in her past. A lonely tear traveled to the ridge of her jaw, when she discovered the multitude of dalliances, which he didn't even disguise in his calendar. Each name was defiantly written in time slots on his calendar. But her love for him still did not fade. While she was the sole beneficiary of his estate, and inherited more money than she could ever anticipate spending, she felt penniless and forlorn without Cole standing by her side.

In the back of her mind, a voice taunted her with tales she did not want to believe. It was her fault, after all. Had Alexis not destroyed her body, she would have been able to provide him a child. Cole acted the only way a man could. What else was there for him to do? He wanted a child conceived of his flesh and blood. Her poor decision in college left them childless, and alone in their silent grief.

Her mother argued, before Alexis and Cole married, that their age difference was too great, and they could not possibly have anything in common. Looking back, Alexis wondered if her mother knew something she never shared. Alexis's father, on the other hand, remained reserved, and placed no opinion on the matter. Seeing how much she loved and admired the man, he freely gave his permission for Cole to take his daughter into matrimony. Lately, she wondered what his opinion truly was, though it would have never changed her feelings for Cole. Through everything she loved Cole, and considered him the one true love of her life.

She could not believe the vividness of her memory of the night he perished. Enthralled in the pages of *Hunger* by Charles W. Jones, she barely heard him tell her that he needed to make a quick trip to the office and would return home before ten. In the morning they had planned, quite suddenly, a trip to Bermuda for a week. Knowing the trip was a pay-off for forgiving his affairs, she agreed to go without questioning his motives. Alexis now wondered whether the trip had been scheduled at the last moment as means for him to serve her with divorce papers. On the island she could cry her eyes out, mourning another loss, while he played with a waitress or cabana boy.

The evening advanced quickly, and as she finished the final prose of the book, a knock came at the door, pulling her away from the dark world she had encountered in the pages. When the second knock came, she remembered giving the servants the night off, allowing them to prepare for the trip. Alexis jumped from the divan, rushing to the door as she smoothed her sheer housecoat covering pink satin pajamas. Expecting to see Cole and feel his strong embrace, she opened the door. The officers standing on the step saw the expression on her face turn from excitement to confusion. Her eyes bounced from one to the other, while her lips parted slightly to allow an expectant sigh to escape.

"May we come in?" the more seasoned of the two officers asked.

Her eyes continued to dart between them, trying to find the reason they acted so respectful. She stepped back, allowing them to enter. After closing the door, she quickly assessed them again, but still did not find any clue of the badness they were surely

there to tell her. Crossing her arms over her chest, she led them into the sitting room, where she had only moments before been comfortable. When she turned to face them, standing in front of the divan, her lavender eyes again searched for the silent answers they knew were there. The officers only gave her somber expressions.

"Please, have a seat," the younger of the two requested with a crackling voice.

Her eyes examined him thoroughly. Though his voice cracked, he wasn't as young as she first thought, but still younger than the other officer. She felt lightheaded, and without a sound she sat onto the plush divan. Once settled, her hand darted quickly in the air in front of her, pointing to chairs opposite her, silently demanding that they join her in sitting.

"Do you know where your husband was going tonight, ma'am?" the younger continued after they were seated. His voice trembled.

"He..." she began. Her voice took the trembling vibrato from the officer. "He had to settle a few things at the office before we go on our trip in the morning. Why? What's happened?"

"Your husband was found at the old country store in the valley," the older officer answered, giving his partner a sour look. "We're sorry to tell you that your husband is dead."

The coldness of his statement swirled around her. Alexis smiled without knowing why. She wasn't happy at what they had told her, but she didn't know what she felt, maybe numb. The older officer's hand slowly slid across the top of hers. Startled that he had suddenly appeared at her side, she jumped up.

"No!" she said. Her smile twitched at the edges. "No, that can't be right. He was headed to the office. I'm sure this is just a big mistake."

She took the phone from the table near the door, and quickly pressed the buttons. Smiling at them, she listened to the phone ring, then Cole's hollow voice began to speak.

"I know better than to call his cell." She smiled at them as she chastised herself. "He's always leaving it in the car." Her sweaty fingers slid across the buttons as she dialed Cole's office number. "I always tell him something like this is going to happen when he goes to the office so late." The phone rang in her ear, and the officers stood watching her with the insistent smile as she waited for her to answer the phone. "His car was obviously stolen car. It's happened before," she babbled while the phone continued to ring in her ear.

Listening to the insistent ringing, Alexis blinked rapidly as tears pooled in her eyes. He did not answer. Her fingers trembled, and she lost her grip on the phone. It dropped to the floor, and echoed the melancholy ring into the room.

The officers rushed to her, catching Alexis before she disintegrated to the floor, and placed her wilted body on the divan. Thunder crashed in the angry clouds, ending the painful memories. She glanced forward, meeting Mandrake's, the driver, eyes in the rearview mirror. His expressionless, scarred face gave her no comfort. His eyes darted back to the rain drenched road ahead, not wanting to betray her privacy, but not before he saw the distressed redness of her eyes.

Turning her head back to the passenger window and the bleak landscape, her thoughts went to Parsons Manor. Twenty years had passed since she'd last been there. When Gabe left for boarding school abroad, her family moved back to town. Her mother

was Gabe's nanny and tutor, and with him in London, the need for them to live there ended, although her father continued to work for Mr. Parsons.

To Alexis's amazement, she'd received an invitation to Parsons Manor a few months after Cole's death. She'd often wondered about Gabe, especially when Cole would return home with the scent of someone else's fragrance lingering on his clothes and hair. What would Gabe be like today? What would her life be like had they kept their pact made when they were children so long ago?

Alexis had tried to keep contact with Gabe after he left, but only received sparse communication from him in return to her almost weekly letters. Before Christmas of his first year away, all replies to her letters ceased, and she stopped sending letters altogether after the holidays, resolved at her wise age of fourteen that he would return to her one day, and everything they planned would come true.