

PART ONE

Sunday, July 7, 2019

PROLOGUE

Michelle Spivey jogged through the back of the store, frantically scanning each aisle for her daughter, panicked thoughts circling her brain: *How did I lose sight of her I am a horrible mother my baby was kidnapped by a pedophile or a human trafficker should I flag store security or call the police or—*

Ashley.

Michelle stopped so abruptly that her shoe snicked against the floor. She took a sharp breath, trying to force her heart back into a normal rhythm. Her daughter was not being sold into slavery. She was at the make-up counter trying on samples.

The relief started to dissipate as the panic burned off.

Her eleven-year-old daughter.

At the make-up counter.

After they had told Ashley that she could not under any circumstances wear make-up until her twelfth birthday, and then it would only be blush and lip gloss, no matter what her friends were doing, end of story.

Michelle pressed her hand to her chest. She slowly walked up the aisle, giving herself time to transition into a reasoned and logical person.

Ashley's back was to Michelle as she examined lipstick shades. She twisted the tubes with an expert flick of her wrist because of course when she was with her friends, Ashley tried on all

their make-up and they practiced on each other because that was what girls did.

Some girls, at least. Michelle had never felt that pull toward primping. She could still recall her own mother's screeching tone when Michelle had refused to shave her legs: *You'll never be able to wear pantyhose!*

Michelle's response: *Thank God!*

That was years ago. Her mother was long gone. Michelle was a grown woman with her own child and like every woman, she had vowed not to make her mother's mistakes.

Had she over-corrected?

Were her general tomboyish tendencies punishing her daughter? Was Ashley really old enough to wear make-up, but because Michelle had no interest in eyeliners and bronzers and whatever else it was that Ashley watched for endless hours on YouTube, she was depriving her daughter of a certain type of girl's passage into womanhood?

Michelle had done the research on juvenile milestones. Eleven was an important age, a so-called benchmark year, the point at which children had attained roughly 50 percent of the power. You had to start negotiating rather than simply ordering them around. Which was very well-reasoned in the abstract but in practice was terrifying.

"Oh!" Ashley saw her mother and frantically jammed the lipstick into the display. "I was—"

"It's all right." Michelle stroked back her daughter's long hair. So many bottles of shampoo in the shower, and conditioner, and soaps and moisturizers when Michelle's only beauty routine involved sweat-proof sunscreen.

"Sorry." Ashley wiped at the smear of lip gloss on her mouth.

"It's pretty," Michelle tried.

"Really?" Ashley beamed at her in a way that tugged every string of Michelle's heart. "Did you see this?" She meant the lip gloss display. "They have one that's tinted, so it's supposed to last longer. But this one has cherry flavoring, and Hailey says b—"

Silently, Michelle filled in the words, *boys like it more.*

The assorted Hemsworths on Ashley's bedroom walls had not gone unnoticed.

Michelle asked, "Which do you like most?"

"Well . . ." Ashley shrugged, but there was not much an eleven-year-old did not have an opinion on. "I guess the tinted type lasts longer, right?"

Michelle offered, "That makes sense."

Ashley was still weighing the two items. "The cherry kind of tastes like chemicals? Like, I always chew—I mean, if I wore it, I would probably chew it off because it would irritate me?"

Michelle nodded, biting back the polemic raging inside her: *You are beautiful, you are smart, you are so funny and talented and you should only do things that make you happy because that's what attracts the worthy boys who think that the happy, secure girls are the interesting ones.*

Instead, she told Ashley, "Pick the one you like and I'll give you an advance on your allowance."

"Mom!" She screamed so loudly that people looked up. The dancing that followed was more Tigger than Shakira. "Are you serious? You guys said—"

You guys. Michelle gave an inward groan. How to explain this sudden turnabout when they had agreed that Ashley would not wear make-up until she was twelve?

It's only lip gloss!

She'll be twelve in five months!

I know we agreed not until her actual birthday but you let her have that iPhone!

That would be the trick. Turn it around and make it about the iPhone, because Michelle had purely by fate been the one who'd died on that particular hill.

Michelle told her daughter, "I'll handle the boss. Just lip gloss, though. Nothing else. Pick the one that makes you happy."

And it did make her happy. So happy that Michelle felt herself smiling at the woman in the checkout line, who surely understood that the glittery tube of candy pink Sassafras Yo Ass! was not for the thirty-nine-year-old woman in running shorts with her sweaty hair scooped into a baseball cap.

“This—” Ashley was so gleeful she could barely speak. “This is so great, Mom. I love you so much, and I’ll be responsible. So responsible.”

Michelle’s smile must have shown the early stages of rigor mortis as she started to load up their purchases into cloth bags.

The iPhone. She had to make it about the iPhone, because they had agreed about that, too, but then all of Ashley’s friends had shown up at summer camp with one and the *No absolutely not* had turned into *I couldn’t let her be the only kid without one* while Michelle was away at a conference.

Ashley happily scooped up the bags and headed for the exit. Her iPhone was already out. Her thumb slid across the screen as she alerted her friends to the lip gloss, likely predicting that in a week’s time, she’d be sporting blue eyeshadow and doing that curve thing at the edges of her eyes that made girls look like cats.

Michelle felt herself start to catastrophize.

Ashley could get conjunctivitis or sties or blepharitis from sharing eye make-up. Herpes simplex virus or hep C from lip gloss and lip liner, not to mention she could scratch her cornea with a mascara wand. Didn’t some lipsticks contain heavy metals and lead? Staph, strep, E. coli. What the hell had Michelle been thinking? She could be poisoning her own daughter. There were hundreds of thousands of proven studies about surface contaminants as opposed to the relative handfuls positing the indirect correlation between brain tumors and cell phones.

Up ahead, Ashley laughed. Her friends were texting back. She swung the bags wildly as she crossed the parking lot. She was eleven, not twelve, and twelve was still terribly young, wasn’t it? Because make-up sent a signal. It telegraphed an interest in being interested in, which was a horribly non-feminist thing to say but this was the real world and her daughter was still a baby who knew nothing about rebuffing unwanted attention.

Michelle silently shook her head. Such a slippery slope. From lip gloss to MRSA to Phyllis Schlafly. She had to lock down her wild thoughts so that by the time she got home, she could present a reasoned explanation for buying Ashley make-up when they had made a solemn, parental vow not to.

As they had with the iPhone.

She reached into her purse to find her keys. It was dark outside. The overhead lights weren't enough, or maybe she needed her glasses because she was getting old—was already old enough to have a daughter who wanted to send signals to boys. She could be a grandmother in a few years' time. The thought made her stomach somersault into a vat of anxiety. Why hadn't she bought wine?

She glanced up to make sure Ashley hadn't bumped into a car or fallen off a cliff while she was texting.

Michelle felt her mouth drop open.

A van slid to a stop beside her daughter.

The side door rolled open.

A man jumped out.

Michelle gripped her keys. She bolted into a full-out run, cutting the distance between herself and her daughter.

She started to scream, but it was too late.

Ashley had run off, just like they had taught her to do.

Which was fine, because the man did not want Ashley.

He wanted Michelle.

ONE MONTH LATER

Sunday, August 4, 2019

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Sunday, August 4, 1:37 p.m.

Sara Linton leaned back in her chair, mumbling a soft, “Yes, Mama.” She wondered if there would ever come a point in time when she was too old to be taken over her mother’s knee.

“Don’t give me that placating tone.” The miasma of Cathy’s anger hung above the kitchen table as she angrily snapped a pile of green beans over a newspaper. “You’re not like your sister. You don’t flit around. There was Steve in high school, then Mason for reasons I still can’t comprehend, then Jeffrey.” She glanced up over her glasses. “If you’ve settled on Will, then settle on him.”

Sara waited for her Aunt Bella to fill in a few missing men, but Bella just played with the string of pearls around her neck as she sipped her iced tea.

Cathy continued, “Your father and I have been married for nearly forty years.”

Sara tried, “I never said—”

Bella made a sound somewhere between a cough and a cat sneezing.

Sara didn’t heed the warning. “Mom, Will’s divorce was just finalized. I’m still trying to get a handle on my new job. We’re enjoying our lives. You should be happy for us.”

Cathy snapped a bean like she was snapping a neck. “It was bad enough that you were seeing him while he was still married.”

Sara took a deep breath and held it in her lungs.
She looked at the clock on the stove.

1:37 p.m.

It felt like midnight and she hadn't even had lunch yet.

She slowly exhaled, concentrating on the wonderful odors filling the kitchen. This was why she had given up her Sunday afternoon: Fried chicken cooling on the counter. Cherry cobbler baking in the oven. Butter melting into the pan of cornbread on the stove. Biscuits, field peas, black-eyed peas, sweet potato soufflé, chocolate cake, pecan pie and ice cream thick enough to break a spoon.

Six hours a day in the gym for the next week would not undo the damage she was about to do to her body, yet Sara's only fear was that she'd forget to take home any leftovers.

Cathy snapped another bean, pulling Sara out of her reverie.
Ice tinkled in Bella's glass.

Sara listened for the lawn mower in the backyard. For reasons she couldn't comprehend, Will had volunteered to serve as a weekend landscaper to her aunt. The thought of him accidentally overhearing any part of this conversation made her skin vibrate like a tuning fork.

"Sara." Cathy took an audible breath before picking up where she'd left off: "You're practically living with him now. His things are in your closet. His shaving stuff, all his toiletries, are in the bathroom."

"Oh, honey." Bella patted Sara's hand. "Never share a bathroom with a man."

Cathy shook her head. "This will kill your father."

Eddie wouldn't die, but he would not be happy in the same way that he was never happy with any of the men who wanted to date his daughters.

Which was the reason Sara was keeping their relationship to herself.

At least part of the reason.

She tried to gain the upper hand, "You know, Mother, you just admitted to snooping around my house. I have a right to privacy."

Bella tsked. “Oh, baby, it’s so sweet that you really think that.”

Sara tried again, “Will and I know what we’re doing. We’re not giddy teenagers passing notes in the hall. We like spending time together. That’s all that matters.”

Cathy grunted, but Sara was not stupid enough to mistake the ensuing silence for acquiescence.

Bella said, “Well, I’m the expert here. I’ve been married five times, and—”

“Six,” Cathy interrupted.

“Sister, you know that was annulled. What I’m saying is, let the child figure out what she wants on her own.”

“I’m not telling her what to do. I’m giving her advice. If she’s not serious about Will, then she needs to move on and find a man she’s serious about. She’s too logical for casual relationships.”

“It’s better to be without logic than without feeling.”

“I would hardly consider Charlotte Brontë an expert on my daughter’s emotional well-being.”

Sara rubbed her temples, trying to stave off a headache. Her stomach grumbled but lunch wouldn’t be served until two, which didn’t matter because if she kept having this conversation, one or maybe all three of them were going to die in this kitchen.

Bella asked, “Sugar, did you see this story?”

Sara looked up.

“Don’t you think she killed her wife because she’s having an affair? I mean, one of them is having an affair, so the wife killed the affair-haver.” She winked at Sara. “This was what the conservatives were worried about. Gay marriage has rendered pronouns immaterial.”

Sara was having a hard time tracking until she realized that Bella was pointing to an article in the newspaper. Michelle Spivey had been abducted from a shopping center parking lot four weeks ago. She was a scientist with the Centers for Disease Control, which meant that the FBI had taken over the investigation. The photo in the paper was from Michelle’s driver’s license. It showed an attractive woman in her late thirties with a spark in her eye that even the crappy camera at the DMV had managed to capture.

Bella asked, “Have you been following the story?”

Sara shook her head. Unwanted tears welled into her eyes. Her husband had been killed five years ago. The only thing she could think of that would be worse than losing someone she loved was never knowing whether or not that person was truly gone.

Bella said, “I’m going with murder for hire. That’s what usually turns out to be the case. The wife traded up for a newer model and had to get rid of the old one.”

Sara should’ve dropped it because Cathy was clearly getting worked up. But, because Cathy was clearly getting worked up, Sara told Bella, “I dunno. Her daughter was there when it happened. She saw her mother being dragged into a van. It’s probably naive to say this, but I don’t think her other mother would do something like that to their child.”

“Fred Tokars had his wife shot in front of his kids.”

“That was for the life insurance, I think? Plus, wasn’t his business shady, and there was some mob connection?”

“And he was a man. Don’t women tend to kill with their hands?”

“For the love of God.” Cathy finally broke. “Could we please not talk about murder on the Lord’s day? And Sister, you of all people should not be discussing cheating spouses.”

Bella rattled the ice in her empty glass. “Wouldn’t a mojito be nice in this heat?”

Cathy clapped her hands together, finished with the green beans. She told Bella, “You’re not helping.”

“Oh, Sister, one should never look to Bella for help.”

Sara waited for Cathy to turn her back before she wiped her eyes. Bella hadn’t missed her sudden tears, which meant that as soon as Sara had left the kitchen, they would both be talking about the fact that she had been on the verge of crying because—why? Sara was at a loss to explain her weepiness. Lately, anything from a sad commercial to a love song on the radio could set her off.

She picked up the newspaper and pretended to read the story. There were no updates on Michelle’s disappearance. A month

was too long. Even her wife had stopped pleading for her safe return and was begging whoever had taken Michelle to please just let them know where they could find the body.

Sara sniffed. Her nose had started running. Instead of reaching for a paper napkin from the pile, she used the back of her hand.

She didn't know Michelle Spivey, but last year she had briefly met her wife, Theresa Lee, at an Emory Medical School alumni mixer. Lee was an orthopedist and professor at Emory. Michelle was an epidemiologist at the CDC. According to the article, the two were married in 2015, which likely meant they'd tied the knot as soon as they were legally able. They had been together for fifteen years before that. Sara assumed that after two decades, they'd figured out the two most common causes of divorce: the acceptable temperature setting for the thermostat and what level of criminal act it was to pretend you didn't know the dishwasher was ready to be emptied.

Then again, she was not the marriage expert in the room.

"Sara?" Cathy had her back to the counter, arms crossed. "I'm just going to be blunt."

Bella chuckled. "Give it a try."

"It's okay to move on," Cathy said. "Make a new life for yourself with Will. If you're truly happy, then be truly happy. Otherwise, what the hell are you waiting for?"

Sara carefully folded the newspaper. Her eyes returned to the clock.

1:43 p.m.

Bella said, "I did like Jeffrey, rest his soul. He had that swagger. But Will is so sweet. And he does love you, honey." She patted Sara's hand. "He really does."

Sara chewed her lip. Her Sunday afternoon was not going to turn into an impromptu therapy session. She didn't need to work out her feelings. She was caught in the reverse problem of every romantic comedy's first act: she had already fallen in love with Will, but she wasn't sure how to love him.

Will's social awkwardness she could deal with, but his inability to communicate had nearly been the end of them. Not just once or twice, but several times. Initially, Sara had persuaded herself

he was trying to show his best side. That was normal. She had let six months pass before she'd worn her real pajamas to bed.

Then a year had gone by and he was still keeping things to himself. Stupid things that didn't matter, like not calling to tell her that he was going to have to work late, that his basketball game was running long, that his bike had broken down halfway into his ride, that he'd volunteered his weekend to help a friend move. He always looked shocked when she was mad at him for not communicating these things. She wasn't trying to keep track of him. She was trying to figure out what to order for dinner.

As annoying as those interactions were, there were other things that really mattered. Will didn't lie so much as find clever ways to not tell her the truth—whether it had to do with a dangerous work situation or some awful detail about his childhood or, worse, a recent atrocity committed by his nasty, narcissistic bitch of an ex-wife.

Logically, Sara understood the genesis of Will's behavior. He had spent his childhood in the foster care system, where, if he wasn't being neglected, he was being abused. His ex-wife had weaponized his emotions against him. He had never really been in a healthy relationship. There were some truly heinous skeletons lurking in his past. Maybe Will felt like he was protecting Sara. Maybe he felt like he was protecting himself. The point was that she had no fucking idea which one it was because he wouldn't acknowledge the problem existed.

"Sara, honey," Bella said. "I meant to tell you—the other day, I was thinking about when you lived here back when you were in school. Do you remember that, sugar?"

Sara smiled at the memory of her college years, but then the edges of her lips started to give when she caught the look that was exchanged between her aunt and mother.

A hammer was about to drop.

They had lured her here with the promise of fried chicken.

Bella said, "Baby, I'm gonna be honest. This old place is too much house for your sweet Aunt Bella to handle. What do you think of moving back in?"

Sara laughed, but then she saw that her aunt was serious.

Bella said, “Y’all could fix up the place, make it your own.” Sara felt her mouth moving, but she had no words.

“Honey.” Bella held on to Sara’s hand. “I always meant to leave it to you in my will, but my accountant says the tax situation would be better if I transferred it to you now through a trust. I’ve already put down a deposit on a condo downtown. You and Will can move in by Christmas. That foyer takes a twenty-foot tree, and there’s plenty of room for—”

Sara experienced a momentary loss of hearing.

She had always loved the grand old Georgian, which was built just before the Great Depression. Six bedrooms, five bathrooms, a two-bedroom carriage house, a tricked-out garden shed, three acres of grounds in one of the state’s most affluent zip codes. A ten-minute drive would take you downtown. A ten-minute stroll would have you at the center of the Emory University campus. The neighborhood was one of the last commissions Frederick Law Olmstead took before his death, and parks and trees blended beautifully into the Fernbank Forest.

It was an enticing offer until the numbers started scrolling through her head.

Bella hadn’t replaced anything since the 1980s. Central heating and air. Plumbing. Electrical. Plaster repairs. New windows. New roof. New gutters. Wrangling with the Historical Society over minute architectural details. Not to mention the time they would lose because Will would want to do all the work himself and Sara’s scant free evenings and long, lazy weekends would turn into arguments about paint colors and money.

Money.

That was the real obstacle. Sara had a lot more money than Will. The same had been true of her marriage. She would never forget the look on Jeffrey’s face the first time he’d seen the balance in her trading account. Sara had actually heard the squeaking groan of his testicles retracting into his body. It had taken a hell of a lot of suction to get them back out again.

Bella was saying, “And of course I can help with any taxes, but—”

“Thank you.” Sara tried to dive in. “That’s very generous, but—”

“It could be a wedding present.” Cathy smiled sweetly as she sat down at the table. “Wouldn’t that be lovely?”

Sara shook her head, but not at her mother. What was wrong with her? Why was she worrying about Will’s reaction? She had no idea how much money he had. He paid cash for everything. Whether this was because he didn’t believe in credit cards or because his credit was screwed up was another conversation that they were not having.

“What was that?” Bella had her head tilted to the side. “Did y’all hear something? Like firecrackers? Or something?”

Cathy ignored her. “You and Will can make this your home. And your sister can take the apartment over the garage.”

Sara saw the hammer make its final blow. Her mother wasn’t merely trying to control Sara’s life. She wanted to throw in Tessa for good measure.

Sara said, “I don’t think Tess wants to live over another garage.”

Bella asked, “Isn’t she living in a mud hut now?”

“Sissy, hush.” Cathy asked Sara, “Have you talked to Tessa about moving home?”

“Not really,” Sara lied. Her baby sister’s marriage was falling apart. She Skyped with her at least twice a day, even though Tessa was living in South Africa. “Mama, you have to let this go. This isn’t the 1950s. I can pay my own bills. My retirement is taken care of. I don’t need to be legally bound to a man. I can take care of myself.”

Cathy’s expression lowered the temperature in the room. “If that’s what you think marriage is, then I have nothing else to say on the matter.” She pushed herself up from the table and returned to the stove. “Tell Will to wash up for dinner.”

Sara closed her eyes so that she wouldn’t roll them.

She stood up and left the kitchen.

Her footsteps echoed through the cavernous living room as she skirted the periphery of the ancient Oriental rug. She stopped at the first set of French doors. She pressed her forehead against the glass. Will was happily pushing the lawn mower into the shed. The yard looked spectacular. He had even trimmed the boxwoods into neat rectangles. The edging showed a surgical precision.

What would he say to a 2.5 million-dollar fixer-upper?

Sara wasn't even sure she wanted such a huge responsibility. She had spent the first few years of her marriage remodeling her tiny craftsman bungalow with Jeffrey. Sara keenly recalled the physical exhaustion from stripping wallpaper and painting stair spindles, and the excruciating agony of knowing that she could just write a check and let someone else do it, but her husband was a stubborn, stubborn man.

Her husband.

That was the third rail her mother had been reaching for in the kitchen: Did Sara love Will the same way she had loved Jeffrey, and if she did, why wasn't she marrying him, and if she didn't, why was she wasting her time?

All good questions, but Sara found herself caught in a Scarlett O'Hara loop of promising herself that she would think about it tomorrow.

She shouldered open the door and was met by a wall of heat. Thick humidity made the air feel like it was sweating. Still, she reached up and took the band out of her hair. The added layer on the back of her neck was like a heated oven mitt. Except for the smell of fresh grass, she might as well be walking into a steam room. She trudged up the hill. Her sneakers slipped on some loose rocks. Bugs swarmed around her face. She swatted at them as she walked toward what Bella called the shed but was actually a converted barn with a bluestone floor and space for two horses and a carriage.

The door was open. Will stood in the middle of the room. His palms were pressed to the top of the workbench as he stared out the window. There was a stillness to him that made Sara wonder if she should interrupt. Something had been bothering him for the last two months. She could feel it edging into almost every part of their lives. She had asked him about it. She had given him space to think about it. She had tried to fuck it out of him. He kept insisting that he was fine, but then she'd catch him doing what he was doing now: staring out a window with a pained expression on his face.

Sara cleared her throat.

Will turned around. He'd changed shirts, but the heat had already plastered the material to his chest. Pieces of grass were stuck to his muscular legs. He was long and lean and the smile that he gave Sara momentarily made her forget every single problem she had with him.

He asked, "Is it time for lunch?"

She looked at her watch. "It's one forty-six. We have exactly fourteen minutes of calm before the storm."

His smile turned into a grin. "Have you seen the shed? I mean, really seen it?"

Sara thought it was pretty much a shed, but Will was clearly excited.

He pointed to a partitioned area in the corner. "There's a urinal over there. An actual, working urinal. How cool is that?"

"Awesome," she muttered in a non-awesome way.

"Look how sturdy these beams are." Will was six-four, tall enough to grab the beam and do a few pull-ups. "And look over here. This TV is old, but it still works. And there's a full refrigerator and microwave over here where I guess the horses used to live."

She felt her lips curve into a smile. He was such a city boy he didn't know that it was called a stall.

"And the couch is kind of musty, but it's really comfortable." He bounced onto the torn leather couch, pulling her down beside him. "It's great in here, right?"

Sara coughed at the swirling dust. She tried not to connect the stack of her uncle's old *Playboys* to the creaking couch.

Will asked, "Can we move in? I'm only halfway kidding."

Sara bit her lip. She didn't want him to be kidding. She wanted him to tell her what he wanted.

"Look, a guitar." He picked up the instrument and adjusted the tension on the strings. A few strums later and he was making recognizable sounds. And then he turned it into a song.

Sara felt the quick thrill of surprise that always came with finding out something new about him.

Will hummed the opening lines of Bruce Springsteen's "I'm on Fire".

He stopped playing. “That’s kind of gross, right? ‘Hey little girl is your daddy home?’”

“How about ‘Girl, You’ll Be a Woman Soon’? Or ‘Don’t Stand So Close to Me’? Or the opening line to ‘Sara Smile?’”

“Damn.” He plucked at the guitar strings. “Hall and Oates, too?”

“Panic! At the Disco has a better version.” Sara watched his long fingers work the strings. She loved his hands. “When did you learn to play?”

“High school. Self-taught.” Will gave her a sheepish look. “Think of every stupid thing a sixteen-year-old boy would do to impress a sixteen-year-old girl and I know how to do it.”

She laughed, because it wasn’t hard to imagine. “Did you have a fade?”

“Duh.” He kept strumming the guitar. “I did the Pee-wee Herman voice. I could flip a skateboard. Knew all the words to ‘Thriller’. You should’ve seen me in my acid-washed jeans and Nember’s Only jacket.”

“Nember?”

“Dollar Store brand. I didn’t say I was a millionaire.” He looked up from the guitar, clearly enjoying her amusement. But then he nodded toward her head, asking, “What’s going on up there?”

Sara felt her earlier weepiness return. Love overwhelmed her. He was so tuned into her feelings. She so desperately wanted him to accept that it was natural for her to be tuned into his.

Will put down the guitar. He reached up to her face, used his thumb to rub the worry out of her brow. “That’s better.”

Sara kissed him. Really kissed him. This part was always easy. She ran her fingers through his sweaty hair. Will kissed her neck, then lower. Sara arched into him. She closed her eyes and let his mouth and hands smooth away all of her doubts.

They only stopped because the couch gave a sudden, violent shudder.

Sara asked, “What the hell was that?”

Will didn’t trot out the obvious joke about his ability to make the earth move. He looked under the couch. He stood up,

checking the beams overhead, rapping his knuckles on the petrified wood. “Remember that earthquake in Alabama a few years back? That felt the same, but stronger.”

Sara straightened her clothes. “The country club does fireworks displays. Maybe they’re testing out a new show?”

“In broad daylight?” Will looked dubious. He found his phone on the workbench. “There aren’t any alerts.” He scrolled through his messages, then made a call. Then another. Then he tried a third number. Sara waited, expectant, but Will ended up shaking his head. He held up the phone so she could hear the recorded message saying that all circuits were busy.

She noted the time in the corner of the screen.

1:51 p.m.

She told Will, “Emory has an emergency siren. It goes off when there’s a natural disaster—”

Boom!

The earth gave another violent shake. Sara had to steady herself against the couch before she could follow Will into the backyard.

He was looking up at the sky. A plume of dark smoke curled up behind the tree line. Sara was intimately familiar with the Emory University campus.

Fifteen thousand students.

Six thousand faculty and staff members.

Two ground-shaking explosions.

“Let’s go.” Will jogged toward the car. He was a special agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Sara was a doctor. There was no need to have a discussion about what they should do.

“Sara!” Cathy called from the back door. “Did you hear that?”

“It’s coming from Emory.” Sara ran into the house to find her car keys. She felt her thoughts spinning into dread. The urban campus sprawled over six hundred acres. The Emory University Hospital. Egleston Children’s Hospital. The Centers for Disease Control. The National Public Health Institute. The Yerkes National Primate Research Center. The Winship Cancer Institute. Government labs. Pathogens. Viruses. Terrorist attack? School shooter? Lone gunman?

“Could it be the bank?” Cathy asked. “There were those bank robbers who tried to blow up the jail.”

Martin Novak. Sara knew there was an important meeting taking place downtown, but the prisoner was stashed in a safe house well outside of the city.

Bella said, “Whatever it is, it’s not on the news yet.” She had turned on the kitchen television. “I’ve got Buddy’s old shotgun around here somewhere.”

Sara found her key fob in her purse. “Stay inside.” She grabbed her mother’s hand, squeezed it tight. “Call Daddy and Tessa and let them know you’re okay.”

She put her hair up as she walked toward the door. She froze before she reached it.

They had all frozen in place.

The deep, mournful wail of the emergency siren filled the air.