

AFTER THE SUMMER RAIN

CHAPTER ONE

“Where are you tonight?”

Melanie looked out into the black darkness of night...waiting. The coyote pair, which she'd named Goldie and Rick, was usually singing by this time. Goldie, because she had the lightest colored coat Melanie had ever seen. And Rick...well, just because.

But the night remained quiet and still, and she thought that perhaps this would be one of the rare evenings when they wouldn't come close and serenade her.

Some people hated, even feared, the coyotes, saying their barks and howls gave them chills. To her, their song was hauntingly beautiful—and oh, so lonely. She knew all about that, didn't she? Maybe that's why she embraced it so; it reminded her of darker times. It reminded her of Adam. It also reminded her that she'd gotten past all of that.

She shifted in the rocker and took a sip of the hot tea she'd laced with honey. Down by the creek, she heard an owl softly hooting. A few beats later, its mate answered. She leaned back and closed her eyes. Sometimes she wished she could sing like the coyotes, call like the owls... Call to someone. Call and have them answer.

She opened her eyes. It felt different tonight. *She* felt different tonight. She felt like...like change was coming.

She tilted her head, looking into the night sky. Had her heart...her soul been calling to someone?

Had someone answered her call? Was someone coming?

Yes, sometimes when she was feeling particularly lonely—like tonight—she wished there was someone. What would it be like to have a lover out here in this secluded place she'd called home for the last seven years?

What would it be like to have someone?

She closed her eyes, letting her heart call to whom it may.

Would someone answer?

CHAPTER TWO

“When’s the last time you’ve slept?”

Erin glanced at the trash basket beside her desk, noting the mound there of empty Red Bull cans. She dismissed her sister’s comment with a wave of her hand.

“Last night, of course. What’s up? Kinda busy.”

Joyce walked closer, peering over the desk, her head shaking slowly. “You can’t live off of caffeine during the day and booze at night.” She glanced at the dirty ashtray beside her laptop. “And cigarettes, Erin? Really? In the office? What is wrong with you?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said sarcastically. “Perhaps I’m a bit stressed. I’m juggling ten houses, two of which are in the final month, two more that just got started, and three that are already behind schedule.” She stood up quickly, her chair rolling back and banging against the wall behind her. “I’m late. Time to go browbeat some contractors.”

Joyce held her hand up. “Not today, sis. Dad’s here. Meeting.”

“Meeting?” She shook her head. “I don’t have time for a meeting. It wasn’t on my calendar.”

She went to walk past her sister but found her father standing in the doorway. He was a large man, tall and bulky. His once dark hair was showing gray at the temples. The moustache and goatee that he'd had her whole life was now totally gray.

“Family meeting,” he said, motioning with his head. “Brent is already in the conference room.”

Erin blew out her breath. “Dad...really, I don't have time. I've got a million things to do. I've got—”

“A meeting, Erin. You've got a meeting. Now.”

The tone of his voice indicated it wasn't up for discussion. That didn't prevent her from glaring at Joyce. The gentle smile Joyce gave her in return only fueled the irritability that had been eating at her all day.

All day? Try all week. All month. Hell, all *year*.

She took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. No. She had no time for a meeting. There were deadlines. There were contractors to yell at. The end of the quarter was fast approaching and she...

She what? She was already far ahead of her brother and sister in sales. What was driving her this time? Was she trying to break her own record?

“Erin?”

She glanced up, finding her father waiting. She nodded, then grabbed her phone before slamming her laptop shut.

As was the norm, Erin sat opposite Joyce at the table. Brent, the youngest of the three, sat at the end, twirling a pen between his fingers. She didn't know why. He never bothered taking notes. Her father sat down at the head of the table and scooted his chair closer. What was missing, however, was his secretary Carol Ann. There was never a meeting of any kind that she didn't attend, jotting down notes on her laptop as if her life depended on it.

"I'm making some changes." Her father folded his hands together on top of the table. "Overdue changes, I might add."

Erin arched an eyebrow but said nothing.

"Where's Carol Ann?" Brent asked as he dropped his pen on the table. "You know, she always sends an email with the recap of the meeting."

"No need. This won't take long." He cleared his throat. "I'm discontinuing the bonuses you all get on the number of projects that are completed within each quarter. From now on, everyone gets the same salary."

Erin's eyes widened. "*What?* Then what's the point?" She stood up quickly, nearly knocking her chair backwards. "I bust my ass," she said loudly. "They produce half of what I do. Why should they get the same salary?"

"This competition has gotten out of hand," he said evenly. "You're likely to have a heart attack and die on us before you're forty. Now sit down, Erin."

Erin felt her hands shaking and she didn't know if it was from caffeine or anger. She pulled the chair closer with her foot and sat down again. Her head was starting to pound and she rubbed her temples.

"I didn't mean to imply that you would get the same pay. There will be a salary and there will be quotas to meet. Instead of getting a bonus for completions, you'll be docked for incompletions. Simple."

"Wait a minute," Brent said. "That's not fair."

"Of course it's fair. I should have done this years ago. Perhaps then the three of you would get along better and act like siblings instead of competitors. When Randy and I ran this business, there was never any of this squabbling that you all do. I'm sick of it."

"When Uncle Randy was involved, the company was in debt up to its ears," Joyce reminded him. "Thank God he didn't have any kids or we'd be fighting with them too."

Erin shook her head at Joyce's callousness. Randy was her father's only sibling. She'd still been in college when he was killed, crushed when a forklift lost its load of lumber. Of course, at the time, the lawsuit was the only thing that saved the company. Randy had no kids, no, but there had been two ex-wives who'd tried to cash in on his death.

"I'll have Carol Ann send the particulars out to you all. This isn't up for discussion. Now—Brent, you may be excused."

"Why do they get to stay?"

"Because, as usual, you are lagging far behind them. You only have four projects, Brent. Four. All four are behind schedule. Why don't you go work on those?" He held his hand up when he would have protested. "You're dismissed."

Brent shuffled out of the room, tossing daggers with his eyes at both her and Joyce. Her father stood up and went to the bar, pouring them all a glass of water.

“Erin?”

“Yes, sir?”

“You’re not going to like what I’m about to say, but this too is not up for discussion.”

She felt her brow furrowing. *Now what?*

“You need a break.”

“A break? Like...a vacation?”

“A lengthy vacation, if you want to call it that.”

She felt panic about to set in. What? Was he firing her?

“We’re worried about you,” Joyce said gently. “You don’t sleep, you don’t eat. When’s the last time you’ve looked in the mirror, Erin?”

“What are you talking about? I sleep. I eat.”

“You live off of Red Bull, bourbon, and cigarettes. You’re a shell of yourself. You’re wasting away to nothing.”

“I’m not—”

“Nobody wants to work with you anymore, Erin,” her father said bluntly.

She turned to her him. “What are you saying?”

“The contractors. You push too hard. You’re on their ass every day. No one wants to work with you. We can’t afford to lose contractors, Erin.”

“The more I push, the quicker they get finished. They can go off to another job sooner. It’s a win for both of us.”

Her father came and sat down beside her. “I’m worried about your health, honey. Joyce is right. When’s the last time you’ve truly looked at yourself in the mirror? Because I’ll be frank. You look like hell. Your eyes are bloodshot. You smell like cigarettes and booze. You’re going to kill yourself if you don’t stop.” He shook his head. “Why in the world did you start smoking?”

Joyce, too, came around the table, sitting beside her. They had her surrounded and she felt like she was suffocating. Yeah, she’d looked in the mirror. She didn’t recognize herself. And yeah, she felt like hell too. So she had a drink at lunch? She needed it. And in the evenings? Yeah, she may have a drink or two in the evenings. Or three or four. But what was she to do? There was stress to deal with. There were deadlines. There were projects to complete. There were contractors to yell at.

“I found a place,” Joyce said. “For you to go to.”

“A...a place?” She pushed away from the table, escaping the claustrophobia from being between the two of them. “A *place*?” She pointed her finger at Joyce. “You’re out of your goddamn mind if you think I’m going to rehab or something. Christ. I have a few drinks when I get home from work. Who doesn’t?” She paced across the room. “And yeah, I keep a bottle at my desk. The stress gets to me sometimes.” She opened up the cabinet above the bar, pointing to the shelf with four bottles of booze. “We all do it. I happen to know that you keep a bottle of scotch in your credenza,” she said to her father.

“Yes. And that same bottle of scotch has been in there months now. It lasts me longer than a week or two, Erin.”

“I don’t have a goddamn drinking problem!” she nearly yelled. “And I’m not going to goddamn rehab!”

Joyce stood up. “I didn’t say anything about rehab. But Dad’s right. You’re going to kill yourself. And as much as we fight and bicker here at the office, I do still love you. You need to get away, Erin. Get your life back. Put things back into perspective.”

“I have things in order and my life is fine, thank you very much.”

“You’re only lying to yourself. You have *nothing* but this job. Nothing. It consumes you. Your friends have disappeared. Your—”

“They have not.”

“Who’s still around, Erin? Who? When’s the last time you’ve been out to dinner with someone? To a party? To a movie? To a friend’s house? When’s the last time you’ve been on a *date*?”

“A date?” She stared at Joyce. A date? She didn’t date because... Because there was... What was her name? Joyce must have seen the confusion on her face.

“It’s been months since Jessica’s been around.” Her voice softened. “You didn’t even know she was gone, did you?”

She looked away. “I’ve... I’ve been busy. I’ve—”

“You’ve been killing yourself,” her father said. “My fault. This stupid competition thing that I dreamed up—I should have known. You got my drive, Erin. And my stubbornness. Brent got none of it, as you both know. I thought this would be a way to push him along, keep up with the two of you.” He shook his head. “I had no idea what this would do to you, though.”

She ran a hand through her hair. “I’m fine, Dad.”

“You’re not fine, Erin. You’re not going to talk your way out of it this time.” He paused. “I’ll fire you if I have to.”

She felt a lump in her throat and she tried to swallow it down. “Fire me?” She would shrivel up and die if he did that. She had nothing else. She had no one. This job... Joyce was right. She had nothing *but* this job. “Okay.” She blinked several times, shocked to feel tears threatening. “I’ll...I’ll do whatever you want.”

He nodded at her. “Three months.”

Her eyes widened. “Three *months*? I can’t be away three months.” She pointed at the door. “I’ve got ten—”

“I know what your projects are. I’m going to personally handle them while you’re away. This isn’t negotiable, Erin. This is final.”

Was he serious? She turned her back to him and squeezed her eyes closed, trying to make sense of it all. Her mind was a jumbled mess for some reason. Might have been that shot of bourbon she’d had a while ago instead of lunch. Apparently it had gone straight to her head.

“Erin?”

She turned back around. “You can’t make me do this. I’m a grown-ass woman. You can’t send me away as if I’m a child. Not for three goddamn months!”

Joyce came over to her. “It’s like a vacation, Erin. God knows you could use one. It’s in New Mexico. It sounds lovely.”

“New Mexico?” She narrowed her eyes. “*New Mexico*?” She shook her head. “No. No, no, no. No way. I’m not going.”

Her father pushed away from the table with a weary sigh and stood up. “I’ll let you two iron out the details.”

“Didn’t you hear me? I’m not going!”

He stared at her, his eyes hard. “Go there, Erin. Or we’ll arrange a clinic somewhere—a rehab, as you said—where you can have counseling. That would have been my choice, but Joyce suggested this. These are your two options. It’s your decision on which you choose.” He pointed at her quickly, then motioned to the door. “You’re not staying here. I’ve already had your access removed, disabled your accounts, passwords—the works. You’re out of here. Effective immediately.”

She felt her breath leave her, felt her throat close up. “Dad? Please?”

“I’m sorry, Erin. I love you too much to watch you become...become *this*,” he said, motioning to her. “You’re...you’re a mess. I hardly recognize you.” He moved closer to her. “I’m sorry to be so blunt, honey. I really am. That pretty, carefree girl you once were, that easy, happy woman you grew up to be—she’s long gone. You look... You look ten years older than you are. The stress is etched across your face, your eyes are lifeless. You’ve shriveled up to next to nothing. Your unhappiness shows, Erin. It’s there for all to see. This *job* isn’t worth it. We’ve tried for the last year to get you to slow down. Nothing’s worked.” He held his hands out.

“So I’m sorry, but yes, I’m forcing you—grown-ass woman that you are—to take a break. Three months. Your sister found a place that she thinks would be great for you. You should hear her out.” She stood stiffly as he hugged her. “I love you. I know you don’t like me very much right now, but I love you.” When he pulled away, his eyes were serious. “This is hard for us too, Erin. But it’s for the best.” He gave a rather curt nod and turned and left them.

Her hands were shaking as she pulled a bottle from the cabinet, intending to pour herself a stiff drink. Joyce stopped her.

“Please don’t. I want my little sister back. And you—you’re not her anymore.”

Erin buried her face in her hands. How had it come to this? When did she become so obsessed with beating the numbers? Beating Joyce? When did she become so obsessed with the job?

“I’m good at what I do,” she said weakly.

“Yes, you are. Too good. Maybe that’s the problem. You can juggle multiple projects. You can coordinate and manage the contractors like no one else. You can negotiate contracts in your sleep. You’ve got it down to a science. But you can’t control the weather. You can’t control lumber prices or whether stone gets delivered on time. You can’t control *everything*, Erin. Sometimes, we get behind. You used to be able to handle that, you took it in stride. But now? You push and push and push, trying to catch up until you break everyone around you. Dad was telling the truth. The contractors—they don’t want to work for you anymore. You know why, Erin? Because you make them miserable. No matter how much money they make, how much you make, everyone is still miserable. Including you.”

She sank down into a chair, suddenly so very tired. She’d slept for a few hours last night—two, maybe three. She’d been pouring over spreadsheets, trying to find a way to get those three houses back on track. Pouring over spreadsheets like she’d been doing for the last few weeks. She took a deep breath, leaning her head back as she stared at the ceiling. Yes, how had it come to this? When had she turned into this crazy, hard-to-get-along-with, demanding workaholic? When had she turned into this person that no one liked?

Was that why Sarah had left her? Not just left, no. She’d been in such a hurry to get away, she’d left more than half her things behind in her haste. She didn’t leave the dog behind, though. Nope. She took the little yappy thing with her when she flew off to the East Coast to be with her new lover. Who knew she’d miss the stupid little thing so much?

She looked over at Joyce, who was watching her thoughtfully.

“I have been miserable,” she admitted quietly.

“I know. It’s been well over a year, Erin. You’re killing yourself.”

She closed her eyes for a second, looking inward. “Okay. So tell me about New Mexico.”

CHAPTER THREE

The bright sunshine felt good on her skin as she peddled along the bumpy dirt road toward Stella's house. It felt good, but she'd rather be at home, alone. She hated these monthly get-togethers with "the tribe," as Stella called them. But after all these years, she'd grown to tolerate them.

She'd moved to Stella's Eagle Bluff Ranch seven years ago last month. Even before her little cabin was built, she'd broken ground on her garden, as she'd been instructed to do. Growing your own food, being resilient, was one of the requirements to living out here.

"Womyn's land," Stella called it. She'd purchased the land—all seven hundred acres of it—over forty years ago and had retreated from society along with her lover at the time. They'd both been from Los Angeles and didn't know the first thing about living off the land. Sustainable living had always been rule number one, however.

Rule number two? Women only. At first, lesbians only. In the last twenty years, she'd relaxed that rule, but there were still only two straight women who lived there. Stella had other

rules too. Being vegetarian. She'd adapted to that rule, even though occasionally she'd eat fish when she was lucky enough to catch a trout in the creek. And like the other women here, yes, she'd retreated from society, but she wasn't completely cut off. She had satellite—she had Internet and TV. Not that she used either all that much.

“Hey, Mel,” Angela called from Stella's front porch. “Thought you were going to be a no-show.”

Melanie leaned her bike against the porch railing, noting that the white paint was starting to chip in places. She loosened her backpack and smiled at Angela as she walked up the steps.

“I wouldn't miss it for the world,” she lied. “It's one of the few times I get to see everyone.”

“We have two guests coming next week. Stella wants to go over that before we have dinner.”

“Two?” She frowned. “It's not my turn, is it?” she asked hopefully. She hated when she had to host.

“No. It's Lindee and Pat's turn and then Rachel's.”

Melanie nodded with relief. “Right.” Then she laughed quietly. “Rachel? Poor guest.”

“I know. But Rachel would get her feelings hurt if we skipped her.”

Rachel was the oldest of the group at eighty-two. She'd lived out here thirty-nine years. Alone for thirty-eight of them. Rachel's hobby was knitting. And inevitably, when it was her turn to host the guest, she tried her darndest to teach them to knit and sew and even quilt. She also ate nothing but beans and vegetables. Every day. Every meal.

The others usually took bets to see how long a guest would last with Rachel before requesting a change. Two days was usually the max. She'd seen some run after only one day.

“There you are. Come in, come in.” Stella beckoned, waving them inside.

Everyone else was already there, crowded into her living room. There were seventeen ladies who called Eagle Bluff home. Melanie was the youngest at thirty-seven. Angela was the closest to her in age at fifty-six. The others were all in their sixties and seventies, including Stella at seventy-five.

“I just love this time of year. It’s so nice to have guests with us, isn’t it?” Stella glided gracefully across the room, her lithe body belying her age. “We have two coming next week. One has been scheduled for months already, but the other just contacted me on Thursday. Well, her sister contacted me.” She stood in front of the fireplace, getting everyone’s attention. “She is booked with us for three whole months,” she said to gasps from some of the women.

“Three months? Whatever for?” Valerie asked.

“Well, I didn’t ask, of course. Maybe she’s interested in joining us out here and is looking to get a feel for it.” Stella waved her hand. “Doesn’t matter, does it? At five thousand dollars a month, that will surely help our coffers, won’t it?”

Melanie had found that most of the guests who came to Eagle Bluff were looking for a spiritual connection of some sort, looking for some meaning in their lives. Very few came here for what Stella had originally intended—an extension of rehab. Stella had started hosting guests after her niece had stayed two months, way back in the late eighties. Her niece had been in rehab for drug use, and Stella’s sister had been afraid she’d relapse. Since no drugs or alcohol were allowed out here and they were more than an hour’s drive to a town of any size, Stella had offered to put the niece up for a while. It had been such a success—and money was tight—that Stella started advertising in some of the gay papers in nearby large cities. It had never taken off quite like she had envisioned, but they had enough guests each year, mostly during the summer

and fall, to add to the “coffers” as Stella called it. Enough to keep them afloat, anyway. She knew a lot of the houses needed repairs, but there weren't enough funds for that.

“Lindee, I’ve got you and Pat lined up for our first guest, Melissa Haywood. She’s coming to us all the way from Seattle. She’ll be with us for three nights. I’ll be picking her up on Monday.” Stella cleared her throat. “Rachel? Are you up for a guest?”

“I believe it’s my turn, isn’t it? I so look forward to having the company. And for three months? Won’t that be delightful?”

Melanie smiled at her words. No way would someone last three months with Rachel. Her smile faded. She knew that it would be her turn after Rachel, which meant she’d be hosting the guest for the bulk of the three months. She wondered if Stella had intentionally set it up that way. Lindee and Pat—her partner of forty-something years—were also in their seventies, but she supposed it would be asking a lot for them to host someone for that long. Most of the guests who came out here rarely stayed longer than a week.

“Erin Ryder,” Stella continued. “She’s coming to us from Houston. I’ll be picking her up on Thursday. Now—who wants to ride with me and do their monthly shopping? We can split it up. Some on Monday, some on Thursday.”

Melanie looked out the window, letting the conversations around her fade to the background. It had taken her nearly a year to get used to doing her grocery shopping only once a month. That was when she’d still been trying to cook based on her old lifestyle. Now? Now she did pretty much what the others did—ate seasonal and out of her garden. She’d also become very proficient at canning vegetables so the wintertime meals weren’t quite as meager as they’d once been.

She looked at the puffy white clouds outside the window, wondering when the daily afternoon rains would come. The monsoon season usually didn't start until July. Living here along Eagle Creek, they weren't quite as dependent on the rain as other places. But the rain provided relief from the heat, and it filled the smaller creeks, which were usually dry by the time the monsoons came. It would be nice to take her morning walk along Mule Creek while listening to the water trickle over the rocks. By late-August, the summer rains would dwindle to short, quick showers, and by early September, they'd be gone completely.

"You're awfully quiet," Angela said as she nudged her arm. "Everything okay?"

Melanie gave her a quick smile. "Yes."

"I made a berry pie. What did you bring?"

"A squash dish. My yellows are really coming in."

"I got my garden in later than you, I think. I've only picked one so far."

And so it went. Melanie got swallowed up in the group, all asking—and telling—how their gardens were faring so far, who had lost a chicken to the coyotes, whose momma goat gave birth, who had vegetables to trade and so on. That was usually the extent of their visiting at these monthly dinners.

These were her people now, her tribe. They all got along well enough, she supposed. She often wondered, if Stella didn't hold these, how many of the ladies would gather on their own. There were five couples. The rest were single. Most everyone had been here for decades except for her and Angela. Angela had joined them two weeks after her fiftieth birthday, three days short of Melanie's first-year anniversary. How many times during that first year had she wondered if this had been a mistake or not? How many times had she been ready to throw in the towel?

“Melanie, honey, I need your help one day this week, if you’re free.”

She nodded at Rebecca. “Of course.”

“I’ve got those limbs hanging over the garden. They’ve gotten so big, they’re shading my corn.”

“I’ll take care of it for you.”

And she would. She was the youngest and most able-bodied. She and Angela did most of the heavy lifting, helping out where needed. She knew Stella worried about them all getting older with no “young blood” coming up the pipeline.

It had been six years since Angela had moved there, the last to join them. Out in the real world, times were different now. There weren’t that many wanting to escape from a heterosexual society like Stella had done all those years ago when she and her lover had retreated out here where they could live free and open, without any prejudices or homophobia. Things had changed, though, and gay marriage was legal. The reasons for moving out here now would be completely different than the reasons Stella, Rachel, and the others had come for.

The reasons might be different, but the outcome was the same.

To escape.

Isn’t that what she had done?

CHAPTER FOUR

“You really didn’t have to come with me.”

“Dad strongly suggested it.” Joyce glanced at her. “He was afraid that when you landed in Albuquerque instead of heading south you’d take off for Vegas or something.”

She looked out the window as Joyce drove them into the Gila National Forest. It was prettier than she’d been expecting, although she really hadn’t had time to research the area. She hadn’t had time to research anything, really. It seemed like once she’d agreed to this—forced—vacation, Joyce had had her packed and on a plane in a matter of days. She hadn’t spoken to her father since that day in the office. He’d tried to contact her, but she ignored his calls. Her emotions were still too...too raw.

“Have I told you that I don’t want to do this?”

“About a hundred times.”

“I’m worried about my projects.”

“Dad can handle them. He managed quite well before we all came on board.”

She let out a loud sigh as she again stared out the window.

“Looks like Colorado,” Joyce mused.

“I wouldn’t know.”

“That’s right. I forgot your idea of a vacation is New York City or some faraway beach destination crawling with tourists. Carl and I went to Colorado three years ago, you know.”

“I remember. You took some train or something.”

“From Durango to Silverton. Fantastic views. This makes me want to go back.”

Yeah, she’d rather be heading to a crowded, touristy beach right now. Not the East Coast, though. That brought back too many memories. Sarah was the one who had loved the city. They traveled there twice a year, and yes, that’s where Sarah had met her new lover. Erin doubted she’d ever want to return to New York again.

“This is kinda out in the middle of nowhere, isn’t it?”

“I think that’s the point, sis.”

“I’m going to go stark-raving mad if I’m stuck out here for three months. I can’t believe you talked me into this.”

“You know what the alternative was.”

“Why couldn’t you have found a beach resort in Cancun or something?”

“So you could do what? Lay on the beach and drink rum for three months? Dad was insistent that you get away somewhere safe. Somewhere where you can clean up—physically and mentally.”

“I know you both think I have a drinking problem, but I don’t. I’ve managed the last two days without a drop.”

“I’m not saying that you needed a twelve-step program or something, Erin, but you were using alcohol to cope with your stress and that’s never a good thing. Not when you have such enormous stress as you had. Self-induced stress, I might add.”

“I’m competitive, what can I say?”

“It was more than that and you know it. You went overboard. You made a lot of money, you made our company a lot of money, but at what cost?”

“I’m well aware of what the cost was.”

“You’re talking about Sarah, I suppose?”

She nodded. “Of course I’m talking about Sarah. She was the love of my life. I lost her.”

“Oh, Erin, she was *so* not the love of your life.”

“She was, yeah. And I ran her off. Not only did she no longer love me, she no longer even *liked* me.”

“You did it for her.”

“Did what?”

“Changed, Erin. You changed because of her. *For* her. You became this...this person that none of us knew anymore. She’s the one who wanted the big house. The elaborate pool. The new car every other year. The four expensive vacations you took annually. She’s the one who pushed you to work every day. She always wanted more and you tried to give it to her. I’m sorry to be so blunt, Erin, but—emotionally—she sucked you dry. I don’t think there was any love involved. She was a taker, not a giver.” Joyce reached across the console and squeezed her arm. “I had hoped that when she left, you’d change back to your old self, but no—it got worse. Much worse.”

Was that how it had been? Her working longer, harder, trying to please Sarah? No. She'd done it willingly. She wanted those things too. She liked the big house, the pool, the new cars. She liked dashing off to New York City twice a year. She loved the cruises they took to the beach resorts in Mexico. They had fun. It was always fun with Sarah.

"It wasn't Sarah's fault."

"Why are you defending her?"

"I know you never liked her."

"No one liked her, Erin. She was using you. Everyone could see that except you."

"No!" Erin said forcefully. "She didn't use me. I loved her. She broke my heart when she left."

Joyce stared at her and slowly shook her head. "I wish you could see what she did to you. She *used* you, Erin. She turned you into...into *this*," she said, motioning at her.

"She loved me. For a while...she loved me. I know she did."

"She zapped the life out of you, Erin! Look at you! I'm taking you to some remote ranch in New Mexico, for God's sake, so you can sleep and eat and...and detox!"

Erin looked at her sharply. "Detox? So you and Dad really thought I needed rehab?"

"Dad did, yes. In your case, I think the detox is more for caffeine than booze," she said, looking at the Red Bull Erin was holding. "I think you're addicted to those things."

"I am not," she lied.

"You'll find out soon enough, I suppose."

"What does that mean?"

"Like you said—it's in the middle of nowhere. I don't think you'll be able to run to a convenience store on the corner and get your fix."

Three hours later, she stood in the parking lot of a local grocery store, her eyes darting between four gray-haired, smiling women and Joyce. She shook her head slowly.

No, no, no, *no!*

There was no way she was getting in a vehicle with them. No way was she letting them take her away to some remote ranch in the middle of nowhere.

No way in hell. Nope. She wasn't doing it.

She looked at Joyce and shook her head. "No."

Joyce met her gaze. "Yes."