

FIONA ZEDDE

*Eve
Falls
First*



Chapter 1

SCARLET

WHEN SCARLET WALKED INTO THE auditorium for the Parent Teacher Association meeting, it got so quiet, she could've heard an ant fart. The spot between her shoulders prickled from the dozens of eyes on her, and she purposely did not yank closed the edges of her oversized button-up shirt.

After a year living in Hurston Cove and having her kid enrolled at the school, the PTA parents at Hurston Cove Middle still weren't feeling her.

So what if she barely made it to the meetings? It wasn't as if she had another parent at home to make sure Maya ate dinner, finished her homework, and didn't burn the house down. Today, her best friend, Mikayla, made the two-hour drive from LA so Scarlet could come to this meeting that half a dozen emails had screamed was the most important, not-to-be-missed one of the year.

So here she was. And they were all staring like they'd never seen a forty-one-year-old woman in yoga pants and pigtail buns before.

"You never said why she doesn't like her. What's the deal?" someone whispered, but they were immediately shushed.

A woman with her red hair in a dandelion fluff and a floral tattoo across her conspicuously bared collarbone smiled slightly at her in

welcome, but nearly everyone else watched Scarlet with suspicion. She returned the redhead's smile and refused to let the rest of them make her feel bad.

So what if her saunter was a little forced as she made her way down the main aisle of the school theater the PTA had commandeered for their meeting space? She found a seat at the end of a row and fixed an interested expression on her face.

It took the woman who had the floor a while to start talking again, but she finally did after a pointed silence.

"Now that we're all here, I'll just skip to the main reason for this meeting," the woman said.

Mrs. Abbi something or other was her name. Scarlet vaguely remembered the woman introducing herself months ago, tacking on the last name of her spouse. A last name Scarlet couldn't recall.

"The school is up for most beautiful in the county again this year, and to win, we need *all* hands on deck." Mrs. Abbi—pretty and curly-haired and around the same age as Scarlet—glanced down at something on the podium before looking back out at the forty or so people gathered in the theater. "Eve—ah, Ms. Marshall—is passing around the list of roles we need filled. Everyone, please sign up so we can make our school prizewinning again this year!"

Seriously, that was it? This was the reason they absolutely had to have all the parents involved in the PTA attend? This was some bullshit...

Scarlet narrowed her eyes at the woman. Mikayla could have been having dinner with her new-ish husband right now. Hell, Scarlet could be home getting ready for her new Pilates client or helping with Maya's homework.

She blew out an irritated sigh, her arms crossed tight over her chest. Honestly, some of these parents needed something else to do. A real job. One less nanny at home.

"Here you are," a low voice said just above her as a clipboard with a piece of paper appeared at the edge of her sight. "Pick out a task you'd want to do along with the dates and time slot. We'll get back to you with any questions or clarifications."

Still irritated at having to be at this nothing of a meeting, Scarlet jerked her gaze up, her lips twisted to say something bitchy. But she

abruptly swallowed. It was the redhead. She had smiled at Scarlet then, and she was smiling now, her white teeth brilliant against her brown skin, her sharp collarbones practically poking Scarlet in the eye. She was young-looking and alarmingly gorgeous. Scarlet tucked away the realization along with any snark. The girl was just doing her job, no need for Scarlet to be bitchy to her.

“Oh, thanks!” Scarlet dragged up a smile of her own and reached for the clipboard. “Do you have a pen?”

A wave of color painted the girl’s cheekbones.

What did Mrs. Abbi say her name was...? Eve. Ms. Marshall.

“Sorry!” Eve said and produced a pen from somewhere. Her gaze flickered down to the clipboard in Scarlet’s hands. She looked so young. What was a girl like her doing here at the school? Was she an intern or something?

“No worries.” Dismissing her random thoughts that were about to wander into child labor law territory, Scarlet glanced over the list of tasks and, after a mental scan of her schedule, signed up for a time and date she usually kept free. “Is this just for parents, or can I bring my daughter with me?”

Another blush colored Eve’s face. “Um—that shouldn’t be a big deal if your daughter wants to come, but I’m not sure. I can ask and let you know, though. Put your number next to your name, and I’ll call when I find out.”

That was sweet of her. “Sounds good.” Scarlet jotted down her number and handed back the clipboard. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure!” Eve grabbed the clipboard and, after smiling at Scarlet again, moved on to the next person in the row.

When none of the other parents, a mixture of men and women, seemed to give the girl a second look, Scarlet dragged her gaze away and took out her phone.

She sent a text to Mikayla.

Everything still good over there?

Immediately, typing bubbles appeared.

Mikayla: *The dinner you made didn't poison either one of us, and I've forbidden the littlest one from watching TV ever again in her life.*

The two of them were probably on the couch watching one of those crazy “pirates in space” shows Maya couldn't get enough of. Mikayla could never deny her goddaughter anything.

Scarlet: *Fine. At least wash the dishes and pretend not to be liquifying my kid's brain with trash TV by the time I get there.*

Mikayla: *No problem. We'll put the chess set and early college applications away so you won't see them.*

Scarlet: *Thanks! You're the best.*

Mikayla: *Hurry home. Daniel decided to reward me in orgasms for buying his favorite ice cream when I went shopping today.*

Scarlet: *I didn't need to know that. The idea of you grocery shopping or doing anything so stupidly domestic freaks me out a little.*

Mikayla: *Don't worry, I have plenty more things to overshare with you later.*

Scarlet: *Can't wait. Love you.*

Mikayla: 😊. *Frontal or occipital?*

Scarlet: *Fuck off. You know that was autocorrect screwing with me.*

Mikayla: 😊. *I love you too, sugar lump!*

When no other bubbles appeared, Scarlet put up her phone. Mrs. Abbi was still on the stage saying things she obviously thought were important.

Scarlet looked at her watch. *Hurry up, lady. My best friend has orgasms to rush home to.*

After another hour, which included a longer soliloquy on how important it was that Hurston Cove Middle won the prize for most beautiful school in the district, Mrs. Abbi finally wrapped up the meeting. During her speech, Scarlet idly noted that Eve Marshall, who had been close to the stage when she'd walked in, now sat close to the door. Gathering her shoulder bag and water bottle, Scarlet headed for the exit along with most of the crowd.

"Thanks for coming, Ms. Hunt." Eve Marshall bounced to her feet as Scarlet walked by. The young woman held the clipboard in front of her with both hands, the side with the list of tasks and names pressed against her jeans-clad thighs. "We look forward to seeing you at the garden renovation next month."

Ms. Hunt? Oh, she'd probably gotten Scarlet's name from the task sheet. "No problem, Eve." How could someone call a young thing like her by a last name? That seemed so *off* somehow. "It was good to meet you."

Eve's smile briefly dimmed before it came back full force. "We actually met before—ages ago!"

"Oh." Scarlet's cheeks warmed. What else to say? This young woman was definitely memorable, and she didn't recall seeing Eve before at all, but okay. "In that case, I apologize for not recognizing you."

"It's all right. No big deal. Have a great night!"

Wishing the girl an even better one, Scarlet left the meeting, happily walking out into the warm spring night and away from the PTA foolishness.

When she had first joined the Parent Teacher Association, she'd had every intention of being an active parent, but their meeting hours didn't quite fit into her schedule. Even the garden cleanup she'd randomly signed up for wasn't exactly at a convenient time.

When not working as a private yoga and Pilates instructor, Scarlet spent as much time as possible doing mother-and-daughter activities with Maya while her child still wanted to hang out with her. She'd heard plenty of nightmare stories about the upcoming teenage years.

But, if they could do this gardening thing together...

Scarlet made a disbelieving noise. She didn't know why she'd signed up for the damn activity. One moment, she'd been determined to cuss out whoever had dragged her out on a busy night for essentially nothing and the next, she'd been handing her name and number to Eve Marshall.

Weird.

Mikayla was going to laugh her ass off about this.

In the ten minutes it took her to drive home, Scarlet decided not to tell her friend about the garden cleanup. Or, at least, not about Eve Marshall's part in it. She didn't know why. Probably because she felt silly after all the shit she often talked about the PTA meetings.

Yeah, that was it.

"Hey, I'm home!" She dropped her keys in the bowl in the short hallway and slid off her laceless canvas shoes.

The house, a small and cozy thing she'd thankfully been able to buy with her freelance income, smelled like a mixture of popcorn and the chicken and dumplings dinner she'd left for Maya and Mikayla.

"This place smells like someone was watching television!" Scarlet called out.

"Your nose is wrong!" Mikayla shouted back.

In the living room, she sat in the middle of the sectional with a bowl of popcorn. Her massive Afro was a pastel blue this week, and she wore lavender booty shorts and a matching tank top that barely contained her big boobs. Maya, dressed for bed and with her hair covered by her sleep bonnet, sat on the other side of the popcorn bowl with her cheeks stuffed full. The TV was off, but Scarlet suspected they just now had pressed the power button when they'd heard her at the door.

Scarlet couldn't even be mad. With Mikayla's recent marriage to the man of her dreams, Maya didn't get to see her nearly enough. A little indulgence couldn't hurt.

“I already did my homework,” Maya said through a mouth full of popcorn.

“Cover that mess up, will you!” Mikayla poked her goddaughter, and, for some reason, both of them started laughing like hyenas.

Her baby was turning into a clone of the woman she’d been named after. How was Scarlet going to survive *two* of them? Then again, being surrounded by love was never a bad thing.

She smiled to herself. “Please don’t choke on your food, sweetie.” Scarlet paused at the open-plan kitchen to drop her oversized bag on one of the barstools.

She’d been in the middle of tidying up before she had to rush off to the PTA meeting. Pressed for time from a late-running yoga session, she’d left their rainbow assortment of sofa cushions on every possible surface, including the floor. A mountain of Maya’s schoolwork and miscellaneous flyers for the town’s upcoming Heritage Week celebrations had littered the dining table. Now, nothing was out of place in the bright, open area.

Mikayla was an angel.

“How was the PTA meeting?” Her friend asked once she stopped cackling with Maya. “Anything interesting happen?”

Skirting her hanging basket chair packed to the gills with pillows and a thick blanket, Scarlet leaned over to kiss Maya on the forehead. “It was a PTA meeting. Nothing interesting ever happens.” But her mind flew immediately to Eve Marshall. Her smile. The enthusiastic way she talked. Her pretty collarbone tattoo. Scarlet winced and yanked her thoughts away from the girl.

Mikayla made a noise, wrinkling her nose at Scarlet. “What? No kiss for me?”

Rolling her eyes at her friend’s ridiculousness, Scarlet gave her a forehead kiss too. Mikayla’s cotton-candy-blue hair smelled like the salon.

“How did the homework go?”

“YouTube helped more than I did, but in the end we got it done.” Mikayla let out a dramatic groan. “When did middle school math get so hard?”

“Right?” Scarlet helped Maya with her homework most days, but it was quickly becoming more than she could handle. Maybe it was time to get Maya a tutor.

Her daughter gave her a cautious look.

“Yes, Maya. I noticed you’re not in bed right now.”

Directly copying Mikayla, Maya flopped back against the couch cushions and pouted at Scarlet, looking at her with big brown eyes. “Can we just finish this episode, please? I already brushed my teeth.”

Parenting was hard enough. Sometimes it was better to let the little things go. Not things like teeth brushing, however. “That piece of popcorn stuck to your bottom lip says you need to brush them again, sweetie.”

Scarlet dropped onto the couch next to Maya, who, sensing her victory over enforced bedtimes and TV prohibition, squealed with happiness and grabbed the popcorn bowl, passing it to Scarlet.

Did this make her a bad mom? Shrugging, she kicked the question into the corner to deal with another time. After a long day of seeing clients in different parts of Hurston Cove, then going to that useless PTA thing, Scarlet was ready to relax.

It was Thursday. Almost like a Friday night.

Justification complete, she reached for her favorite blanket with one hand and into the popcorn bowl with the other. “So, what are we watching now, delinquents?”

Chapter 2

EVE

SCARLET HUNT SPOKE TO HER!

And then at the door, she'd wished Eve a better night!

Better didn't exist, not better than *the* Scarlet Hunt, officially *and* unofficially the most stunning parent currently at Hurston Cove Middle, talking to Eve not once but twice in a single night.

Okay, yes, Eve was the one who'd initiated both conversations, but *wow...*

On tippy-toes, she twirled away from the theater's back door after Scarlet left, imagining that she was wearing one of her poofy dresses instead of her favorite jeans and the floral Laura Ashley blouse she'd bought to be ironic but later realized was just ugly.

They'd looked into each other's eyes and talked about the garden. Scarlet had even given Eve her phone number. Well, she'd given the school her number, but Eve could use it if she wanted to.

And if she wanted to get fired.

Right.

Her floating substitute-teaching job wasn't much, but it was all she had right now. Getting caught being a creep would just be the icing on her bad-decisions shit cake.

Eve bit the inside of her lip as she made it down to the front of the theater, where only a few people were left. Most of the other parents

had escaped as soon as the meeting was over. Abbi and a couple of the other members stood in the middle of the stage with their heads bent together, probably obsessing over something Eve didn't care about.

Her flats patted softly against the floor of the theater, nearly silent, but as she drew closer to the cabal on the stage, Abbi looked up. She said something to the others, then quickly approached Eve.

"Are all the positions filled?" Abbi tipped her chin at the clipboard in Eve's hands.

"Most of them." Eve handed over the clipboard before Abbi could ask for it, the pages fluttering in the freezing air-conditioning of the room.

"Scarlet Hunt signed up for something?" Eyes boring into Eve, Abbi didn't look at the sign-up sheet.

A frown wrinkled Eve's forehead, but she quickly smoothed it away. How did Abbi know without looking at the sheet? Had she been watching them? "Yes. She had a question about her daughter coming to help out. Her number's on there for a callback."

Abbi grunted. "I saw you staring at her earlier." The woman's full lips tightened, and her eyes glinted with sharpness. "We don't allow that kind of thing here."

Allow that kind of thing? An electric current zipped down Eve's spine, and she firmed her jaw. *The fuck?* "She came here like the rest of parents, just like you asked."

"I know why she was here." Abbi's jaw moved like she was grinding her teeth. "I'm only wondering why you were staring at her so much."

Because I think she's beautiful. Is that a crime? But Eve kept the comment to herself and just gave a bright smile. "I was using my eyes like a normal person, you know, looking around and doing the job you all pay me to do. No big."

"Right..." Abbi glanced down at the clipboard. She was quiet while looking over the list of tasks she'd put together herself. Staring into a space over the other woman's shoulder, Eve mentally browsed through her kitchen cupboards and fridge. What did she have in there to make a decent dinner?

Ramen was always a top choice. Or maybe plain old cereal and milk. Wait, was her milk expired—?

“Thanks for coming in tonight. Especially so last-minute,” Abbi finally said. She looked pissed off, though, not thankful.

Eve’s friend, Stella, was supposed to have worked the meeting but had canceled at the last minute when her long-distance girlfriend suddenly showed up. Always ready to help the course of true love, especially when she was getting paid for it, Eve had agreed to sub for Stella.

And had been rewarded for it when Scarlet showed up in all her divine fineness.

Eve felt it when Abbi’s gaze sharpened on her—a prickling along her scalp, like the woman was trying to laser her way into Eve’s mind. Eve didn’t so much as twitch. These games of hers were nothing compared to the middle schoolers Eve dealt with every week.

“No problem.” Eve bounced on her toes, hands linked in front of her as she waited with a smile for Abbi to get over her PTA president power trip. “Is there anything else?”

Another beat of silence. “No. I suppose not.”

“Great! I’ll see you around, then. Stella will be back for the next meeting.”

“Wonderful.” Abbi opened her mouth, like she was ready to say something else, but she just snapped it shut with a click of teeth before dismissing Eve with a nod.

Tossing out a good night to the remaining PTA members, Eve grabbed her purse and left without looking back.

* * *

At home, away from Abbi and her minidramas, Eve immediately headed for the kitchen. Her stomach had started to rumble after her last class of the day. By the time the PTA meeting had rolled around, her belly had felt like it was trying to devour itself.

School wasn’t that far from her house. She should have just come home. But, no, she’d had to take her laptop into the library and begin her daily scour of the internet for jobs in her field. In the last couple of months, she’d even started looking *outside* her field. Any place in Hurston Cove that would take someone with a master’s in education.

What a useless degree. Or, to be fair, it was useless to her.

In college, everybody she knew had been going for an undergraduate teaching degree, so she'd got one too. With the prospect of getting a real job staring her in the face, she'd immediately enrolled in grad school and slogged through a master's degree. She hadn't been ready to give up the comfort of being in school and had delayed her entrance into the real world.

Now she was about to be shoved out into it, ready or not.

Overeducated and underemployed, she was staring the rest of her life in the face, and it didn't look pretty. But at least she lived in the house her father had left her before he escaped to Quebec to live with some woman he'd met online.

And so here she was, scouring her kitchen for food while her latest paycheck made its slow way to her bank account. At least tomorrow was Friday and the money would finally arrive. Maybe she'd take herself out for a cheeseburger and a milkshake at the vintage shake shop downtown.

At the back of her freezer, she found a single prepackaged chicken potpie. Not a fan of the microwave, she put it in the oven and went out to the kitchen patio to read her snail mail, careful to leave the door propped open so she could hear the oven timer.

Most of the mail was bills, but an envelope with a scattering of bright stickers caught her eye. She grinned, her mood brightened by spotting the letter.

"Real mail for the win!"

It was from Trish. Exchanging letters with her college best friend forced Eve to practice her penmanship. Plus, it was nice to get something in the mail besides bills and bloodsucking credit card offers.

She ripped the envelope open.

Eve!

You won't believe what finally happened! Ruben made me the offer. I've officially moved from a lowly intern to a for-real actuary, with the title and everything!!! Can you believe it???

You know I've been waiting on this forever and was ready to quit if they didn't step up. I got an offer from someplace else with more

money, but I want to stay here. The opportunities for advancement are endless—well, as far as CEO, anyway, lol! Plus, the hiking here is amazing. Perry can't get enough of our morning walks in the foothills, and he has lots of nice trees to pee on.

Once the promotion money comes through, you should visit. My guest room is yours, and I'll treat us both to our favorites the whole time you're here. Say you'll come!!!!

XOX

— T

For nearly a year now, Trish had been pushing herself at her investment firm, trying to show them she was worth the job title and promotion; and now she had it. Damn.

Slowly, Eve's smile died, and the happiness sparking in her chest for her friend drowned in a splash of acidic envy.

Trish, like most of Eve's friends, was starting a career in a field she loved and was making great money while Eve lingered at Hurston Cove Middle, pulling in checks that barely lasted until the next one came in.

And her job had an expiration date.

They were set to hire someone full-time, someone with more classroom experience instead of a shiny, new degree. Graduate school was less than a year behind her, but what lay ahead? Eve had no idea.

She stared out into the night, the warm breeze grazing her bare throat and collarbones.

Eve was still staring out into the darkness—feeling the shadows creeping inside of her, a dread of the future she couldn't escape—when the oven beeped to let her know her boxed meal was ready. Maybe she'd feel better after she wasn't so hungry.

Chapter 3

SCARLET

“NOW, GENTLY, SETTLE INTO THE posture,” Scarlet said, sitting in lotus position in front of Marquita and guiding her through a forearm plank pose. “Breath in. Breath out.”

They were on the back patio of her client’s gorgeous Spanish-style house, settled in the shade on their yoga mats. A late-morning breeze rustled the leaves of the orange trees scattered across the extensive manicured garden, bathing them in the scent of citrus blossoms. From down the hill came the sound of the ocean waves rushing up to the sand.

If Scarlet didn’t need the money, she’d seriously consider teaching Marquita for free, her house was that beautiful, that calming.

“That’s it, Marquita,” Scarlet gave her an encouraging nod. “Fifteen more seconds.” She started the countdown, watching for strain on Marquita’s beautiful and gently lined face. The woman had been in a bad car accident over two years before and, though mostly healed, was still recovering her flexibility. She had a ways to go but was determined.

“Damn...” Marquita huffed, her body shaking. Before the count ended, she collapsed onto her stomach, sweat beading on her face.

Strands of silver hair clung to her cheeks, loosened from the bun at the back of her head. “I can’t,” Marquita gasped. “I just can’t.”

“And that’s okay,” Scarlet said softly. “Nobody said you have to conquer this position right away. It takes time after what you’ve been through.”

“But I want to be better *now*.” Despite the rash words, a crooked smile shaped her mouth. Slowly, she sat up and blew out a measured breath.

“And I want a yacht with a private chef and a sexy captain to take me all over the world.”

“You want to borrow mine?” Marquita likely wasn’t joking. She was one of Scarlet’s wealthier clients and *did* have a yacht parked behind a house that most people would call a mansion.

“If you’re trying to bribe your way out of the rest of this lesson, you have to try harder,” Scarlet teased. “Now, before you ruin all our good work by goofing off, flow gently and slowly into corpse pose and allow your body to rest. Treat it tenderly; don’t punish it for its inability to be what it was years ago.”

Marquita rolled her eyes but did what Scarlet asked, lying on her back, arms at her sides with the palms up. Her chest lifted gently with her breaths.

“Perfect. Now, breathe like we practiced. Reward your body for all it’s been through, for the pleasure it gives you, for taking you so ably through life.”

With Marquita, Scarlet did mostly healing yoga. She used the traditional postures, some modified to suit the woman’s limitations, but she often slipped in some meditation to soothe Marquita’s often overactive mind, a flitting butterfly trapped in her beautiful head.

When Scarlet’s watch softly chimed two minutes later, Marquita opened her eyes. They were clear and not as troubled as before. The corners of her eyes and mouth crinkled with her wide smile, and she let out a loud breath filled with relief.

“Thank you, Scarlet. You’re so good at this. How do you always know what I need?”

“Some of it is what I learned in training, but the rest...”

Over the year they'd been seeing each other, Marquita often asked the question and mostly received the same answer. Scarlet rested her hands in her lap, mulling over if she should say something different than her usual joking reply. *Fuck, why not?* "I've been where you are."

When Marquita looked at her with surprise, her eyes openly roaming over Scarlet's body like she was searching for signs of some physical restriction, Scarlet shook her head. "Not physically, but mentally. I..." She hesitated. It had been a long time since she talked about this, years since she'd even *thought* about it. "I turned to yoga and meditation about ten years ago when my marriage ended. The breakup wasn't my idea, and, to be real, it ripped me apart."

The whole experience of breaking up with Nita was like a massive *fuck you* with no lube. For months, years, she'd hurt in places she'd never thought possible. Now, only occasionally would the memories and feelings pierce the armor she'd built over the years. Dulled by time, but still present. The sharpest memory was of her ex telling her they didn't have a future together anymore despite being the one who'd pushed for a baby to "make them into a real family." The family they made had been real, but, apparently, it was also disposable as her ex raced toward a Hollywood career.

"Yoga helped me to push through feeling like I wasn't enough, feeling limited." Scarlet breathed out, banishing those painful memories back to the past. "It helped me so much that I decided to make it my job," she finished with a smile. The road to making a good living for her and Maya hadn't been as simple as she made it sound, but that was all she was willing to share.

"Well, it's a job you're very good at." With a soft grunt, Marquita sat up, her legs straight in front of her. She undid her thick mane of gray hair, scraped the loose curls back from her face, and refastened her bun. Her face was dotted with sweat, her posture erect. "Since our first session, I've been impressed by how skilled and dedicated you are." Marquita paused, an eyebrow arched as she watched Scarlet's face. "You should have your own studio."

A laugh burst from Scarlet. Then she winced at the hurt look on her client's face. "I'm not laughing at you, I promise. I've been think-

ing about getting my own space for a while now, and you're the second or third person who's reminded me in the last month or so."

"You should do it, then!" Marquita's eyes brightened. "It's convenient having you come to me, but sometimes *too* convenient. Some days, I need a reason to leave my house. I'd love your studio to be that reason."

Marquita's faith that Scarlet could make her own studio work was nice to hear. She had so many doubts. It was those doubts more than anything else that held her back.

"Thanks, Marquita. You saying that means a lot."

* * *

Scarlet was still thinking about the conversation with Marquita as she drove through downtown on the way to Maya's school for a guidance counselor appointment. Downtown wasn't strictly on her way to the school, but she always made time to pass through it. With its pastel-colored, two-story buildings—each with a storefront below and a living space up top—the area was out of a storybook.

The streets were wide and freshly paved, the median lines a bright yellow against the black tarmac. Brightly purple jacaranda trees were concussive explosions of color along the streets, joining the splashes of orange, yellow, and pink bougainvillea blossoms clinging to every other building façade. The smell of caramel corn from one of the shops perpetually lingered in the air, and white-peaked mountains stood as a backdrop to it all.

Hurston Cove was surreally gorgeous.

More than a year after her move, Scarlet still wasn't used to it.

Being in the town was like getting a shot of dopamine—automatic happiness. Maybe she looked like the Joker with her mouth spread in a huge grin, but she didn't care. Breathing in the scents of caramel and spring flowers flowing through the open windows, Scarlet brought the car to a stop at a red light.

Every day, she thanked whatever power in the universe had made Jamal, a longtime client of hers, relocate from LA. He'd paid for Scarlet to drive the two hours to Hurston Cove to give him and his man a yoga class in their new home. One look at his new town and

Scarlet had been hooked. Of course, it was also perfect that Scarlet had been looking for somewhere cheaper to live, a place where Maya could be safe and enjoy her childhood. At first sight, Hurston Cove had fit the bill, and it hadn't disappointed Scarlet yet.

The light turned green, and she slowly coasted through the intersection, glancing again at the perfect bubblegum-colored storefronts, the flower-filled window boxes on all the second-floor windows, a *For Sale* sign on the front door of one of the buildings—

What?

Scarlet stepped on the brake. A horn bleated behind her, and someone shouted out a string of colorful curses from their open car window.

Shit! Face hot with embarrassment, she waved an apology and pulled the car over. No, she hadn't been hallucinating. A *For Sale* sign hung on the front of one of the buildings. The sign was a vivid purple against the seafoam green structure, shouting to anyone who would look that this building was within reach, as long as the interested party could afford it.

Me. I want to afford it!

Scarlet's fingers tingled. Blood rushed to her head, and excitement kicked her heart into a high gallop. Grabbing her bag, she scrambled to get out of the car to write down the sign's details.

This *had* to be fate. Especially after the earlier conversation with Marquita. The building was perfect. The location was perfect. Everything was like it had fallen out of a dream and landed at her feet.

Was she really going to do this? Absolutely, yes.

With shaking hands, she called the listed number and arranged to see it. Only the important appointment to talk with a guidance counselor about possible tutors for Maya stopped her from arranging for a showing right then and there. Scarlet stared at the building.

Could this be it? Was she finally going to get that space she'd dreamed of since forever?

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

Eve Falls First

BY FIONA ZEDDE

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