

Emily Waters

Honey in the Marrow



CHAPTER 1

STELLA CARTER WAKES UP AND reaches for her phone. For the first time in weeks, it feels like something is going to happen today that actually matters. The sunlight slants across her bed, and she rolls over, sweaty and uncomfortable. She has trouble sleeping at night, and when she does finally fall asleep, she sleeps half the day away, rising only when hunger insists.

It's almost noon. She has one missed text from Addie.

See you in a few hours!

Maybe fifty-one is a little long in the tooth to be taking on a roommate, but when her niece called three months after Ron's funeral, saying she wanted to move to California and asking if she might stay with Stella for a while, it made sense to invite her to move into the spare bedroom. Stella's husband is dead and buried, so she's always alone in the house.

Maybe that's what Addie was angling for all along. Stella offered to fly out to Nashville and make the drive with her, but that was met with protest. Stella didn't force the issue because she didn't really want to do it, and besides, Addie is twenty-three and perfectly able to make a trip like that alone.

Now that her niece's arrival is imminent, Stella looks around her little bungalow with new eyes and mounting dismay. She's been here a month and a half, but it looks like she moved in yesterday. Not wanting anything to do with the duplex she lived in with Ron, after he died, she used the money from his life insurance to buy a two-bedroom house in her old

neighborhood, thinking maybe she could start her life over again, as if she just moved to LA.

As if she could undo the last eight years.

The past few months have been unsettling. One day, she's a high-powered prosecutor, a special assistant deputy district attorney for Los Angeles County, married to a deputy chief of the LAPD, and the next, she's a widow on indefinite leave, haunting the five rooms of her new house.

She had meant to get things more ready for Addie, but the days had slipped away from her, each day bleeding out and quickly away while she did nothing. She took a month of bereavement leave from the district attorney's office and then decided on a whim not to go back. Part of her restart on life. She wants to be the old Stella Carter, a different Stella Carter. The one she was before she got married, before she threw away a thriving law career and left Nashville for sun-soaked Southern California, desperate for distance from her family.

It was the boldest and most daring thing she ever did. But when she arrived in LA, she was paired with a team of homicide detectives who showed her the worst parts of the city: the rapes, the murders, the seedy underbelly of the entertainment industry—people with money who thought themselves untouchable.

What she really is searching for is life before that damn woman, Captain Murphy.

She closes her eyes, shakes her head. She's not going to think about any of that anymore.

Every room in this 1930s house is small, and though she got rid of most of her stuff when she moved, it still feels cluttered. Addie's room is the smaller bedroom, and while the coffee brews, Stella looks around at the stacked boxes and trash bags. She should unpack, clear the room, but the task seems insurmountable, like she couldn't possibly do it alone.

Nothing seems to work like it used to.

Addie arrives in the early afternoon, looking fresh and happy despite four days of driving cross-country. Her dyed blonde hair is growing out to its original light brown color, and she wears it just above her shoulders. Stella shows her around and listens to her happy chatter. Addie's sedan is

packed to the brim, but it takes her less than an hour to drag her luggage and boxes into the house. Stella feels exhausted just watching her.

“I might go lie down for a while,” Stella says.

Addie nods. “Sure. I’ve got this.”

Within the first week, Addie has shelved all of Stella’s books, including from the boxes she left unpacked. Addie organizes them by color, and the rainbow spines detract from the scuffed paint on the built-in shelves.

Addie photographs the books from several different angles. “For Instagram,” she explains.

As if that means anything to Stella.

Then Addie moves some of the furniture from the garage into the living room. In no time at all, the house feels lived in.

Within three weeks, Addie has a bartending job and instructs Stella to tell her parents, if they ask, that Addie has a serving job. Stella doesn’t care if Addie bartends—the money is better—but she also doesn’t want her out-of-state niece working in a dive bar where people are more likely to commit crimes, people Stella spent years putting in jail.

But Addie tells her it’s at the Irish pub, Casey’s.

“That’s a cop bar,” Stella says.

“Is it?” Addie asks innocently.

Casey’s is within walking distance from both the police administration building and the district attorney’s office. Over the years, Stella had more than her fair share of wine there. It’s not exactly her style, but the homicide detectives she worked with liked it well enough.

“What could go wrong in a bar full of cops?” Addie asks.

Stella stares her down. “Maybe I’ll get a job there too.” Stella’s joking, but it comes out sour. She needs to figure out what she wants to do. She’s waiting for something to fall into her lap, for someone to come rescue her.

“Let’s go to Target,” Addie suggests, changing the subject.

Retail therapy. “Okay.”

She lets Addie drive the hybrid she bought a year into her promotion to special assistant. Ron’s newer SUV sits in her one-car garage, untouched.

They’re pulling into the Target parking lot when Stella says, “Hey, do you want Uncle Ron’s car?”

Addie glances over at her. “What?”

“It’s only a few years old,” she says. “Real good condition. It’s just sitting there.”

“I have a car.”

“You could sell yours.” Stella glances out at the glowing red bullseye on the front of the store. “I could sell Ron’s car, I guess, but it makes more sense to keep the one with fewer miles.” She looks back at Addie. “I don’t know anything about cars, really, besides that.”

“Maybe. I’ll think about it.”

Inside the store, Stella grabs a cart and trails behind her niece. Addie checks the list on her phone but tosses seemingly random things into the cart too: a candle that smells like piña colada, a pink mug that says *Hello Gorgeous* in a curly rose gold font, and a set of three wooden cutting boards. She also buys a pack of twenty-five velvet hangers and a plastic laundry basket.

Stella has been undressing in the laundry room and using the washing machine as her hamper. It might be pathetic, but it’s efficient.

They go through the clothes section on the way to the registers. Addie buys three pairs of black jeans and several black tank tops.

“Jesus, who died?” Stella blurts out.

Then she feels stupid and sad.

Addie wore a dark green dress to Ron’s funeral, a tiny bit of color in an otherwise gray day. Stella remembers the green dress, the yellow flowers on the casket, Captain Murphy’s long red hair, pinned up because she was in uniform. The cap came off one of Stella’s lipsticks, staining the lining of her purse, and she’d had to throw the purse away. Then she started throwing other things away, and then she decided to move.

“It’s my uniform for the bar,” Addie mumbles. “Let’s go.”

Back in the car, Stella calls for a pizza. When she hangs up, she asks, “How did you even know about Casey’s?”

“How does anyone know about anything?”

“Is that supposed to be rhetorical?” Stella snaps.

“I found it on the internet,” Addie says. “If it bugs you so much, I don’t have to work there.”

“It doesn’t bug me. I just momentarily forgot that this is the world’s tiniest town.”

Honey in the Marrow

Later, Stella eats pizza standing in the kitchen while Addie's on the phone in her bedroom. There aren't a lot of secrets in this house. The insulation isn't great, and Addie's door is open anyway.

"I don't know. I haven't started yet," Addie is saying as she rustles her shopping bags. A pause. "It's fine. The house is really cute, and we're getting settled."

Stella strains to hear what her sister-in-law—Addie's mama—is saying on the other end, but of course she can't.

"Yeah," Addie says. "I mean, super depressed, but wouldn't you be?"

Stella dunks her crust into the container of ranch dressing, and it drips on her shirt on the way to her mouth.

"She just isn't doing anything. I think if I can get her doing something, anything at all, she'll feel better... I don't know. I haven't been here that long."

Stella realizes that Addie is probably talking about her. Is she depressed? She looks down at the ranch on her shirt, the dirty kitchen, today's half-empty pizza box sitting on the empty pizza box from two days ago.

She's just lazy. She's always been lazy, and now Ron isn't here to snap her out of it. Ron isn't here because someone got into the police administration building and randomly shot him. Now he's dead. That's all.

She isn't depressed. She's fifty-one, still a mess, just like she was at forty, just like she was at thirty-three, just like she was at seventeen. But she's doing fine, and she can start her life over.

Stella wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, wipes her hand on the hem of her shirt, then takes it off to dump into the washing machine.

She falls asleep in her bra and sweatpants, the fan in her bedroom squeaking as it spins.

* * *

Addie is home during the day a lot, though often she's sleeping. Often Stella is too. She tries to leave the house at least once a day, however sometimes all she can manage is a walk around the block or a drive to the nearby CVS to buy shampoo or razor blades or chocolate. Mostly chocolate. The checkout people there are starting to recognize her.

She comes into the house with a bag of mini chocolate bars and an avocado face mask. Addie is watching the coffeepot. She's wearing a pair

of cotton shorts and a gray tank top. Her hair is in a messy bun on top of her head.

“Hey, sugar,” Stella says, pushing up her sunglasses.

“Hey.” Addie yawns and pulls a mug out of the dishwasher.

“How was work?”

“Kinda slow. They still have me on the taps. It’ll be a while before I can work up to a cocktail shift.” Addie’s the newest, so mostly she pours beer and wine and buses tables. “You could come see it, you know.”

“I’ve seen it,” Stella reminds her.

“Not with me behind the bar,” Addie says. “I’ve come to see you at work before.”

Stella remembers the visit well. A sixteen-year-old Addie spent a week in California, sitting in courtrooms or hanging out either in Stella’s office or with Ron, who showed her a few tourist attractions before Addie lost interest in sightseeing. Stella has always loved her niece, but she prefers this grown-up and independent version of Addie over the sulky teen from before whose eyes were ringed in black and arms in rubber bracelets practically up to her elbows.

“You could come tonight,” Addie continues. “It’s Thursday, so it won’t be too crazy.”

“Honey...” Stella is suddenly tired and desperate to get out of doing anything ever again that doesn’t involve eating snacks while wearing soft pants.

“Drinks on the house,” Addie says. “We have that wine you like from Markham Vineyards.” The coffee machine beeps, and Addie turns to fix her cup, stirring in a little almond milk and a packet of sweetener. She takes a sip and says, “Oh, my God, that’s amazing.”

“I guess I could stop by,” Stella concedes. “What time does your shift start?”

“Four thirty.”

“Good.” Stella nibbles at the ragged skin around her thumbnail. “Before the shift turnover. Maybe I won’t see anyone who knows me.”

“Would that be so bad?” Addie wraps both hands around her mug. Her green nail polish is so dark, it’s nearly black, and it’s chipped on both thumbnails. When Stella’s nail polish chips, it looks awful. On Addie, it’s effortlessly cool.

“I just don’t need it right now,” Stella says.

“I mean, it seems like you could use... And wouldn’t they understand about Uncle Ron?”

“About Ron?” Stella says. “Sure. But I’m not one of them anymore.” She shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter.” She doesn’t expect her young niece to understand the inner workings of the criminal justice community.

Addie drinks her coffee, changes into workout clothes, and goes out for a run. She comes back, showers, and dresses for work. She wears all black—usually skinny jeans and a black tank top or T-shirt. Today she has on a black V-neck, the fabric so thin that Stella can see the straps of her sports bra through it.

Stella used to be that young once. Pretty and soft.

But when Stella was that age, she was in law school being recruited to one of the bigger private firms in Nashville. She spent nearly ten grueling years there before deciding she hated working for a private firm. So she went to work for the State of Tennessee for a number of years, thinking she might help people, and then, desperate for a change, moved to Los Angeles County.

Looking back now, she wishes she’d stuck it out with the private firm. She’d have a lot more money, and there would have been no Ron. A life without the sudden shock of heartbreak.

Addie sits on the floor at the base of her floor-length mirror, surrounded by makeup. Stella perches on the edge of her bed and watches her buff foundation over her already perfect skin, then concealer, then powder and bronzer and blush. She manages to wing out her black eyeliner evenly with a few, quick flicks. Stella doesn’t tell Addie all that makeup isn’t necessary because she used to hate people telling her that when she was younger.

“What are you going to wear?” Addie asks, digging out a pink tube of mascara from the bin of makeup at her knee.

“I dunno.”

“You’re going to shower?” Addie asks hesitantly.

“I guess.”

“And wear real clothes?”

“Okay. Hint taken.”

“I just think it’ll do you some good to leave the house,” Addie says. “Talk to someone who isn’t me.”

“You never said anything about talking to people.” Stella means it as a joke, but it comes out somber.

“You’ll be fine.” Addie finishes her lashes and drops the mascara back into the bin on the hardwood floor. “Okay. I gotta go. I’ll see you there.”

On her way out, she leans over and pecks her aunt on the cheek. Then she grabs her hoodie and her purse and heads for the door, calling back, “And don’t forget to brush your hair!”

Stella stands in the shower, staring at the water swirling around her feet and down the drain of the porcelain tub. She loses track of time, and it’s nearly five by the time she manages to wash her hair and bathe. She lies on the bed, wrapped in a towel for another fifteen minutes before putting on underwear. She dons a pair of jeans and a soft pink sweater. She skips drying her hair, instead running some mousse through it to let it dry up into golden waves. She can’t bring herself to put on makeup and simply rubs some moisturizer into her face.

Her car is filthy inside, so she decides to take Ron’s SUV. A police administration parking pass hangs from the mirror. The inside of the car still smells a little like him, but she drives through her tears. She is determined not to let Addie down, not to promise her something and then let it drop.

When she arrives in the parking garage, she looks in the rearview mirror. There is no hiding her red, swollen eyes. She wipes her cheeks with her sleeve, her nose with the back of her hand, and decides she won’t care about any of it. No one will notice in the dark bar anyway.

It’s been years since she was in this bar, since before she married Ron, but everything looks exactly the same. All the high-top tables are occupied, so she plants herself on a stool at the end of the bar, up against the wall that separates the bar from the restrooms. Her back is to the entrance.

“Can I get you something?” a man’s voice asks.

“Glass of merlot. Whatever the house is will be fine,” she says without looking up.

He looks at her, tilts his head. “Are you Addie’s aunt?”

She snaps her head up to look at him. He’s tall, handsome, young. “Yeah.”

He grins, revealing a row of perfect white teeth. “I’ll tell her you’re here.”

“How’d you know?” Stella asks.

“You look like her,” he says. “Merlot coming up.”

Addie arrives before the wine. She smiles at Stella, a real smile that lights up her whole face. But when she gets closer, the smile falters.

“You’re here. I was in the back, cutting lemons and limes. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Stella says. She nods in the general direction of the bar. “Place looks the same.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I swear. Just tired.”

“Do you want some food? The kitchen just opened. There’s happy hour stuff.”

The handsome young bartender comes back, sets a glass of wine in front of her on the polished bar, then turns to another customer.

Stella sips the wine, and it’s good, definitely not the house wine. There are worse things than sitting in a bar drinking a decent glass of wine, and Addie looks so hopeful that Stella can’t cut and run now. She’s made it this far, and there’s no harm in eating something. “Maybe some nachos.” There’s nothing Irish about nachos, but it is LA, after all.

Addie nods. “I can make that happen.”

Alone once more, Stella fishes around for her phone before realizing she left it in the SUV. Her purse is full of wrappers and crumpled receipts. She used to always keep a paperback with her, even if it was a trashy novel, but she hasn’t been that person since before moving to Los Angeles. Maybe she should get a library card. Read something again. Hide out in someone else’s problems for a while.

The bar is starting to fill up now that shifts are ending. No one who comes in is in uniform, but Stella can tell who the cops are and even recognizes a few of them, though she’s hard-pressed to come up with names. There are probably a few lawyers too, but they rarely socialize with their assigned squads.

By the time her nachos come—a huge plate heaped high with chips and beans and melted cheese and sour cream and *pico de gallo*—the place has almost filled up. Other than the stool right next to her, the bar top is fully occupied.

The cute bartender brings her a refill.

She feels less edgy after she eats something. The wine helps too. And she doesn't want to admit that Addie was right, but it feels good to be out of the house and somewhere other than the drug store or the grocery store.

Addie stops by again with a little bowl of maraschino cherries. "Having fun?"

The bar is louder now. People have been feeding the digital jukebox. Stella has to read Addie's lips to understand what she's saying. "The nachos are good," she says. "Maybe it was good to get out."

"Make any friends?" Addie asks, glancing across the room at the entrance.

"Too old for all that." Stella knows exactly how haggard she looks. Who would find that attractive? "How about my bill?" She pops a sweet cherry into her mouth. It soothes the burn of the jalapenos that were in the nachos.

"Oh, please," Addie says. "No charge." She waves her hand in the air, then glances back at the front door again.

Stella looks over her shoulder to follow her gaze, but no one is there.

"I'll get you a box for the rest of the nachos," Addie offers.

"I don't need it."

"You have half a plate left." Addie pulls a small white towel out of her apron and wipes at the bar top. "You can take it home."

"I may not want it later."

"So I'll eat it," Addie says. "Stay right there."

Stella is hit with a familiar ping, and she realizes that something isn't quite right. In the courtroom, she was relentless and exacting, asking a defendant or a witness question after question until she asked just the right one to catch them in their made-up story. That's the feeling she's getting now, the desire to ferret out the truth, but she's out of practice and the itch has to claw its way up through the fog, through the weave of apathy and sorrow that she lives in. It takes her a few minutes to work out that Addie is the one lying.

She's not sure about what—Addie is on the other side of the room getting the to-go box, but she keeps looking at the door.

When Addie comes back, she slides the box across the bar and glances back again. And in that moment, her shoulders relax.

Stella looks up to see what Addie's been waiting for. Not a what, but a who.

Heat crawls up the back of Stella's neck as she looks back at her niece.

"Addison, what did you *do*?" Her voice is a furious hiss.

Addie shakes her head, says, "It's...it's a cop bar."

Stella wants to slink off the stool and slither out the back door, but it's too late. Captain Elizabeth Murphy is already walking toward her in a black pencil skirt, pale peach silk blouse, and black heels, a purse hanging off her shoulder. Her shoulder-length auburn hair is brushed back behind her ears.

Stella hasn't seen her since the funeral, and before that, not since Stella took a promotion and left Captain Murphy's homicide squad. But she remembers her clearly enough. Elizabeth, even out of full uniform, is hard to forget. With her high cheekbones and striking green eyes, she looks like a young Greer Garson, despite being ten years older than Stella.

At the funeral, Elizabeth placed her hand on Stella's arm, told her she was sorry for her loss, for the loss to the force. And then Lieutenant Sam Warren led her away.

Elizabeth stops at the bar where Addie is watching her and says, "You didn't tell her I was coming?"

"I thought... I... She wasn't going to—"

"Addie!" someone calls from across the bar.

"Sorry," she says and dashes away.

"Well," Elizabeth says, looking at Stella, "how are you doing?"

"I..." Panic washes over her. "I have to go."

She grabs her coat and heads for the door, abandoning her nachos and the rest of her wine.

"Wait a minute," Elizabeth calls out, but Stella is already pushing through the door and out into the chilly night air. By the time she gets back to the SUV, she's feeling light-headed.

The inside still smells like Ron, and she starts to cry again.

CHAPTER 2

STELLA CRIED IN THE CAR all the way home. Cried in the bathroom brushing her teeth. And she cried herself to sleep. She wakes up a little hungover from crying, and she feels numb and weird and out of sorts. She can tell her face is swollen; the skin under her eyes is tender.

She blinks at the late morning light coming through the window—curtains are still on her list, especially now that spring is coming and the days are longer. Birds are squawking outside, and there's the sound of pans and plates clanging in the kitchen. She smells bacon.

Stella throws the covers off and tiptoes into the bathroom. But the pipes are old in this house. The toilet flushes loudly. The faucet squeaks when she turns it on to wash her hands and brush her teeth.

She looks up at her reflection. Her face *is* swollen. The attributes she once considered attractive—fair skin, curly blonde hair, dark brown eyes—now give her a hollow and washed-out appearance. How she feels on the inside is starting to seep out into her skin.

In the kitchen, Addie is stirring gravy at the stove. Fresh biscuits are on the counter. The bacon is set aside. Scrambled eggs are in the pan, ready to be served. Carters always apologize with food.

Addie's hair is pinned back out of her eyes, and she's wearing a pair of cotton shorts and a hooded sweatshirt. She looks like Stella's brother, Thom, but her coloring is Joyce's, her mama's.

Addie glances at Stella over her shoulder, then looks back at the gravy. "I hope you're hungry."

Stella looks at her niece and the spread and the late-morning light. "I'm always hungry," she says. Her voice is raspy from last night's tears.

Addie relaxes her shoulders.

Stella can't stay mad at her forever. She'll just have to...explain.

Addie has pushed aside the mail and other stuff on the kitchen table and set out plates and flatware. The food is good, but then Addie was always a good cook, always good at whatever she tried. Everyone was concerned when she graduated college without a solid career plan, but Stella doesn't worry about her. She'll be a good bartender, and if she finds another job later, she'll do well at that too. And if she decides to find someone to marry and pumps out a couple of kids, she'll no doubt be a great mom.

"Listen—" Stella begins once they've eaten.

"No," Addie interrupts. "I'm sorry. I forced you to do too much too fast."

Stella draws her fork through what's left of the gravy on her plate, watches it separate and come back together. "Honey, you don't understand."

"I mean, it was my idea, so I take full responsibility. And I get it. People grieve in their own way and take the time they need, and I should just stay out of it." Addie looks down at the hands in her lap. "So I'm really sorry."

Stella doesn't speak as she slowly processes what Addie said. By the time she has thought it through, Addie is stacking dishes in the sink.

"Addie," she says, "what do you mean it was your idea?"

"What?" She turns around.

"You said it was your idea. What did you mean?"

"To come out," Addie says.

"And to see Captain Murphy?"

"I mean, it's...it's a cop bar." Addie folds her arms in front of her chest. "You could have run into any number of people you know, right?"

"But you were watching the door," Stella says. "You were waiting for Elizabeth Murphy, weren't you?"

Addie turns away to pour the remainder of the gravy in the pan into a plastic container.

"How do you even know her?" Stella asks.

"Aunt Stella, we met at the funeral. You know that." Addie pulls open a drawer and digs through it. "Does a lid for this even exist?"

"That funeral was months ago."

Addie digs some more and then pushes the drawer closed. Opens the one above it and pulls out a roll of foil.

“Addie!” Stella says again.

Addie rips off some foil and covers the gravy. “We traded numbers at the funeral. Like, just in case, I guess.”

“In case of *what?*”

“I don’t know!” Addie says. “I didn’t think about it, really. Everyone was so sad and confused. Anyway, I forgot about it, and then when you didn’t go back to work, she heard about it and texted me to see if you were okay.”

“Jesus.” Stella drops her face into her hands.

“And then, you know how it goes. You just, like...keep talking or whatever. She’s nice.”

Stella scoffs. “Captain Murphy is not nice.”

Elizabeth Murphy is a very talented cop, but she’s also a rule-obsessed ice queen who spent more time arguing with Stella than working with her. Cops and lawyers have to work together, but the district attorney doesn’t take personality clashes into consideration when assigning staff to LAPD personnel. Stella could never decide if she and Captain Murphy clashed because they were too different or too much the same. Stella found the woman to be stubborn, uptight, and unyielding. Captain Murphy considered Stella to be manipulative, and Stella thought Captain Murphy was unimaginative.

The main difference is—or was—that Elizabeth Murphy works well within the structure the law provides, and Stella makes the law work for her. They could never get past the difference in methodology. So the two of them were always at odds, always snipping at one another, never friends.

Eventually, after Stella spent five years in Homicide, they figured out how to coexist. They became *almost* friendly—until she learned that Captain Murphy, the most by-the-book woman she ever met, was sleeping with Lieutenant Warren. Feeling baffled and even betrayed, she put in for a promotion rather than think about *why* she felt that way.

“She seems to worry about you a lot,” Addie says. “Very nicely, I might add.”

“You can’t talk to her, Addison. It isn’t right.” Stella has worked hard to keep her family and her career separate. With her family, she’s simply

a daughter, an aunt, a sister. In the courtroom, her colleagues, opposing counsel, and judges considered her to be tenacious, even aggressive. Addie isn't aware of her aunt's reputation in the courtroom, and she prefers to keep that part of her life separate, especially now that it's likely over. If Addie and Captain Murphy start spending time together, Stella won't be able to stop the lines from blurring.

"Aunt Stella, I don't understand what you have against her."

"I don't want to talk about it," Stella says. It's way too complicated to explain what she doesn't understand herself. She runs through last night's interaction again: the wine, the food, the familiar setting, the usual crowd. The feeling of being lied to. "Casey's is a cop bar..."

Addie bites her lip.

"Did she help you get that job?" Stella asks, suddenly understanding.

Addie nods.

With that, Stella goes back to bed.

* * *

Stella wishes she had somewhere else to sulk—an office, a vacation house—where someone would make her a cup of hot chocolate and let her complain for an hour.

The irony is not lost on her—she needs a friend, and that's why she invited Addie to stay with her. But Elizabeth was never her friend. Their relationship got less frosty toward the end, but they never moved beyond work colleagues. Anyway, Stella can't be friends with her because there is something about her that makes her feel totally and completely unchained. Not herself. Not in control of her feelings. If Stella is a pile of dynamite, Elizabeth is a brightly burning match.

And Stella is in no position to catch fire.

She spends the whole afternoon in bed sulking, looking at her phone, and napping. She's always tired, no matter how much rest she gets. When she hears Addie shower and then leave for work, she emerges from her room to take a bath, lighting a candle and turning the overhead light off. She soaks in the hot water for a long time. By the time she yanks out the plug, it's nearly dark out, and the flickering candle illuminates the steam surrounding her. She wraps her hair up in one towel and tucks a second

around her, rubs the mirror enough to see a dim and watery reflection of herself.

It occurs to her only then that she could call Elizabeth. Tell her a thing or two.

“Stay away from Addie,” she rehearses in the mirror. Then says it again, trying to sound more serious, sterner: “Stay *away* from Addie.”

She brushes her teeth and her hair. Puts on real clothes—a bra, clean underwear, and a soft knee-length blush-colored dress with little cap sleeves; it’s got enough shape to not look like a sack on her. She sits down at the vanity in her room and smooths moisturizer into her skin, pats concealer under her eyes, darkens her lashes with mascara, puts on a nude lipstick, and brushes some blush into her cheeks. She twists the front pieces of her hair and pins them back. Her work complete, she examines the results. She looks more like herself than she’s felt in some time.

Finally feeling ready, she digs her phone out of her bag, only to find that it’s dead. She unplugs the toaster—apparently people in the 1930s did not have much need for outlets—and plugs the charger in.

When the phone charges up enough to turn on, she scrolls through to check what she’s missed. Her eldest brother, Brick, left a voicemail, scolding her for screening calls. There’s a text from Thom asking about Addie’s birthday in May. Maybe the family could come to LA? And one from Addie from the night before, asking her to come back to the bar.

She opens her contacts and finds Elizabeth. There’s no picture, but there’s a cell number and even an address. Someone—Warren or Esposito—must have sent her the whole contact record and all the information came with it. They’d both known her for a long time, after all.

Stella is screwing up the courage to touch the number and make the call when the screen changes and starts flashing Elizabeth’s name. Had she hit something without realizing it? But then it clicks that Elizabeth is calling her. Coincidentally.

Which freaks Stella out, throwing her off her game.

She answers with a terse “Hello?”

“Stella.” Elizabeth’s voice is low and soft, and Stella sags against the counter.

“Hi,” she says inanely. Where is her rage? Her indignation? Elizabeth has taken her out at the knees by calling first. Which is so typically her.

“I just wanted to reach out to you,” Elizabeth says. “I hope you didn’t feel put on the spot last night.”

“Actually,” Stella says, “I was about to call you.”

“Oh?”

Stella sees the neighbor’s headlights across the street through the kitchen window as they pull into their driveway. “I don’t understand, Captain, why you’ve been talking to my niece.”

“Ah.” Elizabeth uses her softest, kindest voice, the one she reserves for victims, for family members grieving someone who has been murdered. “You know, Stella, she was very concerned about you after your husband passed. We all were. I only offered myself as support, should she need it.”

Stella scoffs, taps her nails on the tile counter. “You have no right to suck her into your world of murder and death and the worst people. She’s just a girl.”

Elizabeth sucks in her breath, then says, “I can see how that’s a valid concern, but my only intention was to be helpful. To her and to you.”

“Fine,” Stella says. “Sure.”

“It was nice to see you, you know.” Elizabeth offers an olive branch. “Maybe we could get dinner or a cup of coffee. Catch up.”

Stella rests the warm skin of her forehead onto the cold tile of the counter. “I don’t think that’s a very good idea, Captain.”

“I see,” Elizabeth says.

“Just...be careful with Addie.”

“Stella...”

“Bye now.” Stella ends the call. Sets the phone down. Opens the back door, sticks her head out into the night air, and takes a few deep breaths. That woman is no good for her. No good at all.

* * *

She dreams about Ron. They’re in the Homicide squad room. He’s in his LAPD uniform, and she’s still assigned to Captain Murphy. They’re talking when he grabs his stomach, looks at her in horror.

He pulls his hands away. They’re covered in blood.

“Why?” he asks.

She looks down at the gun she’s holding and screams.

“It’s okay. You’re okay.” Addie is shaking her awake. Stella is confused for a minute because it’s dark and only the hall light is on, backlighting Addie’s shape in the darkness. “It was just a bad dream.”

Stella is sweaty and nauseous, and one of her legs is tangled in the quilt. She sits up a little, pushing her hair back. “I’m okay. Sorry.”

Addie shakes her head. “You want to talk about it?”

“No.” Stella draws her knees up and wraps her arms around them. “I don’t, uh, remember.”

“Okay.”

“What time is it?”

“Three,” Addie says.

Stella realizes Addie still has her coat on and her makeup is smudged. Her purse is on the floor by the bed. “You just get home?”

“Yeah. I closed,” Addie says. “I was just gonna... You want to put on a movie or something?”

“Yeah,” Stella says. “Sure.” Anything is better than going back to sleep.

Stella brings her quilt to the couch. Addie makes popcorn in the microwave, salty and sweet, just how Stella likes it. They put the big bowl between them and cozy up under the quilt. Addie scrolls through the cable channels until she finds a rom-com. The movie is at a commercial break.

Stella looks over at Addie. She looks tired and washed out in the light of the television. The skin under her eyes is dark.

“You doing okay?” Stella asks. “Do you like it out here?”

Addie looks at her. “Yeah, I like it. It’s different. I needed different.”

“You don’t get homesick?”

“No. I think if I were alone, maybe, but I have you.” Addie smiles. “I wish I could help you more, though.”

“I’m just gonna be sad for a while, I think. That’s just the way it goes. I know it’s not much fun for you.”

“It’s okay,” Addie says. “I have Monday off. Maybe we could do something fun. Go to the beach or something.”

“It’s a date.”

Addie turns back to watch the movie for a few minutes and then says, “Did you talk to Elizabeth?”

“What?”

“She said she’d call you to apologize.”

“We spoke,” Stella says. “But we were never friends, you know. And I don’t need her to be my friend now just because my husband is dead and she feels bad about it.”

Addie presses her lips together, tucks her chin to her chest. “I really like Elizabeth. And I don’t know anyone out here. Not really.”

“You know me. You know your friends from work—”

Addie looks up at Stella abruptly. “It’s fine if you don’t like her, but it’s not your place to decide whether or not I can see her.”

“Fine,” Stella says. “Just leave me out of it.”

They turn back to the movie until Addie excuses herself and goes to bed.

Stella stays up watching TV until the sun rises. Then she gets dressed and drives to The Coffee Bean. She waits in line with people who are on their way to work and orders a sugary drink that’s more chocolate than coffee. She drinks most of it sitting in the car, then drives around until she finds the place where she used to go with Ron for breakfast on his rare day off, back when they were courting, before they got married. She’d forgotten about it until now.

Full of caffeine and French toast, she next goes to the library. She lies to the woman at the counter, says the address on her license is current, and walks away with a library card for her sin. She wanders through the stacks, looks at the new books. She picks up one about a CIA spy, but the premise is ridiculous, so she sets it down again and leaves without checking anything out.

Next, she stops at the grocery store and buys milk and creamer and butter and bread, and eggs. The things normal people always have in their refrigerator. And she keeps going until the cart is full.

Addie is awake when she gets home and watches her carry in the first bag of groceries. “Where were you?”

“Just out running some errands,” Stella says. “You can help me carry some bags.”

“You went grocery shopping?” Addie sounds surprised.

“Yes.” Stella’s voice is tinged with irritation, but she tries to cover it up. “I figured if you were going to cook for me, we should probably have food.”

Addie doesn't seem to notice her tone. "That's awesome," she says, and her words sound genuine. She goes outside and brings back a couple of bags.

When all that's left is a twelve-pack of Coca-Cola, Stella grabs it and closes the back of the SUV. She's been driving it more and more. Stella can actually drive it now without weeping. In fact, the more she drives it, the more the smell of Ron fades. And she likes riding up high—she feels safe, like she's driving around in a huge black tank. It makes leaving the house a little easier.

She never used to be scared to face the world.

Addie helps her unpack the groceries. There are so many boxes of cereal and canned goods that they have to turn one of the cupboards into pantry overflow.

The sleepless night has caught up to her, so Stella excuses herself and goes to lie down. When she wakes up again, the sun is setting and Addie is gone.

She pours a glass of wine and goes to the backyard and watches the sky turn orange to purple and then shift into darkness, into the starless expanse that passes for night in this city.

* * *

On Monday, they drive to Santa Monica for fish tacos at Wahoo's and then go to the pier. They people watch and dip into shops, though they don't buy anything. Stella offers to ride the carousel or the Ferris wheel, but Addie says "no, thank you" to both.

She says yes to the aquarium, though, and Stella forks over the ten dollars for admission.

It's a small and quaint attraction. Addie seems bored by the whole thing until they get to the jellyfish. They stand and watch them for a long time, Addie's pretty face awash in the watery blue light. She even sticks her hands into the touch tank, though Stella skips that; slimy and cold is not her style.

"How far is it to the one in Monterey?" Addie asks as they head back outside. "That's supposed to be the best one, right?"

Stella thinks about it. "Five or six hours, I think."

"Really? I guess I didn't realize how big this state is."

“We could go up for a couple days,” Stella says. “No problem.”

They stop to lean against the railing of the pier, looking out over the water. Addie is wearing denim shorts, a blue hoodie, and white sneakers, and she shivers a little in the cool breeze. “I do like it here.”

“Good,” Stella says. “I’d be sad if you left.”

“Daddy says that in a year, I should go back to school.” Addie yanks on the dangling strings of her hoodie and then holds them hard, her fist resting over her heart. “He says by then, I’ll have been here long enough that I won’t have to pay out-of-state tuition.”

“For what degree?”

“I have no idea!” Addie rolls her eyes. “But I have time to decide, I guess. My degree is in sociology. I’m going to have to get some sort of graduate degree if I ever want to stop working in food service.”

“What made you pick sociology in the first place?”

“Honestly, I took random classes trying to figure out what I wanted to do until eventually I had to declare a major.” Addie tucks her hair under her hoodie. “I looked at all my credits, and sociology was what I had the most hours in.”

Stella laughs.

“I don’t even know, Aunt Stella. Everyone always...maybe because I look like you, everyone in the family compares me to you. Because you were the only girl, and so am I, but you were always off doing something amazing. You always had a plan. I’ve never had a plan.”

“Oh, honey,” Stella says. “I fly by the seat of my pants all the time. Believe me.”

“Really?”

“Really. And I don’t have a plan now, do I?”

“That’s different. You’re grieving.”

“And I know it can’t last forever, but it’s just so hard to move forward.” She puts an arm around Addie’s shoulders. “We’re just going to have to help each other.”

“Yeah,” Addie says. “Just start over. That’s why I came here. To start over.”

That’s why anyone comes to Los Angeles, Stella thinks, and she wonders what was so bad that Addie felt she had to leave it behind. But

now the wind is picking up and it's getting colder. Addie's bare legs are covered in goosebumps.

"Let's go get something warm to drink," Stella says. "I think I saw a café back there."

* * *

After the trip to Santa Monica, Stella slides into her grief again, and she sleeps through the day, getting up when it's dark to scavenge the kitchen for leftover pasta, cold pizza, a half-empty box of cheese crackers. She sniffs the carton of leftover Chinese and then eats it cold, standing at the sink.

She looks at her pathetic reflection, distorted by the old glass in the window. Her real estate agent called this place an original gem, pointing out the wooden floors, the crown molding, the brick patio in the backyard. But original charm had come with a low price tag for a reason. The windows need to be replaced. The roof is patched in several places. The wiring is all single circuit. The plumbing is still on septic. She purchased it anyway, desperate to get back into the neighborhood she lived in before she got married. Like she could go back in time. Like an address change would be the balm to ease her pain.

She's four days into this low mood when for some reason, at one in the morning, she feels compelled to go out. She pulls on dirty sweats and Addie's black hoodie. Slides her feet into pink flip-flops and grabs her keys. She drives two blocks and parks outside of her old house. She studies the white Hyundai sedan and the old beat-up Toyota pickup in the driveway. She can't remember who they sold the house to, and, anyway, there could be different people here now. Ron handled things like that. She was always busy, tied up at the courthouse and unwilling to rearrange her schedule for something as mundane as real estate.

She closes her eyes, trying to picture the interior of the house as it used to be. Does a mental walk-through. The house was perfect for two people, but Ron considered it hers, not theirs, so he convinced her to sell it. Then the housing market collapsed, and they landed in the little duplex, planning to cool their heels for a year to see if the market improved. Then it was two years, and then, well, Ron died.

She meanders around the neighborhood, looking at the houses, some dark, some with lights, some with only the flickering illumination of a television. When she circles back around, Stella realizes she's been creeping through her own neighborhood in her dead husband's car for over an hour. She parks in her driveway and sits in the dark car, the engine still ticking. She should go inside before Addie gets home, but she can't move just yet.

She's still zoning out when a car that looks like something from the LAPD motor pool—boxy and unmarked, covered with antennas—pulls up to the curb. Stella looks at it in the rearview mirror. The lights go off and the engine cuts.

Addie gets out of the passenger's side.

Stella throws open her door and climbs out. "Addie?"

Addie jumps. "Jesus! What are you doing out here?"

Elizabeth Murphy emerges from the driver's side.

"Where's your car?" Stella asks.

"Liz gave me a ride home." Addie's voice cracks, like she's been crying.

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I *did*," Addie hisses, then storms past her and goes inside, slamming the front door.

Stella reaches for her phone, but these sweats don't have pockets. She tries to remember where she left it or when she even saw it last. *Shit*.

Elizabeth walks toward Stella, stopping a few feet away. "A brawl broke out at Casey's. Someone shot off a round and hit one of the light fixtures above the bar. The bartending staff was showered with glass."

"What?" Stella asks, stunned.

"Addie is fine, but she's shaken up. They gave everyone a day off while they repair the damage." Elizabeth tries to smile. "She'll be fine, Stella."

"Why did you report at two in the morning?"

Elizabeth looks perplexed for a moment. "Addie called me when you didn't answer," she says gently. "I didn't work the... It wasn't a homicide. I wouldn't report for a bar brawl."

Stella nods, flustered and embarrassed. "Of course. Yes, I know that, Captain."

"It's very late," Elizabeth says in the same gentle voice. "I'm going to check on both of you tomorrow, okay?"

It's a question, but Stella doesn't feel like she has a say in the matter. "I've never seen you in jeans before," she manages to say, apropos of nothing.

"Stella, what were you doing out here in the driveway?" Elizabeth asks, a tone of concern emerging through the gentleness.

"I was just..." Stella looks over at the SUV, her mind blank. "I should go check on her."

Elizabeth waits until Stella is inside the house. Stella watches at the window, waiting for the car to start, the lights to come on, and the sound of the engine to fade into the night.

Addie's bedroom door is closed, and the space between the door and the wooden floor is dark.

In the night, when Stella gets up to use the toilet, she finds three pieces of broken glass on the edge of the sink, reflecting the moonlight.

CHAPTER 3

ELIZABETH IS SITTING AT THE kitchen table with Addie when Stella stumbles down the hall, drawn by the scent of coffee. Addie always makes a full pot.

Another Carter trait. Never let the coffeepot run cold or dry.

Stella is wearing the same clothes from the night before, minus a bra, and her hair is pulled up into a ratty bun on the top of her head.

Addie and Elizabeth look up at her.

Stella turns right back around.

When she emerges the second time, she's wearing a fresh T-shirt, clean underwear, and black yoga pants. Her hair is her hair. They will simply have to live with that deficiency. She smiles half-heartedly. "Well, don't you two make a pretty picture."

"Did you get some rest?" Elizabeth asks.

Stella says nothing and makes for the coffee. She knows they're watching her, and when she turns around, holding her mug in both hands, Addie is staring at Stella, her mouth a thin line. Elizabeth is studying her thoughtfully.

"Sit down," Addie says.

Stella sits, Elizabeth on one side and Addie on the other. She swallows a mouthful of coffee and sets the mug down. Her mug—teal with gold around the rim and down the handle—matches theirs because Addie bought a set of four at HomeGoods.

Addie speaks. "I'm not quitting my job."

"No one asked you to," Stella says. "Certainly not me."

Addie tilts her head. "Oh, really?"

“Do you want to quit?”

“No.”

“Well, then, case closed. You’re a grown woman, and I’m not your mama.”

Elizabeth leans back, sips her coffee.

“People commit crimes all the time.” Stella gestures to Elizabeth. “She knows it too. At least you were somewhere help could come fast.”

“The dude who fired the gun was drunk,” Addie says. “I’d already cut him off.”

“Did he get arrested?” Stella asks Elizabeth, who nods.

Addie relaxes, and she curls her hands around her mug. “I guess I thought you’d want me to quit.”

“I trust you to make good choices,” Stella says.

“Well, you both seem substantially better by morning light.” Elizabeth smiles at them and pushes her mug away. “I wish I could stay longer, but I’ve got to get to work.”

“See you for dinner tomorrow?” Addie asks.

Elizabeth nods. “You’re invited too, Stella. Josh is down from Santa Cruz. He’d love to see you.” Elizabeth has three kids, all grown. Josh is the youngest and the only one Stella has met.

Stella doesn’t respond.

After Elizabeth lets herself out, Addie rinses her mug and says, “I’d like you to come with me. You spend too much time alone.”

Stella wants to say that she can make her own friends, but that’s never been true. Every friend Stella ever had has made her. So she sighs and says, “Fine.”

* * *

She tries to weasel out of it, but Addie orders her into the shower and picks out a button-up dress with tiny flowers on it for her to wear, then leads her to a chair in the kitchen and spends twenty minutes brushing, braiding, and pinning her long blonde hair up into milkmaid braids. Stella gazes admiringly at the result, even if they are a little youthful for her.

When Addie offers to do her makeup, Stella shakes her head and crosses her arms. She can do her own makeup, for heaven’s sake. She applies mascara, puts on lip gloss, and dusts on some blush while Addie watches.

“You ready?” Addie asks.

“I guess. Into the belly of the beast.”

“Oh, my God, calm down.” Addie shakes her head. “Elizabeth is nice, and I’m starting to think the reason you two couldn’t get along is because of you.”

That does more than graze, so Stella says nothing.

It’s simply that Stella is so good at some things, people don’t understand how she’s not good at everything. As if winning court cases and making friends are the exact same skill set. As if the very thing that makes her good at cornering criminals isn’t what makes her fail in her personal relationships.

Addie drives. She’s been to Elizabeth’s home before, apparently. Stella never has, never had occasion to visit before now. Before Stella left the homicide division, the only time Elizabeth came to the duplex was when Stella shot a murderer named Arthur Sullivan—one of the rare cases she lost. Despite what the jury decided, Stella was sure that Sullivan was guilty, and he wasn’t one to forget a grudge. He showed up at her house one night, armed, and she shot him with Ron’s personal sidearm in self-defense.

Elizabeth came with her squad to work the scene. Stella was happy to see her and, frankly, grateful. She was shaken up, and Elizabeth’s presence was familiar and calming.

She’d never killed anyone before, and the district attorney had made her pass a psychological evaluation before she came back to work, but it wasn’t like she ran over some innocent pedestrian with her car. She’d killed a disgruntled murderer who had come to kill her, and she could live with that just fine. Lieutenant Esposito told her she should have been a cop, not a lawyer.

“Stella?”

Stella looks over at Addie, who is staring at her. They are parked in a residential neighborhood.

“We’re here?” Stella asks.

“Where’d you go?” Addie asks.

“Sorry, I was just... It didn’t take long to get here,” Stella says, opening the door.

Elizabeth lives on the eleventh floor of a condominium building. Addie calls up on the intercom, and they get buzzed in. This kind of communal

living isn't Stella's style, but she understands the benefits: the security, a pool, a gym.

In the elevator, Stella starts to feel nauseous and tries to calm down, push her feelings aside. By the time they reach Elizabeth's door, she feels nothing at all, so much so that she watches herself walk into the beautiful condo, shake Josh's hand, greet Elizabeth, decline an offer to hang up her sweater. She'll keep it on for now, thanks.

Dinner is a taco bar, each item lined up on the kitchen counter. They make their tacos and carry their plates to the dining table. Addie and Josh met before, and they're chatty and friendly. Stella eats her two tacos—one beef, one chicken—and answers questions directed at her. She listens to everyone else's conversation, watches Elizabeth prompt Josh into talking about himself. He's majoring in science communication, which Stella works out to be journalism or what journalism has morphed into in the age of instant news and social media.

Addie asks Josh about UC–Santa Cruz. What's it like? How far is it from here? Does he like the campus? Why did he choose it?

"I wanted UCLA," Elizabeth says, "but I was overruled."

"I've lived in LA my whole life," Josh says. "I wanted to try someplace new."

"A different California beach town," Stella says before she can stop herself.

Josh stares at her, and Addie looks down at her plate. Stella deflects by standing up and taking her plate into the kitchen. Elizabeth follows her in with more dishes.

"Can I help clean up?" Stella asks.

"Sure." Elizabeth opens a cupboard with neat stacks of nesting storage containers and matching lids. Nothing like Stella's jumbled drawer of recycled cream cheese containers and empty yogurt tubs.

They work together to put away leftovers, then Stella rinses the dishes and Elizabeth loads them into the dishwasher.

"I'm glad you came tonight," Elizabeth says as she closes the dishwasher and rehangs the dish towel on the handle.

Stella nods, then turns to look at the items on the refrigerator: Josh's senior picture, a ticket stub from a Marvel movie, a few spare magnets.

Stella's fridge displays nothing. She doesn't even know where her old refrigerator magnets are. Maybe they were thrown away in her great purge.

Elizabeth touches her arm, and Stella nearly leaps out of her skin.

"What?" She rubs her arm where Elizabeth touched her.

"I said, do you want dessert?" Elizabeth frowns, deepening the small line between her eyebrows behind the bridge of her glasses. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Dessert. Sure. Can I use your bathroom?"

"Down the hall." Elizabeth nods toward the hallway.

When Stella comes out of the tastefully decorated restroom—white tile, marble countertops, beige towels, and the woman in the mirror a total stranger—she hears the kids talking in the living room. She pauses out of sight of everyone and takes several deep breaths, stopping when she becomes woozy. Elizabeth is waiting for her in the kitchen.

"There's peach pie," Elizabeth says.

It's not exactly the season for peaches, but the pie isn't homemade either; there's a fancy box on the counter. It tastes good, no matter what season it is.

In the living room, the kids are talking about music—Josh has a guitar but doesn't know how to play, and Addie can play but left her guitar back in Tennessee. Josh brings out his guitar, and Addie tunes it while Elizabeth cleans up the dessert dishes and Stella walks around the living area. Table lamps, throw blankets, a dusty fake plant—apparently the only place dust has managed to flourish. She's inspecting Elizabeth's dark red accent wall of ballet-themed art, listening to Addie strum chords and hum a tune when Elizabeth comes over to her.

"This wasn't so bad," Elizabeth says.

"I guess not."

"You know, Stella, your husband's benefits entitle you to grief counseling," Elizabeth says matter-of-factly while staring up at a retro print of ballet shoes. She turns to look at Stella, who is staring at Elizabeth, slack-jawed with surprise. "I think you should take advantage of that."

"I'm not... It's only been—"

"I'm not passing judgment." Elizabeth's hand reaches out but doesn't make contact. "I'm a great fan of therapy myself, whether it's for a traumatic incident or general maintenance."

Stella was admiring the art with her arms behind her. Now she crosses them in front, tucks them tight against herself.

“I know it’s only been six months.” Elizabeth’s voice is gentler now. “You deserve to take as much time as you need, but if the LAPD is willing to pay for something, you ought not to let it go to waste. Think of it as wringing the chief of police for every penny he wants to keep in his deep, dusty pockets.”

Stella nods at the sales pitch.

“You probably already have the paperwork, but I’m going to have it sent to you again, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Then I’ll have someone follow up,” Elizabeth promises. “Now, you’ve had a long night, and if you want to leave, I won’t be offended.”

“Are you kicking us out?” Stella is relieved and offended at the same time. “You’re like a drive-by shooting, Elizabeth.”

“No, you can stay as long as you’d like, for all I care. But I’m setting you free.” Elizabeth winks and then calls over her shoulder, “Addie, I think your aunt is fading.”

“Yeah, we should probably get going.” Addie stands, setting the guitar down gently on the sofa. “Thanks. This was fun.”

“We’ll do it again,” Elizabeth assures her, and gives Addie a hug.

In the car, Stella asks Addie, “Do you think I need therapy?”

Addie turns down the music. A long, black cord connects her phone to the car speakers. “I absolutely think you need therapy. Especially if it’s free.”

“Tell me what you really think. Jesus.”

“Do you think you’re doing particularly well?” Addie asks. “Sleeping all day, eating like crap, not working?”

Addie is right, but her words slam up hard against Stella, knocking any reply right out of her, and she endures the pain that always accompanies the brutal truth.

“As long as I’ve known you, you’ve been a workaholic.” Addie’s voice softens a bit. “And yet something that used to be a huge part of your life now seems to hold no interest for you.”

“I hated the DA’s office,” Stella says churlishly. That’s not even true, but she feels exposed, tender, like a fresh bruise. She’ll never go back to

that life, never be that ruthless attorney again. Never again be the woman who passed the bar in two states on her first try, the woman who could make anyone on the stand spill the truth.

“Okay. So do something else,” Addie says.

“What? What would I do?”

“You know who would be great at helping you figure it out?”

“Don’t say Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth,” Addie says anyway. “The woman who has been trying to be your friend for, like, six years.”

“Why?” Stella demands. “What’s in it for her?”

Addie shakes her head. “That’s not the point.”

“When we first met—”

“When you first met, she surely reacted to the way *you* treated *her*,” Addie says. “Let it go. Get to know her now.”

Stella slumps in her seat, mutters under her breath, “Who made you president of her fan club?”

Addie turns the music back up.

* * *

Stella knows she needs something to help her move out of this childish rut, so when she gets a big white envelope in the mail with the LAPD return address, she opens it, flipping through quickly. She is looking for a note from Elizabeth, but there’s only a form letter, a page with some legalese, and a glossy brochure.

She fills out the form and the insurance paperwork, but calling to set up the initial appointment seems daunting and insurmountable, and she paces for three days trying to drum up the courage. When she finally does, she’s sitting on an area rug in a warm patch of afternoon sunlight, watching the clock tick closer and closer to five. At 4:56, she makes the call. Her heart is racing and her hands are clammy. When someone answers, she gives her name and tells them she wants to book a grief counseling session.

The receptionist is kind and gentle. Stella makes a list on the back of the envelope of everything she’s supposed to bring. They set an appointment for two weeks out, which feels like an eternity and at the same time way too close. After she hangs up, she lies back on the rug and takes a deep breath.

She gazes out the window at the fading sunlight. While down there, she notices the trim underneath it. Whoever repainted it didn't bother to do the underside of the windowsill. The baseboards are scuffed too, and the floor is filthy. Maybe when therapy magically fixes her and she gets a job, she can hire painters and cleaners.

"Ha," she says into the empty room.

She stays on the rug until her hips start to ache and the sun gets so low that she loses her warm patch of light. She gets up, her joints creaking, brushes herself off, and wanders off to run a bath.

* * *

She would wear work clothes to her appointment if she hadn't gotten rid of all her suits, though she doesn't know what that would prove, exactly. Maybe that she's not grieving—or that she's not grieving too much or incorrectly. That she's functioning. She wears something clean, something of Addie's because Addie does her laundry more often.

She sits in the parking lot outside the building getting hot and nauseous. Starts to cry. Realizes she can't go in.

She calls Addie, but it goes to voicemail, so having no friends or family who might come close to understanding, she calls the only other person she can think of.

"Stella?" Elizabeth answers right away. She sounds worried.

"I-I-I can't." She's crying so hard that she can barely breathe.

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

"I can't d-do it," she manages to choke out. "I can't go in there. I can't."

"Go in where?"

Stella presses the heel of her hand into her left eye. She pulls her hand away. It's wet and streaked with mascara.

"Can't go in to see the grief counselor?" Elizabeth guesses after a pause.

Stella nods, then realizes Elizabeth can't see her moving her head. "I'm not ready."

"I don't think anyone is. It's always hard. It's fine to be scared."

"You don't understand. I can't move."

"Okay," Elizabeth says. "Where are you?"

"What?"

"Which office are you at? Which doctor?"

“Elizabeth...”

“Come on, which one?”

“Veronica Barrett.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” Elizabeth says.

“I’m going to be late.”

“I’ll put sirens on. Stay there. You’re going to be okay. I’m on my way.”

“Okay,” Stella says, feeling small and dumb and helpless.

When Elizabeth arrives minutes later, Stella is still crying, only now it’s because she’s anxious about being late and feels guilty for calling Elizabeth and feels stupid because she can’t seem to do anything by herself anymore.

Someone else is driving, because the lights cut off as they pull into the parking lot and Elizabeth gets out of the passenger seat while the car is practically still moving. It looks like the driver is a woman, but Stella can’t be sure through her tears. Not that she would know her; she’s been away from Homicide so long that she doesn’t know everyone in the division anymore, and that makes her feel strange and sad too.

Elizabeth opens the passenger door of the SUV and gets in, setting Stella’s purse on the floorboard.

“Hi,” she says, then adds, “Oh dear.”

“I’m so stupid.” Stella brings her hands up to her face again. Her makeup by now is wrecked.

“You’re not. You are, infuriatingly, one of the most intelligent people I have ever met.”

“I can’t even...do this one thing,” Stella says between sobs.

“Yes, you can,” Elizabeth says. “The hardest part is going inside, and so we’re going to do that together.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I’m going to walk in with you, I’m going to wait with you, and if you want, I’ll even do the session with you,” Elizabeth says softly, putting a hand on her arm. “You aren’t alone.”

“Okay,” Stella says. “Okay. Okay.” She pulls the keys out of the ignition with shaking hands.

“Let’s go.” Elizabeth picks up Stella’s purse and slings it over her shoulder, then walks around the car and opens Stella’s door.

The car that Elizabeth arrived in pulls into a parking spot. The driver cuts the engine. She feels foolish, but Elizabeth’s presence is weirdly

fortifying. The receptionist looks up and smiles when they step inside the door. The cool air of the office dries Stella's damp cheeks.

"I'm so late," Stella says meekly.

"That's just fine, sweetheart," the receptionist says.

Elizabeth presses gently on Stella's back, and she moves to the counter. "I'm Stella Carter."

"I just need your insurance information." The woman pushes a clipboard through the space in the window.

While Stella rummages for her insurance card, Elizabeth sits down with the clipboard and starts filling in the information. She's half done by the time Stella sits next to her.

"Are you feeling better?" Elizabeth glances over at her.

"Um..."

Elizabeth pushes her glasses up to the top of her head and looks at Stella like a mother checking for fever. "Your face isn't so red, and your breathing is better." Stella shrinks down into her seat at the scrutiny. If she were in an interrogation room and saw Elizabeth's piercing green eyes, what wouldn't she confess to?

"I guess," she says finally.

Elizabeth hands her the clipboard. The only blanks are for her social security number and some other questions. Elizabeth filled in her address and even her birthday. Stella has no earthly idea when Elizabeth's birthday is.

She picks up the pen and fills in her social security number, then squints at the questions.

"Where are your glasses?" Elizabeth asks.

"I don't know," Stella admits. "Couldn't find them this morning."

Elizabeth looks over at the clipboard. "Number one, do you find your grief is interfering with your life?"

Stella snorts and writes *yes*.

"Do you feel cut off from other people?"

Stella waves off the question.

Elizabeth continues to the third. "Are there things you used to like to do that you now avoid?"

“This is stupid,” Stella says. She writes *DEAD HUSBAND* across the last two questions and hands the clipboard back to Elizabeth, who smirks and returns it to the receptionist.

The door to an inner office opens, and someone says, “Stella?”

“Do you want me to come in with you?” Elizabeth asks.

“No,” Stella says, though a tiny bit of her does. It’s best if she does this on her own. She wouldn’t be honest with Elizabeth there. She would try to impress her or say what Elizabeth might want to hear. Anyway, the hard part was getting here, and now that she is, it’s hard to remember why she panicked. “You should go back to work. I mean, thank you, but you’ve done...more than enough. Jesus, I can’t believe I called you.”

Elizabeth regards her with an arched brow but says, “You’re welcome.”

Stella stands and follows the waiting woman into the other room. They sit in comfortable armchairs, facing each other.

Dr. Barrett reviews the paperwork. “It says here you recently lost your husband,” she says.

“Six months ago. Well...almost seven now, I guess,” she says. “He was a police officer. He died at work.”

“I see.”

“He was murdered,” Stella says. “Right in the middle of headquarters.”

“That must have been devastating. I’m sorry for your loss.” Dr. Barrett says sympathetically. She writes something down on her notepad.

“I worked with cops too, so I understood the dangers of the job. At least I thought I did.” Stella shrugs.

Stella talks about Addie, about leaving her job, about the little house and how she mostly haunts it full time now. About how she doesn’t have any hobbies, any goals, or even any friends anymore.

“Who was with you in the waiting room?” Dr. Barrett asks.

“Elizabeth?” Stella asks. “Oh, we aren’t friends.”

“No?”

“No. We used to work together.” Stella shifts uneasily in her chair, then slips her fingers under her thighs as if her hands might betray her discomfort. “Our professional relationship was somewhat strained at the start, then about the time it started getting better, I left that job.”

“So what’s stopping you from being friends now?” Dr. Barrett asks. “You’re two females in law enforcement of a similar age. That seems like a pretty good place to start a friendship.”

“She’s Addie’s friend now,” Stella says, barely keeping the resentment out of her voice.

“Your niece?”

“Yeah. They made friends at the funeral. Weird, right?”

Dr. Barrett considers for a moment. “Unusual, maybe, but not weird. Well, if she’s not your friend, then why did she come with you today? Was it in an official capacity?”

“No,” Stella says. “I just... I wasn’t sure who to call, and I was having some...trouble in the parking lot.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“Just coming in seemed impossible. Everything seems to be so hard these days.”

Dr. Barrett writes something down again. “So you called Elizabeth, who is definitely not your friend, and she came in the middle of the workday?”

“I don’t expect you to understand,” Stella says.

Dr. Barrett smiles. “I’d like to see you again, Stella, if you’re okay with that. Kathy will schedule another appointment on your way out.”

“Sure. Okay.” It feels like they barely had time to talk about anything, barely touched on Ron, but according to the clock on the wall, it’s been forty-five minutes.

She leaves through another door and finds herself on the opposite side of the reception window. Kathy looks up and smiles.

“Dr. Barrett wants me to schedule another appointment.”

“Great! What day and time work for you? When are you free?”

“I’m literally always free,” Stella says with a self-deprecating laugh. She looks out at the waiting room but doesn’t see Elizabeth. Good. She shouldn’t hang around on Stella’s behalf.

She rebooks and opens the door to the parking lot. The sun is bright and she squints, bringing her hand up to her face to shield her eyes.

“How’d it go?” asks a voice out of nowhere that makes Stella jump. Elizabeth is sitting on the small retaining wall by the door. She stands, dusting off the seat of her slacks. She pushes her hair off one shoulder.

“I thought you *left*,” Stella says crossly. Her heart is still pounding.

“I told you I wouldn’t,” Elizabeth says reasonably. “Also, I sent Maria back to work, so I need a ride.”

Stella slings her purse onto her shoulder. She feels put out, even though she’s the one who called Elizabeth. It had seemed the only reasonable thing to do, though now it seems ridiculous.

“You want to talk about it?” Elizabeth asks as they walk to the SUV.

“I’m going back in two weeks,” Stella says, “so it went okay, I guess.”

“Did you like her? Therapy is a two-way street. You get to screen her too.”

Stella shrugs. “I don’t feel anything about anything anymore.” She glances at Elizabeth. “Unless I’m having a panic attack.”

“Right,” Elizabeth says dryly. She looks at her watch. “Let’s stop at Starbucks.”

“I’ve already eaten up so much of your day.”

“I’m the boss,” Elizabeth says. “What are they going to do, fire me?”

Stella snorts. “I thought you liked Homicide. Thought you were getting on well there. It’s been, what, seven years?”

“I do like my division. But I don’t feel as warmly toward the LAPD as a whole.”

There’s a Starbucks just down the street. They go through the drive-through. Stella lets Elizabeth pay.

“Thank you,” Stella says as the car idles at a light near the police administration building. “You didn’t have to do any of this.”

“Stella,” Elizabeth says, “I think about our time working together, and there’s so much I should’ve done differently. I feel like we were just starting to figure things out, and then you took that new job, and I didn’t see you anymore. You don’t always get a second chance with people, and I’d like to be friends. Josh is gone now, and I work *all* the time. It’s hard for me too, you know, to meet people I can stand and have them understand about my schedule, and—”

“Jesus, Elizabeth. Fine! You win!”

The light changes, and Stella drives through the intersection.

“Addie likes me,” Elizabeth says softly. “Isn’t that worth anything?”

“Yes.” Addie’s opinion is worth a lot, and Elizabeth has been nothing but kind. Stella has no good reason to keep pushing her away. “It’s fine. Let’s be friends. Best friends.”

Elizabeth snorts, and they both laugh.

It feels okay, actually. Laughter.

Stella pulls up to the curb. Elizabeth opens the door, looks back, and says, “I’ll call you,” then disappears into the building where Stella used to spend many of her workdays. A building she has no reason to enter anymore.

She heads home.

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PLEASE PURCHASE

HONEY IN THE MARROW

BY EMILY WATERS

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