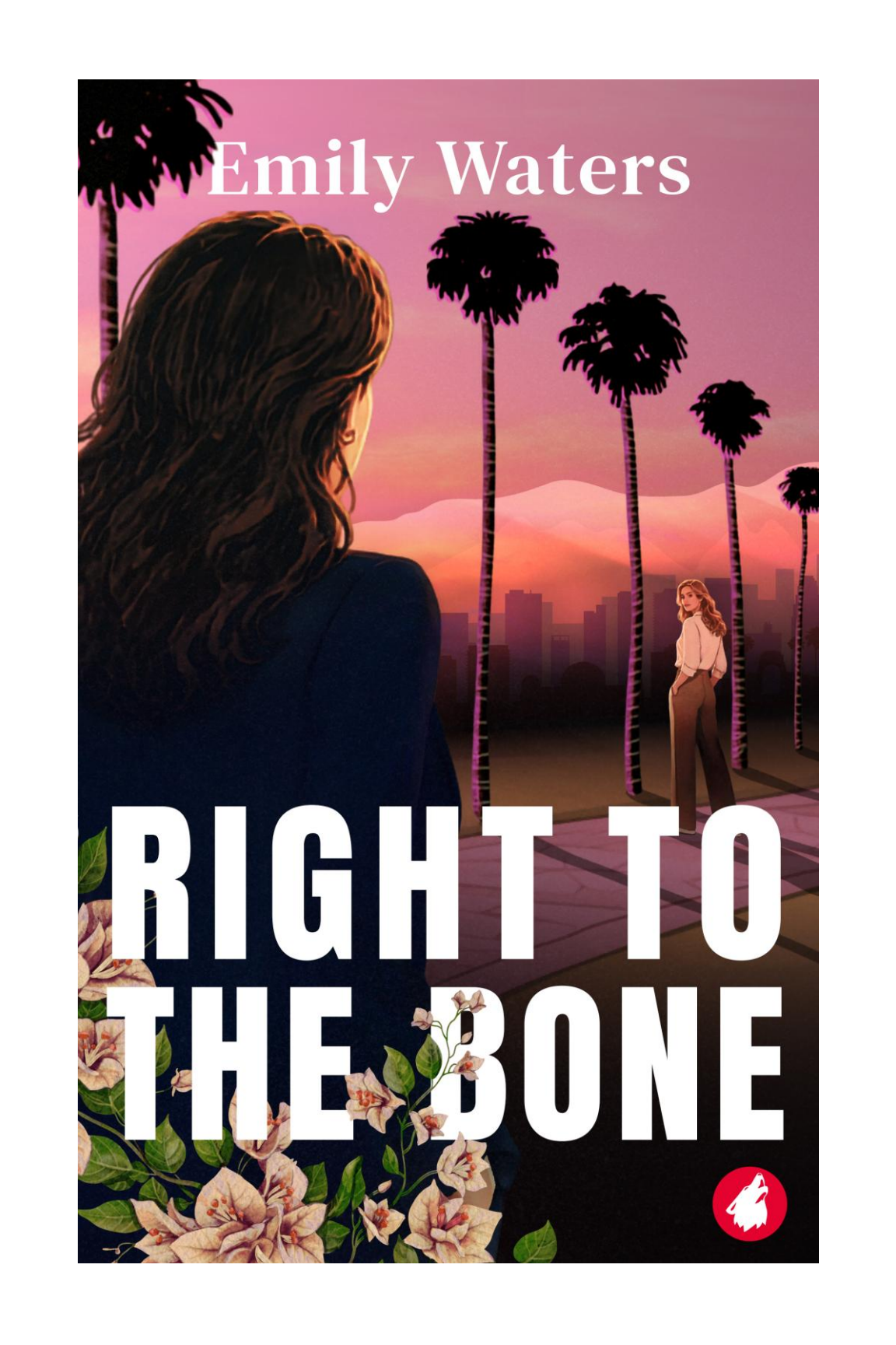




Emily Waters

**RIGHT TO
THE BONE**



CHAPTER 1

1993

Annie should have been home by now. The thought kept tumbling through Helen's mind as she tried to distract herself. She did the dinner dishes, she put her children to bed, she turned on the television and then turned it off again, finding the spectacle of the nightly news too much to bear alongside her worry.

Helen Everton had originally decided to rent out her detached garage to Annie, a grad student, for the extra income, realizing that between her two jobs and her husband's fluctuating paycheck (lawyers had to actually bill hours to make money), they were struggling to make ends meet.

That had been before her husband Bruce had left her (or she had kicked him out — *to-may-to, to-mah-to*, either way, he had to go), and partially because when said grad student, Annie Weaver, had shown up in her office begging for housing, she was just desperate enough for Helen to be empathetic. After all, Annie was in her late twenties, not an eighteen-year-old: she said she was employed, and she paid three months' rent in cash. *Up front*. That much cash was the difference between rice and beans for dinner and being able to buy meat and cheese and single-serving bags chips for school lunches for the month.

Helen, a newly single mother to her two children and new foster baby, had been in no position to turn down that kind of windfall, so she'd chosen to trust Annie and gave her a key to their life.

It took a while to get out of Annie what her employment had been, and even then, Helen had eased it out of her in bits and pieces. She was convinced for the first three months that Annie was some kind of call girl. She certainly had the face for it, and the demeanor. But, no, she

was contracting with law enforcement agencies, including Helen's other employer, the Los Angeles Police Department. When they'd crossed paths at the LAPD headquarters, Parker Center, Helen realized that Annie wasn't a sex worker, but she wasn't quite sure what she was doing or how she was doing it or who was issuing Annie's paychecks.

It had turned out that little twenty-seven-year-old strawberry blonde Annie Weaver had a past, and it was stamped *Top Secret*, courtesy of the CIA. Getting that much out of Annie had felt like such a win at the time. She was so secretive, so closed off, and every nugget of truth was hard-won. Helen understood she might never have the entire truth about what Annie went through. But at some point in her past, before Helen had ever met her, something awful had happened on the job to make Annie quit, and yet somehow the agency had dragged her back in. Helen was vague on the details, but suffice it to say, no job had ever wanted Helen that much.

Where *was* she? She should have been home by now.

Annie's mysterious assignments meant she came and went at all hours; Helen understood that it was part of the life of law enforcement. Annie's arrangement was unusual, but she assured Helen that it was fine, that everything was fine. Annie did like to dodge her questions. But things had settled down for Annie when she got a more permanent assignment to the FBI. (That was around the time they'd started sleeping together. Helen couldn't believe herself: the audacity of a thirty-nine-year-old single mother of three hooking up with her student, her tenant, this *girl*. But she was absolutely irresistible. Helen had tried, God, she'd tried.)

Again, Helen didn't completely understand why Annie went along with this job of hers at all, but anytime she gently probed for more information, Annie only said, "It's complicated." Somehow, moving to office hours with the FBI hadn't unburdened Annie from her late-night assignments.

Helen looked out the kitchen window again, but the detached garage was still dark. Her uneasiness turned into a prickle of fear.

Police officers were often in the same boat when it came to working nights, though as a single mother, Helen had managed to position herself into a role with more standard hours. She couldn't leave three children alone in the house at night. It would be harder for her to get promoted, of course; any such concession came at a price.

Earlier in the evening, Helen had found herself so driven by impulse around Annie that she'd watched her take the final for her class and then

had had sex with her in Helen's UCLA office. Helen should be *fired*. At least the semester was over and they could sort things out now. What were they doing, after all? What was the plan?

Helen needed a plan forward because she was, unfortunately and unavoidably, infatuated with Annie. Maybe it was love, if she was still capable of that—if she could figure out how to be more than a mother constantly on the edge.

As they had tidied themselves inside Helen's office, Annie had told her she was going out for a job and had promised to come home later tonight. And so Helen had decided she would sit in the living room, hopeful that Annie would soon come traipsing in through the front door as often she did if it was late and the kids were asleep.

But midnight came and went. She couldn't get herself to go to bed, so she had been lingering in the living room. One a.m. ticked past, and then two, and by then, Helen was half dozing on the couch, yawning so largely that tears gathered under her eyes. Worry sat heavy in her stomach, but she consoled herself by remembering that Annie had stayed out all night before and come back in the morning no worse for wear. She gave in and went upstairs, the prickle becoming an unignorable sense of dread.

In the morning, she made coffee and stared hard at the detached garage through the kitchen window, straining to see signs of life. There was nothing, but it was still quite early. Helen had only managed four hours of sleep herself, so a lot was riding on this coffee to carry her through another busy day. The end of the semester was often a whirlwind but also a relief in its own way. The end was visible on the horizon. The grading could be grueling, but watching her students take their exams was easier than teaching, and then she could work extra hours with the police department during the break between semesters—for a bit of a financial cushion.

The coffee finished brewing. She poured herself a mug. She considered making one for Annie but decided it would be kinder to let her sleep. Annie was definitely asleep in her bed.

She got the kids ready for school and dropped them off. She usually went straight from school drop-off to her precinct. She didn't mind being an hour early as there was always work to do and her sergeant didn't care if she worked a few extra hours throughout the week, but something compelled her to stop back at the house first. She wanted to be certain Annie got back safely, to shake off this bad feeling, like a dog shaking water off

its back. She wanted to, at the very least, peer through the grimy window of that side door to the garage and see her asleep in bed. She had to know.

It was so quiet; as Helen made her way through the backyard, it was as if the birds had stopped singing and all the flies, bees, and ladybugs landed and stilled their wings. She and her ex had boarded up the garage door last year with the intention to rent to students, so now the only entrance and exit was the side door. The door had a glass panel, and Helen meant to do something about it, because it didn't give any tenant much privacy, but, also, covering it meant covering one of the only sources of natural light. Annie said she didn't mind, but, of course, Annie had slept for two weeks in a sleeping bag on an old army cot when she moved in, so perhaps Annie was a glutton for punishment.

Helen could spend the rest of her life convincing Annie that she deserved nice things, if only Annie would let her.

Helen raised her fist to knock on the door but hesitated when she saw the twin bed empty and made.

She fought back the flush of panic that roiled through her body. It looked like Annie hadn't come home, but she didn't *know* that. Annie made her bed every morning, always careful to keep her rented space tidy. Perhaps Annie had simply risen and left while Helen was dropping the kids off at school. She slipped in and out without Helen's notice all the time because she was exceptionally good at doing so.

Helen turned the knob. It was locked. She briefly debated the ethics of letting herself in.

The debate didn't last long. She unlocked the door and went inside; Annie would do the same. She wasn't certain what she was looking for. A sign of something, perhaps. A warm item of clothing on the ground, a wet shower door, some sign of life. But the room was cold and stagnant. The bed was untouched, the hot plate was cold, and the shower and sink were both dry.

Annie never came home.



The only phone number Helen had for Annie was for her parents in Ohio, and the one time Helen spoke to them, Annie had become twitchy and unnerved. Helen didn't even know the number to the pager Annie

carried around all the time. She didn't know who to call or where to look. Helen's final was the last one Annie needed to take, so she wouldn't go back to campus. All Helen could do was wait to see if she came home.

Her workday, which usually sped by, was endless. She worked a five-hour shift four days a week, officially, though she tried to stay later whenever she could swing it. The money wasn't very good, but the benefits were, and she needed them. Plus, the hours put her home in time to pick up her kids from school.

She collected Ashley and Kevin from their elementary school and then Zach from the daycare, and the whole time, she was clutching the wheel, praying she'd get home to Annie out in the garage or even in the house waiting for her, with that apologetic expression she got on her pretty face when she felt she was taking up too much space in a house she didn't belong in.

Meanwhile, Helen was always trying to coax her inside, like she was a nervous, hungry animal. Dinner, a warm bed, company. Sex. Whatever Annie wanted to get her to stay. Because Helen wanted her to stay and be a part of her life.

She would pull into the driveway and see Annie's car, she told herself. She would see the light on in the garage, and the relief would be so good and palpable that she would laugh at herself for panicking at all.

The moment she turned onto her street and saw that Annie's car wasn't there, the dread grew exponentially—doubling, then quadrupling, in her stomach.

Inside, the kids dropped all their things on the ground by the door. Ashley, always hungry when she got home, ran into the kitchen for a snack. Helen found her standing at the back door, peeling a banana.

"Where's Annie?" Ashley asked, mouth full.

Helen swallowed, rubbing Zach's back like he was the one in need of comfort, though for once he wasn't fussing. He was more even tempered as he approached his first birthday. But there was no one here to comfort her, so offering comfort to someone else was the best she could do.

"Out, I think," Helen said. What else was there to say?



By the weekend, Helen felt somewhere between caught in a nightmare she couldn't wake from and resigned to grim acceptance. By mid-morning Saturday, a knock on the door revealed a moving van, two workers in jumpsuits, and a man in a business suit holding a government badge. He flashed it so quickly that she couldn't make out who'd issued it.

"I'm here to collect the personal items for Anabelle Weaver."

Helen felt his words like a slap in the face, though she was nearly relieved that *something* was happening. The lack of information was the worst part; it made time trickle like molasses, every second stretched out endlessly into the unknown. She'd been toying with putting out a missing person bulletin, filing a report, doing *something* actionable, but Annie was always so secretive about her work. The indecision of not knowing whether Annie would appreciate Helen's effort or not froze her. Her current plan had been that if Annie didn't show up after the weekend, she would file a report. But now these men were here, and the worry turned to dread, sinking like a stone in her gut. Had she waited too long? Had her fearful indecision cost Annie her life?

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ms. Weaver will not be returning," he said. "Can you please show me to her room?"

"No, I most certainly will not! Where is she?" Helen demanded. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Ashley standing in her black leotard. She had ballet class in an hour. Helen's story of Annie being constantly out but unharmed wasn't holding water with her perceptive, observant eleven-year-old daughter.

"I'm not at liberty to divulge that information," he said. "But I do have a search warrant."

"You have a warrant to collect personal items?" Helen asked, taken aback.

"Ms. Weaver is suspected of a felony, and as such, we have a warrant to collect her personal items. Clothes, electronics, stationary items, suitcases, her vehicle, et cetera. It's all outlined here."

She felt a ping of relief break through the fear. Annie was *alive*. "I need to see your badge again, and the warrant," Helen deserved to know what entity was standing at her door. "What felony?"

The man pulled his badge out again. "I'm not at liberty to discuss that, ma'am." The badge was CIA. He handed her the warrant.

It was signed by a superior court judge out of Sacramento.

"Well," Helen said, knowing there wasn't much she could do to fight it now, "you don't have access to my home, so you can go around to the back alley. The bed belongs to me; that stays."

"Do my men have permission to carry things through the house? The truck won't fit in the alley."

"No, they do not." Helen shut the door in his face.

"Mom." Ashley's voice held a note of urgency.

"Honey, I don't know." It was tough to put on a strong face for her daughter when she herself didn't know what was going on.

"But did Annie do something wrong?" Ashley's voice was small, and that sharp edge it had developed since her father left had briefly disappeared. "Is she in trouble?"

"I very much doubt she did anything wrong," Helen said. A felony seemed like a fabricated excuse to get a warrant, though Helen didn't doubt Annie was capable of anything. She had come to UCLA and Los Angeles to get away from her work with the CIA and to start life over as a regular citizen, as someone who said she wanted to help people. How could Annie have committed a crime so bad that government agents were now swarming her backyard? Or was it Helen that had been wrong all along, duped by a pretty face and a coy act?

Annie was more than capable of lying, of deceit, of subterfuge. The burn of embarrassment crawled up her neck, and she tried to shake it off. She needed to think more about this, comb through her memories and clinically assess each one, but she didn't have the time or the stamina right now. "We'll figure it out," she told Ashley. "Can you please go get your ballet things? I'm going to call Aunt Sal to drive you."

The idea of Annie not being someone trustworthy after all stung like a deep cut, but the idea that Helen had let someone like that around her children made her nauseous. Helen always considered herself a good judge of character, and now she couldn't be sure about that either. She'd married an asshole, hadn't she? Bore his children? Perhaps the great cosmic joke was that Helen was the worst judge of character of all time and she was only now realizing it, standing on the edge of forty years old.

She could drive Ashley herself and make all three children come, but she wasn't about to leave these men unsupervised at her house. Ashley skipping ballet was also out of the question. Ballet was nearly the only thing

that mattered to her introverted, exacting daughter, and any disruption to the ballet schedule caused a meltdown with shockwaves that rippled out for days.

She prayed Sal answered, and she did.

"I owe you something huge," Helen promised her. Sal would never cash the favor in; that wasn't the kind of ex-sister-in-law, current best friend, that she was.

Helen relocated to the kitchen and watched through the window over the sink as the men swarmed the garage. Maybe she should call a lawyer? She couldn't afford one. And what could they do here? Annie wasn't her partner or her child or anything other than a woman who rented her garage. The great irony was that Bruce *was* a lawyer, but they were in such a bad place right now that he was the last person she'd ask about anything—from this situation down to a parking ticket.

The men and the truck were gone after an hour. It turned out Annie's collections of items were meager. They carried out clothing, shoes, some books, but nothing that looked at all incriminating, and she doubted they would find anything. If there was something to find, surely Annie wouldn't keep it nestled in with her socks.

Helen let Kevin have a morning on the Nintendo to keep him distracted and carried Zach out to the garage to see the damage. Nearly everything was gone. The bed remained with a bare mattress, and there was the dry bar of soap in the shower, but they'd taken the shampoo, the bedsheets, the towels, everything. How would bath towels help them solve a crime? Was there even a crime?

It was all a pretense, of course. Even Helen could see that. A judge who owed someone a favor signed a sham warrant so someone could get all of Annie's things. But the unorthodox methods of the federal government—or whoever was behind today's operation—might contain a kernel of truth, and the thought unsettled Helen deeply. Did she think Annie was a criminal? No. Did she think Annie was capable of committing a crime?

Helen couldn't convince herself that Annie wasn't, and that doubt allowed her to picture Annie accomplishing *anything*. Running away to start a new life or getting Ashley to like her or, hell, getting Helen off. Annie excelled at everything, from what Helen could see.

A dark thought occurred to her. What if this had been Annie herself? What if she was the one pulling strings to get out of the garage without

a scene? What if the CIA had finally made her an offer to return that she couldn't refuse? The last time she saw Annie, they'd had sex on her desk, for Christ's sake. Helen's face burned at the memory of letting herself be so out of control.

The last thing she'd said to Annie was that she would fight for her. Even if it meant coming out to her friends and family and her children. Even if it meant being ostracized at work for being a lesbian. Even if it meant dismantling this life and rebuilding it. Annie was worth it.

Had she scared her off? Was Annie not interested in commitment? Was she running, or was something really wrong?

That question swirled around her brain, bringing anxiety during the days and hot tears at night.



After a weekend of crying herself to sleep (rejection stung just as much as the thought that Annie was somewhere in danger), Helen went into the precinct, sat at her desk, and decided that she was going to find Annie using good old-fashioned police work. As a recently called-up reserve officer and a woman, she was not particularly popular among the force, and so there was no one to confide in about what was happening with Annie—who was also kind of unpopular with officers, especially the union ones who felt she was doing their jobs.

The best person Helen had to trust was her supervisor, who tolerated her quietly, rather than being outright cruel, which was about all she could hope for.

She asked him for a list of translators who were on call for the department. He squinted at her.

"I just want to cross-reference something," she said. "I don't intend on spending any money; don't worry, Captain."

"Okay," he said gruffly. "They updated it a couple weeks ago, I think." He started rummaging through a drawer.

"If you have the old one, I'll glance at that too, please."

She was familiar with his filing system of tossing the new one on top of the old, and when he pulled the list from his drawer, that was exactly what he found. He handed her both, and she thanked him and took them back to her desk.

On the updated form, Annie wasn't listed. On the older one, she was. There, and then just gone. Kevin had a flip book where a little boy turned into a ghost and faded away. Helen thought of it now, as she flipped between the two sheets. Like Annie was disappearing before her eyes.



Helen already knew Annie wasn't coming back. She felt the certainty of it deep in her gut, the way a poorly healed broken bone could feel a storm coming. Another full week passed in what felt like a pointed silence. Helen broke down and called the only number she had—Annie's parents.

She called on a Thursday morning but got a busy signal. She tried again a few hours later, and it rang several times before going to the answering machine.

"You've reached Ken and Patty Weaver! We're not home right now..."

Helen did not leave a message.

She tried one more time the next day, and a man answered, presumably Annie's father, Ken.

"Mr. Weaver," she said, feeling nervous, though for what reason, she couldn't fathom. Phone calls had never made her especially nervous before. Perhaps it was the possibility of confirming her greatest fear that shook her. Here she would find out: Did Annie leave of her own free will? "It's Helen—"

"Oh, hi!" he said. "Patty is downtown with Annie today, but I can have her call you back, or she'll see you at church on Sunday, I'm sure."

She'd confused him, then, with her extremely common name, but it didn't matter because now she knew. Annie had gone home. Annie was *downtown* with her *mother*, alive and well and free of the Evertons.

"Sunday is fine, thanks," she said and hung up.

She expected the pain to be sharp, like a blade slipping in, like a bullet moving so fast that it was out of her body before she realized it was in, but instead the pain was an ache, dull and slow-growing.

Early on, she had been able to shake it off and dismiss the idea of Annie leaving, but as the day wore on—as the sun sank and the dark of night took over—the ache thudded in her heart. How could Annie simply discard her?

Her children? The life Annie had created for herself that she claimed to have wanted?

She needed to know more. She needed to know *why*.

On Monday, she called a general number for the CIA she found at work.

"This is Lieutenant Everton with the Los Angeles Police Department. I only need verification of employment."

It wasn't terribly uncommon for federal employees to become cops or vice versa. The CIA wasn't going to give her anything specific she asked for, but if it seemed as if she was just following up on an application, maybe they'd at least give her that.

"We take those requests by fax only," the man on the phone responded. "I'll give you the number."

Helen wrote it down, along with the instructions for what information to provide. Basically, they wanted the name of the employee and the dates they wanted verified. Helen was reluctant to put anything into writing, but it was the only way, so she thanked the man, typed up her request, and faxed it off. Hopefully, she would hear something soon.

It took only two days before her desk phone rang. It was her boss's boss, a deputy chief, letting her know that the chief of police wanted to see her in thirty minutes in his office.

"Yes, sir," she said. What else was there to say? It was certainly about Annie. It had to be. There was no other reason for the chief, a man she'd never formally met, to want to speak to a part-time officer who'd been called up from the reserves out of desperation.

By the time she got up to his floor, she was sweating, the stiff collar of her uniform feeling tight and scratchy. She willed her voice not to shake when she let the chief's secretary know who she was.

The office was huge, though as dated as the rest of the building, with a tiled drop ceiling and linoleum floors. The man himself sat at the desk and watched her cross the room, standing spine straight.

"Everton?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know why I called you up here?"

She had an idea but wasn't about to offer it up to him on a platter.

"No, sir."

He sighed, deep creases in his forehead. "What the hell are you doing contacting the feds, Lieutenant?"

Chief Williams was newer to the department, brought in from Philadelphia to clean up the LAPD's image after the Rodney King riots. With his large glasses and mustache, he'd looked unassuming until his steely gaze was trained on Helen.

It was hot in his office, and she worried her sweat would show under her arms for the rest of the day. She could lie, of course, and make up some flimsy half-story about following a lead or some investigation, but lying wasn't in her nature and she wasn't going to be good at it, so she defaulted to the truth.

"I was looking for someone," she admitted, her voice sounding thin and uneven to her own ears. "A friend. And a colleague."

"Looking for someone," he muttered, tossing a pen onto his desk.

"Annie Weaver was doing some work for us—"

"Oh, I know who she is," Chief Williams said. "My suggestion is that you leave it alone."

"The thing of it is, sir, is that she was here just a couple weeks ago, and now it's as if she's fallen right off the map, and I—"

"Lieutenant Everton!" he interrupted. "Leave the detective work to the real detectives unless you want to find yourself out of a job."

It couldn't be more crystal clear than that.

Yet she couldn't just leave it like this. "Did they at least answer my question?" Helen asked desperately. "Is she a current agent?"

"They told us to mind our own business, and that's what I intend on doing. Is that clear?" He didn't even have to raise his voice for it to feel like he was roaring at her.

"Yes, sir," she said. "Thank you, sir."

She cried in the bathroom and went back to work. She needed this job and the health care that came with it. She had no choice but to follow his order.



Helen Everton, single mom of three, finalized her divorce from her husband, Bruce, on a hot October day, two months after Annie disappeared.

With Annie gone, Helen decided to control what she could control. The divorce had been in purgatory long enough. Half the battle was pinning Bruce down for enough time to hash out the details. Lawyers were

expensive, and he could save money by representing himself. He didn't want custody of the children, and he certainly didn't want to pay child support.

Helen was willing to give up a lot to have the whole ordeal done with, so she forked over the money for decent representation in the hopes that Bruce's drinking problem would make him cocky and unprepared. She asked for child support for Ashley and nine-year-old Kevin—their biological children—as well as her foster baby, Zach. She requested that Bruce be given visitation rights one weekend a month. She knew that he'd likely not provide either request.

Bruce showed up to court late, underdressed and hungover. The judge, not impressed, ordered full custody to Helen and child support for all three children.

"That kid ain't mine," Bruce shouted, regarding Zach.

"Mr. Everton, your name was on the foster application," the judge told him. "Until such time that Mrs. Everton adopts him formally, he is your responsibility as well."

Helen still thought fondly of Bruce's red, sputtering face. Though she wasn't proud of her failed marriage, that was a bright day in an otherwise catastrophically shitty year.

Perhaps the timing was right. Perhaps she formalized the divorce when she did so that she could grieve Annie with no explanation. Her family and friends would assume that divorces were hard and would give her space. The fact that her broken heart was about Annie was known to her and her alone.

She hadn't meant to fall in love. Not with Annie, not with any woman, not with anyone at all. But just as Annie had slipped out of her life, she'd first slipped into her heart. And cracked it wide open when she left.

Helen picked up the pieces alone.

CHAPTER 2

2005

On an unassuming Monday morning, Helen got two phone calls. The first told her that she didn't get chosen for the transfer to Financial Crimes she'd applied for because someone was hired from outside the force.

In the last ten years or so, Financial Crimes had become quite important. Helen wasn't exactly a technological wizard, but she was a good supervisor and more than qualified to run any department, so of course she'd applied. She'd applied for every available transfer out of Internal Affairs, in hopes that the diversity of leadership would lead to a promotion.

It wasn't that she didn't believe in IA's work or find the oversight important—she did. She didn't even mind that most of the force disliked her, because that was based on the role she filled and not her as a person. But there was no upward movement left where she was, and she wanted to rank up as high as possible before she retired so that her benefits would pay out better.

She had known when she'd took the IA role that it might stall her upward momentum, but it was full-time and included a promotion, so she accepted the role with the understanding that it was the end of the line for most people. At the time, she'd believed her hard work and dedication would be enough to save her from that curse, that nothing was a dead end for a smart officer willing to put the hours in. She'd been wrong.

It could be any reason holding her back: her gender, her age, the rumors of her sexuality. She knew it wasn't her competence, but that was little consolation.

The second phone call was from Sally. Phone calls from Sal were not unusual. Sal moved to Sonoma around a year ago, and phone calls were

what they had now. Sally was also her children's aunt and godmother. The best thing that Helen had gotten in her divorce was full custody of her children, but the next best thing was Bruce's sister sticking by her side. Their friendship was one of the most important things in her life. Sal moving up north had broken her heart, and she missed her desperately.

Sal had wanted Helen to go with her, which Helen had considered, and was still considering to this day. But she needed a few more years for a comfortable retirement, and Zach wanted to stay near his friends, so the plan was on hold for now. Maybe when she got him through high school.

Sal did not usually call her when she knew Helen was at work, so Helen returned the call with a thread of worry about potential bad news at the other end of the line.

"Hello?"

"Hi, doll," Sal said. She sounded off, not like herself but like she was trying to sound normal.

"What's the matter?"

Sal laughed, but it sounded strained. "Nothing. Nothing is wrong, but I do need to tell you something."

"What?"

"Ashley is here."

"My daughter, Ashley?" Helen's oldest lived in Austin, teaching ballet. Why was she in Sonoma unannounced? "Did she tell you she was coming?"

"No," Sal said. "She's always welcome, of course. I told her to stay as long as she wants, but..."

"But what?"

"She says she quit her job and isn't going back to Texas. Her car is full of her stuff. She told me she broke her lease."

Helen inhaled sharply. Ashley was analytical and methodical and didn't make rash choices.

"Put her on."

"She doesn't want to talk to you, hon. She doesn't even want you to know she's here but I...I wouldn't feel right keeping it from you."

"Sally, did something happen?" Fear churned in her gut. It was so much harder now that her two eldest were grown because she had less influence on their lives and she had to watch things happen. Preventable things. But

part of being a good parent was letting them learn lessons on their own—at least that's what she told herself.

Sal hesitated. "She's pregnant."

The news was so incongruous with what she knew of Ashley that it momentarily struck her dumb. Ashley was only twenty-five, but she was the most careful and conscientious person that Helen knew. She never did anything without thoroughly thinking it through, so how she might find herself in this state was baffling.

"Sorry, wait," Helen said. "Wait, wait, wait. Ashley?"

"I really wasn't supposed to tell you that either. I promised."

"I need to come up there." She was already thinking logistics. Asking for time off, booking a flight. Oakland was closer than San Francisco, so she would fly Southwest, rent a car. Or she could forego all that and simply pack a bag, get in her own car, and drive the sixish hours with fevered maternal determination. It was ten a.m. now; she could be there by dinner.

"You absolutely are not to come here," Sal said. "I don't know much of anything right now, but I do know she doesn't want you to know about this yet. Give me some time to figure out what's going on! She seems a little shell-shocked, but physically she is fine."

"How far along?"

"I think four months. Maybe five. I'm going to get her to a doctor, try to get her to tell me who the father is, and take care of her until she's ready to tell you."

"And I'm supposed to what? Just sit here pretending like I don't know and everything is fine and dandy?"

"Well," Sal said with some exasperation, "yeah."



The rest of the morning passed in a strange fog. She got very little work done, her mind sifting through everything she knew about her daughter. She knew her address and the school she taught ballet at ever since the hip injury had ended her chances of being a professional working ballerina. But Helen didn't know about Ashley's friends, save for the close one she'd made in college who didn't live in Austin anymore. She didn't know about any boyfriend, serious or casual. Ashley simply never told her those things, and Helen didn't pry because it wasn't as if she hadn't had her own romantic

secrets over the years. Prying with Ashley never worked anyway. She was as tight as any oyster, and forcing her into opening up was akin to killing the topic dead.

She realized she had five minutes to get to a meeting that she was unprepared for, so her mental catastrophizing would need to wait.

At least the meeting, which included upcoming personnel changes, required very little of her input or attention. Chief Worth did mention that they'd hired someone for the Financial Crimes division, glancing at her like she was going to have some sort of violent outburst at not being picked. She barely reacted, still fretting over Ashley. Despite the pain of being left out of the conversation, she was starting to realize that in a few short months, her first grandchild would be born; she was going to be a grandmother. It was exciting, though her reaction was more of a confusing swirl of hurt feelings and anticipation than true joy.

"She'll start next week," Worth said.

The meeting was wrapping up, and people were filtering out of the room. There was another meeting on her calendar in this conference room in fifteen minutes, which was enough time to leave and come back. She could use the restroom or get a cup of coffee or simply circle the floor to get some steps in, but she found herself not moving, gazing out the window that was partially obstructed with dusty slatted yellow blinds. The view outside showed a blue sky fading into a thick line of smog.

"I hope you understand we went with the candidate with greater experience," Worth said, hovering near the still-closed door.

Helen nodded, uninterested in discussing it. "Of course."

"I think you knew her."

Helen looked up at him now. She hadn't really been listening before.

"She? I was sure I'd have to drum up the courage to congratulate Commander Forsythe."

"Despite his very public assumption of that, no," Worth said. "With the way these hackers are getting into every nook and cranny of the world wide web, I wanted someone with a little more experience with computers and the experience to merit the rank of deputy chief."

"Sure," Helen agreed, eager to avoid that particular rant.

"She's coming in from Chicago, and I believe that—" His Blackberry started to ring loudly. "Sorry. Excuse me."

Helen nodded and watched him step into the hallway. If she had to lose out on a promotion, at least it was to a woman. The LAPD was still overwhelmingly male. They had a goal of twenty percent of sworn officers being female, and they were hovering at a dismal eleven percent.

Maybe this was all for the best. Perhaps it was a sign, these two events converging. No promotion and the news about Ashley could be the universe telling her that her time in Los Angeles was concluding. Helen wanted to move north anyway, and while Zach wouldn't be happy uprooting his life, he was about to finish eighth grade. He could start high school fresh. He would understand if it was for Ashley. They were very close.

It was a form of self-soothing, creating a plan. She practiced the conversation in her head with Zach. She practiced the conversation in her head with Ashley. She practiced her resignation, imagining that she would type it up and fold it crisply, trifold, and leave it in Chief Worth's inbox for him to find. He could scramble to find someone else to take over Internal Affairs.

That would not be an easy task. It felt fitting to leave him with a mess. After all, it was how she'd found the department when she transferred into it.



News of the outside hire traveled fast. The next day, Helen overheard snippets of conversation about her in the lobby, in the elevator, and even in her own office among her employees.

"I heard she's actually from DC, not Chicago. I heard she was federal."

"I heard she used to work here in the '90s."

"No, I heard she was a kind of scab. She worked for everyone for hire after the riots."

"I heard Worth has been headhunting her for years."

Helen listened to the gossip but never participated. Still, they were odd tidbits. It was definitely not the usual kind of talk an outside hire would warrant. Longtime officers tended to close ranks. It was a hard culture to break into for an outsider; you had to adapt both to the force and to the state of California. Californians welcomed outsiders, but there was a stark divide between locals and transplants that never went away.

Helen chalked her unease up to the tumult in her personal life. She weighed bringing up Sonoma again with Zach but decided that until Sal

figured out what Ashley was doing there and why, she would wait. She'd tried to call Ashley the previous night and got sent to voicemail and then immediately received a text from Ashley that said, *Work is crazy. Call you soon.*

How often did her daughter lie to her, she wondered?

Now she came into her department, and the uneasiness built. She was almost always alone during the lunch hour because she heavily encouraged her staff not to eat at their desks, though it was not advice she took herself; someone needed to be there to answer the phone. Still, she always closed up her office while she stepped away to get food, so she shouldn't have returned to find the fluorescent lights already on and her office door ajar. She rarely bothered to lock the door because her file drawers were all locked and she wanted staff to be able to come in and leave things in her inbox, but they always closed the door behind them, too.

She walked the last several feet loudly, making sure her shoes rang out on the grungy linoleum.

There was someone in her office.

Helen's breath caught. She looked different but not different enough that Helen didn't immediately recognize Annie Weaver. The pieces fell into place: Chief Worth thinking that Helen knew her. The rumors of her coming from DC. The mention of her being a scab. The timeframe of the Riots. Of course it was Annie.

Annie Weaver might have disappeared from Helen's life, but she hadn't disappeared from Helen's thoughts or memories. Even now, years later, she thought about Annie with alarming regularity: *Where was she? Why did she leave? Where did she go and what did she look like now?*

And because she never could answer any of those questions, she'd concocted a version of Annie in her mind, like a shadow. Helen's imagined version lived her life, growing older, thinking of Helen in return. Pathetic, really. Helen had been deeply wronged by Annie, and yet a part of her still yearned for her, would always yearn for her, because she was the woman who changed her life. She'd given Helen the courage to finally divorce her husband, to admit to herself that maybe the marriage might never have worked at all because Helen had other desires.

But Shadow Annie, when presented next to the real thing, seemed a little cartoonish and obviously false. The shadow version still wore light ripped jeans and thick-soled boots and had a soft, round face that came

with youth. But studying Annie's profile as she looked at the framed photos on Helen's desk, Helen realized the ghost she'd been living with all these years was all wrong.

Annie's hair was long, and still that bright, strawberry gold that eluded so many women. It was curly, too, but the big, smooth kind of curls made with a hot iron instead of the natural riot of waves and corkscrews that it used to be. The front pieces of Annie's hair were twisted and secured in the back with bobby pins. She was wearing a patterned dress with a cardigan over it—clothing that positively screamed that she'd spent a significant time in the Midwest. Gone was the roundness in her face, replaced by a woman who was clearly very strong and fit. Her limbs were muscular, and her thin face made her look a little bit severe. But aside from all of that, it was Annie, and she was still beautiful. The sight of her made Helen's skin feel hot and itchy.

Inside, a dark spot formed, yawning and brittle. She felt like smashing something, but the only thing she could do was push the feelings aside and face this head-on. She cleared her throat, which was all she could manage in the face of this unbelievable curveball. Life really did pile it on all at once.

Annie picked up a frame and turned to Helen with a smile. "Is this Zach?" Her voice sounded easy and familiar, like they'd seen each other last week and she was picking up the conversational thread. The familiarity irritated Helen, and her irritation grounded her. She found her voice.

"Chief Weaver, I don't generally permit people into my office without my permission when I am not in it."

Annie nodded, and the smile slid right off her face. She replaced the frame and respectfully stepped away from the desk.

"I can see I've interrupted your lunch hour. I meant to come up earlier, before I officially started, but I've had to hit the ground running."

Helen said nothing.

"Well, anyhow, I wanted to stop by and say hello to you."

"Hello." Helen entered her office far enough to set her lunch things on the desk's edge. "Welcome to the LAPD." She enunciated carefully so that her voice didn't shake. She used her ire as a shield.

Annie wrung her hands together. "Helen—I mean—Commander Everton, I just need to apologize to you. Officially, or in person, anyway. You have every right to be short with me. I would be too, but I just wanted

you to know how happy I am to be back in California. I regret ever having to leave, and I never would have left if it was a situation I had control over.”

“I see.”

She didn’t see shit. All Annie offered were empty apologies—as if that could change the past. She wasn’t even taking accountability for disappearing.

“I did leave, obviously, but everything I did back then was because I thought it was the best for you and your family. I know it was a long time ago, but I thought... I thought I should say that first thing. I’m sorry.” Annie’s cheeks were flushed, and she flexed the fingers of her left hand like a nervous tic.

Helen dragged her gaze away from Annie’s twitchy hands. “Alright.” An apology wasn’t going to fix anything because the truth was that it had come over a decade too late. It didn’t buy the time back, and just because it didn’t make things worse, that didn’t mean it soothed the burn.

She didn’t like to feel this prickly, this hard-shelled, but what was the alternative? Digging into the wound? She still had a workday to complete and a son to raise and a life to live and a move to make, and if she’d learned anything, it was to not let her life revolve around this woman again.

They would figure out a way to coexist until Helen submitted her resignation, which would be soon. It was a large organization, and Helen should have very little reason to overlap with Financial Crimes. Also, they had no other choice.

“I...uh...I wasn’t very good at long-term planning back then. I was just sort of running on adrenaline all the time. But once I started working for police departments, I made a plan, and that plan was to get back to Los Angeles. I know it’s been, like, twelve years, but this was the last place I was really happy, you know? And almost all of that had to do with you and your family.

“I know I messed up any real chance I had of us being friendly but, at least I’m back here now, and even if all we ever are to one another is colleagues or acquaintances—or enemies or whatever—I’m just really glad and relieved to have you in my life again. Even if it’s just a little bit.” Annie’s eyes were glassy, or hopeful, perhaps.

She flashed Helen a tense smile. Helen did not return it. Helen felt overheated and slightly nauseated, and Annie’s next sentence sounded like Helen was hearing it from underwater.

"That's it. That's all I've got to say. Wait, also: You look great. Okay, I have to go. We have a case. I must go." Annie edged out of the office, past Helen and out the door. "Bye, now, Commander. Bye-bye."

And then she was gone.

Helen realized the underwater feeling was the blood rushing in her ears. Her hands were shaking, like someone had slapped her.

Chief Williams's dressing down of Helen back when Annie had first disappeared surfaced in her mind. She closed her office door and sat herself in her chair.

The memory always humiliated her anew each time her brain forced it on her. At some point, she'd figured it might have been Annie herself who rattled his cage, but maybe the entire situation really had been out of her control. Helen had spent the last decade and change equating Annie being gone with her leaving and with being mad that she'd left. She didn't know what to do with the information that she'd possibly been unfair in that interpretation.

Annie was a more than passable liar. In her line of work, she had to be. Was she even telling the truth now? Did the truth still matter?

It was obvious that time had made things very different. It was obvious as well that some things were just the same.

CHAPTER 3

Helen still thought about that last evening they spent together, bent over the small desk of that laughably tiny office she'd once had on the UCLA campus. Having sex with a graduate student at work was, to this day, the wildest breach of ethics she'd ever participated in, and she thought about it periodically like a person might remember wild college parties or underaged drinking. She knew she shouldn't have done it, and yet, even now, heat crawled up her spine at the memory, her skin and cells betraying her, overwhelming the anger and making it briefly soft, malleable, willing to be shoved to the side to let the memory of Annie's mouth and fingers and body come to the forefront.

But the anger never stayed quiet very long. She could slap Annie Weaver across the face. She really could. The woman had up and left in the middle of the night, and once Helen grieved the loss and the heartbreak, a simmering rage had moved in to take its place. And though they said that time healed all things, Helen would strongly disagree.

The first week after Annie had vanished had been a blur, the first month a depressing slog, and the first year a complete reevaluation of her life and where she'd thought it was going. Though the experience had not been enjoyable, she'd learned a lot about herself: what she could endure, what was actually important to her, and what she could pick herself back up from.

She could never quite forgive Annie, though, and the resentment and hurt and anger festered. It had felt good to have someone to blame and a place to aim all those upsetting feelings. Whatever the reasons were for Annie leaving, it had made Helen feel shitty. Now Annie had reappeared suddenly back in her life, and she felt shitty all over again.

It wasn't fair that she could simply reappear as suddenly as she'd disappeared. Helen had not even considered it a possibility and now had to figure out what it meant for her. Could they work together amicably? Did Helen even want to? And would it matter? The truth was that Ashley was still in Sonoma, still avoiding her calls, still pregnant.

Annie Weaver's reappearance didn't change one thing about that.

Helen wrestled with the idea of Annie back in her life for the rest of the workweek and finally concluded that it was best if she ignored the whole thing. The crossover between Financial Crimes and Internal Affairs over the last several years had been practically nil. If Annie, no, *Chief Weaver*, kept her staff in line, Helen wouldn't have any reason to interact with her at all.

On Saturday, she called Ashley and was sent to voicemail, so she called Sal. She had to tell someone about Annie. She had to.

"I know this is hard," Sal said, her usually booming voice low, like she was trying to stay quiet. "But she just needs space."

"Sure," Helen said. "Yes. I understand that. Well, no, I don't *understand*, but I hear you. I'm not calling about Ashley. Something else happened. The LAPD hired a new deputy chief from out of state." The hard plastic handset of the kitchen phone was cool against her hot ear.

"Oh. Did you put in for that job or something?"

"Yes, but I'm not devastated. I didn't think I would get it. Do you want to know who they hired, though?"

"Uh, it seems like you want to tell me," Sal said.

"Annie Weaver."

There was a long beat of silence before Sal echoed her. "Annie Weaver."

"Annie Weaver," Helen repeated.

"Annie Weaver?" Sal exclaimed. "Are you shitting me?"

"No."

"Did you know this could happen?"

"No! Never in my wildest dreams. I didn't even... I try not to even think about her anymore."

Sal scoffed. "Liar."

"I said *try*."

"Even I still think about her," Sal said. "She had *great* hair. Have you seen her?"

"Yes. She stopped by my office to say hello."

"And?"

"And what?" Helen asked. "I was too surprised to do anything but look at her, really. Look at her and be angry."

"Maybe it's a good time to let bygones be bygones," Sal said. "That was a long time ago."

"Not that long," Helen muttered. "I'm just going to avoid her."

"Jesus, are you not even *curious*?" Sal quit smoking back in the late nineties, but her voice had never lost the rasp, and Helen found the sound of it, the cadence of her voice, so comforting, even when Sal was scolding her. They could have conversations in person again if Helen moved. They could drink tea in Sal's mid-century modern living room and enjoy the fog rolling over the hills. Maybe she'd promise to buy Zach a car as soon as he turned sixteen. Would that sweeten the deal enough?

The first time they'd discussed it, she'd showed him real estate listings of adorable bungalows, photographs of the rolling gold hills dotted with majestic old oak trees, and explained how they'd be close to the beach, near San Francisco, that the mascot to Sonoma Valley High School was a dragon—and he loved dragons! He would be the new kid, mysterious and interesting, and he would make friends so easily. Everyone loved sweet and affable Zach Everton.

"I think I'm probably supposed to be a SoCal kid," he said, always shutting the conversation down. "I don't think I'll fit in up there."

She understood the anxiety because she had some of it too. She'd never lived anywhere else either, but there were other places, and it felt like it was past time to try one of them out.

"I'm curious about her, sure," Helen told Sal. "But it's too late. Anyway, can you send me the information for your real estate agent? I'm going to talk to Zach about moving again tonight."

"Ashley is going to figure out that you know if you suddenly move up here."

"She can't avoid me forever." Helen was starting to think forcing a confrontation was the only way she was going to get her daughter to talk to her at all. Her promises to call her mother back later were wearing extremely thin.

She would not be able to fully retire if she moved now, but she could get a law enforcement job in Sonoma. She could also get another sort of job, something with less stress and less responsibility, something to supplement her retirement. To buy groceries and gas with.

She secretly fantasized about a completely different kind of life. Working at a bookstore or as a florist, as if she were the protagonist of a Nancy Meyers film, wearing cream linen pants and going to Pilates twice a week. Would she even miss Southern California once she was wearing white cable-knit sweaters and drinking pinot grigio from a nearby vineyard?

Maybe. She was a Los Angeles native, and it was home. For every fault, there was something sensational. Every place had trade-offs. At least this was the devil she knew.

She'd sold her house in Inglewood eighteen months previously and downsized to a condominium closer to work. Zach hadn't liked that *either* but accepted the compromise with the understanding that while everyone in the family had a say, he was not actually in charge, and it was better for them financially.

She felt bad forcing him to leave the house he grew up in. She wanted him to buy into the changes they made as a family, not use the *because-I-said-so* card, but now that Ashley was expecting, she might need to force him upstate. Ashley was capable, but she was young and obviously scared. She would need help, whether she admitted it or not.

"Okay," Sal said, a note of resignation in her voice. "I'll send you my agent's number. Let me know how it goes."



Helen decided not to tell Zach they were absolutely moving to Sonoma at the end of the school year, only because she felt that, for the sake of their relationship, the news of his sister's pregnancy should probably come from his sister. But she did start mentioning Sal more and referring to Sonoma as a *when* and not an *if*.

She also sent her daughter a stern email about avoiding her. She made a veiled threat of coming out to Texas to see her. Of course Ashley wasn't there, but Ashley didn't know that Helen knew. The threat might spook her into communication.

Which meant that, instead of immediately resigning and imploding her life in a spiteful huff, she kept working. Everything was on hold until Ashley came clean, and, realistically, through the end of the school year, which was another five months. When she showed up to be a grandmother

to this new baby, she wanted to be completely present, and if that meant waiting, it meant waiting.

She would have to work with Annie. And if not with her, in the same building as her.

Still, Helen found herself spending significantly more time than usual in both picking out her outfits and doing her makeup and hair. She wanted to say it was subconscious, but she was all too aware that she was doing it and who she was doing it for. She wanted Annie to be impressed by her, for Annie to see her and know that Helen had thrived without her, and was thriving still. It was foolish, of course, because it was likely that Annie would not see her at all.

Regardless, today she straightened her dark hair with a flat iron, leaving everything sleek and shiny instead of with its regular natural texture. She put on a new suit that had been lingering in her closet with the tags on because it was a little too nice for an average day of sitting in her office. She'd been saving it for an important meeting or function.

Her eye makeup came out heavy handed, even for her standards. She knew she looked well within the acceptable parameters of day-to-day life in the LAPD, but it was a little much for her. She wanted to look beautiful and out of reach, but all she managed was to feel self-conscious.

Winning Annie's favor was a fool's errand anyway. The last thing she needed to do was put herself in a position to be outed at work. She didn't want her last bit of time here to mar her respectable reputation or put her ability to get another job somewhere else in jeopardy. The general attitude in LA about being gay was better than it had been in the '90s when she'd joined the force, but as much official talk as there was about respect and inclusion, in practice people were not as open and welcoming, especially men, who made up most of the force.

Helen worked alone in her office with the door closed for most of the morning, languishing in her solitude, before someone knocked and shattered the illusion that maybe she could simply rot away unbothered in here forever.

"Come in," she called, her tone a little curt even to her own ears.

The door opened slowly, and Sergeant Macy Blevins stuck her head in. She was relatively new to the team and had come from Vice and had been with them not yet an entire year. Helen initially worried that this might be

too tame of an assignment for her, but Blevins hadn't complained yet, and had seemed somewhat happy to have Helen as a supervisor.

"Good morning, ma'am," she said and then tilted her head. "You look so nice!"

Helen forced herself not to stick her hands in her lap uncomfortably.

"Do you have our ballistic results for me, Sergeant?"

"No, that's why I'm here. Financial Crimes jumped the line, so we won't have them until the afternoon."

"What?" Helen demanded. "Why?"

"Ballistics said it was a request from Worth." Blevins shrugged. "Don't they have a new commander?"

"She's a deputy chief."

"We have a female deputy chief?" Blevins' smile was genuine. "That's wonderful!"

"Not if she's always cutting in line," Helen grouched. "Alright, this afternoon, then."

"Sure," Blevins said. "You want this open or closed?"

"Closed."

When the door latched, she plopped back into her chair and briefly let her head tip all the way back against the top of her chair. Stained ceiling tiles greeted her. People used to smoke in this building, and it had yellowed the ceilings and walls. There was no sense in painting or replacing because a new building was coming eventually. That was the official line, anyway.

Helen thought about Shadow Annie again, mourning her slightly. The reappearance of the real Annie had killed the shadow version dead, but Helen had spent a lot of time with Shadow Annie over the years, and it was oddly melancholy to have to let her go. She used to let her out in small doses, a fantasy that she sometimes unfurled, like putting a top sheet onto the guest bed. If Annie had stayed, where would they be right now? Still in love? (Were they ever in love, or had it been Helen alone—horny, infatuated, and desperate to rid herself of the feeling of failure that came with the end of a disastrous marriage, charmed by a smart woman and blind to her secrets, the same secrets that would grab her in the night and wrest her from Helen's proverbial arms. Was Annie even sad about it? Heartbroken and alone, or just relieved? Too embarrassing to contemplate.)

And so the Shadow Annie that she'd invented went back into the linen closet, folded and creased and hidden away until Helen retrieved her once more—hell-bent on living the fantasy for a few moments before it all

inevitably unraveled, her imagination too weak to find a clear path out of the reality of their abrupt end.

She attempted not to think about Annie anymore for the rest of the day but quickly abandoned that impossible task to do something she hadn't done in quite a few years: search for Annie online. Finding her twelve years ago would have been much easier with internet search engines and the whole of human knowledge just a few keystrokes away. It made the early '90s pager Annie used to carry around like an anchor seem laughably ancient now.

Helen's vow to stay in her lane had lasted until Chief Williams left the force in some disgrace, but by that point, Helen had moved on as much as possible. Dredging up information on a ghost hadn't seemed worth it.

The city had declined to renew Chief Williams' contract because he'd failed to fix their many systemic problems with internal management and could not magically rehabilitate their reputation. In Helen's opinion, he had tried somewhat admirably to achieve both of those impossible goals. It was the chief of police after him, Chief Parks, who had approved Helen's promotion and reassignment to Internal Affairs in '97.

The few transitional weeks between Williams and Parks had presented a unique opportunity: Helen attempted the same trick twice, banking on the transition taking everyone's attention; her off-the-record requests could very possibly go unnoticed. She faxed the CIA for Annie's employment dates, and this time it worked, but only because she was no longer there. She'd left the previous year, according to the fax Helen received.

But where had she gone?

Helen had let it lie because the obvious truth was that Annie had never been missing, she was simply gone, and the thought of it sat at the back of Helen's throat like yesterday's cheap wine, so that she could hardly stand contemplating it at all.

She'd thought it would help—not knowing where Annie was but having an idea of where she had been. It hadn't. She'd vowed never to search again.

Now breaking that vow, she knew where Annie was but not why she was here or what had led her back to Los Angeles. She typed the name into the search bar.

All she found was an article from the *Chicago Tribune* about a female officer getting shot while intercepting a convenience store robbery. The article was nearly two years old, and it talked mostly about the robber who'd gotten away—only to be arrested four blocks later because Annie

had called it in—but it did mention that Annie would survive and quoted her calling the man a bad shot, which made Helen laugh.

There was a grainy black-and-white photograph, but it barely looked like her. The article also mentioned she was new to the Chicago PD by way of Metro PD and the State Department.

It was hard to understand why she'd abandoned her half-finished UCLA degree—which had supposedly been the start of a new and better life—and had gone back to DC, back to the CIA, a place that had left her haunted, rattled, and ashen until she'd turned up at Helen's office asking for a place to sleep like an abandoned puppy. At the time, Helen had suspected Annie's return to them, but something had never quite added up—Annie had seemed to dislike that job so much. It hadn't made sense then, and it didn't make sense now.

What happened to drive her away? Was it Helen and her children, or had that agent at the time spoken the truth? Had Annie committed some crime bad enough that her choices were limited? Something bad enough to make her run so far and so fast that strangers had come to gather her things. It couldn't have stuck, whatever the charge, because her career in law enforcement clearly carried on. Flourished, even, because here she was, significantly younger than Helen and outranking her handedly.

Helen closed the browser angrily and told herself none of it mattered. They wouldn't be in the same department; they wouldn't even be on the same floor.

It'd be fine. It would all just have to be fine.



Zach wouldn't remember Annie, of course. Even Kevin had been relatively unfazed at Annie's abrupt departure. Ashley had cared, though she'd acted indifferent. But she'd asked, for nearly a year, about where Annie had gone and whether she'd be back.

Ashley's reply to Helen's email had a practiced, casual tone.

Hi Mom,

Now isn't a good time. You know how tired everyone gets after Nutcracker season. Spring would be better. Hope you understand.

Ashley

It was bullshit, of course. They were well into January, and Ashley hadn't danced the Nutcracker since her hip injury. Helen let the email sit for a day before replying in the same easy tone that maybe she'd go up to see Sal with her time off instead, then. She wanted to see how Ashley wriggled out of that one.

But the more she thought about it, the more she realized she did need to go up there. Why was she letting Ashley and Sal call the shots? She was going to be a grandmother, and she was missing the whole pregnancy for a reason she didn't understand. Because Ashley was embarrassed of getting pregnant outside of marriage? Because the man was a deadbeat? Helen could hardly judge her on that front. She only wanted her daughter to be happy and for Helen to be a part of her life, and the baby's as well. She wanted more than anything to be excited about being a grandmother. Ashley was robbing her of that.

She booked a flight for the first weekend in February for her and Zach, sent the details to Sal, and requested the days off. She had more vacation accrued than she knew what to do with, and Dave Taffa was completely capable of stepping up in her absence.

Sal called within the hour.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "It's amazing you lasted this long."

Helen relayed what Ashley wrote to her.

"I don't blame you, but try not to tell her I told you, okay?"

"You want me to lie?"

"Damn straight," Sal said.



Helen ducked out of her office around three to go pick up Zach from school and drop him off at home. She would end up sticking the missed time onto the end of her workday; she was nearly always the last to leave.

In the car, Zach said, "What's with you?" His sandy-brown hair was messy, and he always seemed to maintain a summer tan, or maybe it just looked more golden against the sky blue of his school polo shirt. He was handsome, she thought proudly, as if she had anything to do with his genetic makeup. With the other two, she caught glimpses of Bruce from time to time—an expression, a turn of phrase, or the way they moved their body—but that trap never sprung with Zach, and she often consciously appreciated it.

"What? Nothing. Why?"

"Usually you ask me, like, a thousand questions about my day," he said.

"Would you like to tell me about your day?"

"No."

She smirked at him. "How much homework do you have?"

"Some," he said. "I did most of my math during science."

"You're supposed to be learning science during science," she pointed out.

"Well, they should probably make it at least as interesting as my math homework then."

Hard to argue with that, actually.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

She wasn't going to unload on her teenager about ghosts from her past or the situation his sister found herself in. "I'm perfectly fine. I'll be home at the usual time."

"Do you want me to start dinner?"

"There's chicken defrosting in the sink," she said as they pulled up to their building. "You have your keys?"

"Yes, Mom. I'll see you later." He undid his seatbelt and opened the car door.

"Hey," she said. "Are you forgetting something?"

He rolled his eyes but leaned in and gave a quick kiss, then grabbed his bag and was out the door. She idled until he disappeared into the building and then headed back to work. The car felt empty, lonely, so she switched the radio on low, the chattering voices of the deejays giving her company.

To continue reading,
please purchase

RIGHT TO THE BONE

By Emily Waters

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com