

CARRIE BYRD



# PROLOGUE

"Hello there," the strange woman at Anne Lowell's front door said cheerfully. "I'm going to blow up my driveway."

Temporarily stunned into silence, Anne stared at her uninvited visitor. The woman wore an emerald-green satin jumpsuit that cuddled the rich curves of her body. Layers and layers of gold lariat necklaces hung around her neck. Beneath a vintage Brooklyn Dodgers baseball cap, a tumble of loose and curly blonde hair—was that synthetic?—fell just an inch or two below her pearl-studded earlobes. And her untroubled face projected the easy-going confidence of someone who knew exactly what she wanted.

Anne kept both hands on the door in case she had to slam it. "You're—what? Pardon me?"

"Well, it isn't my driveway yet. Right now, it's just dirt. But it *will* be a driveway, once I get that massive rock outcropping out of the way tomorrow. I've got a pal who works at a quarry out in Riverside—just the most gifted singer, by the way—and he's secured the dynamite for me." The stranger's hands flew wildly through the air as she spoke. "You know, I've never watched a boulder explode before, but I think I'll find it extremely satisfying. Satisfaction's probably the fifth most important emotion in the world. Don't ask me to name numbers one through four, though. Too much pressure."

Anne had heard stories about the classic Topanga Canyon eccentrics who'd been around since before mass gentrification, seeking a rural haven tucked away from the rest of Los Angeles. Homesteaders, painters, ostrich farmers. This woman seemed to be a relic from those times, even though she looked younger than most of that remaining crowd. Around Anne's age, likely, somewhere in her fifties. "May I ask why you're telling me all this?"

"I'm your next-door neighbor. That adorable little pink house across the meadow?" The woman pointed. "Decent chance you'll get some rock shrapnel raining down on your property once that outcropping goes sky high, and I don't want to be responsible for you being unwittingly in the line of fire. So everyone within a quarter mile is getting a heads-up. Literally."

That explained it. As much as any of this could be explained.

The woman stuck out her hand. "This visit doubles as a belated welcome wagon. You've been living here, what, a month now? Sincere apologies for the delayed introduction. I've failed miserably at social graces lately. Too busy keeping company with my own brain."

Keeping company with—? No. Anne wouldn't ask for clarification. That might extend this conversation. "I moved in six weeks ago," she said instead.

"If you don't shake my hand," the woman continued, "I'll assume you're permanently outraged by my rudeness and therefore uninterested in homemade tzimmes cake." She wiggled her extended fingers, which were tipped with lavender nails.

Anne had no idea what tzimmes cake was, other than cake, which was enough to know she didn't want it. She didn't want to shake this woman's hand either; as a rule, Anne avoided touch in favor of air-kisses and polite smiles. But she didn't seem to have much of a choice.

Her slowly offered hand was swallowed almost instantly by the woman's grip. Warm, firm, solid.

How long had it been since Anne had had physical contact with another human being? Not since Genevieve had kissed her cheek in greeting at the last Conserve Malibu board meeting, two weeks ago, and maybe that was why Anne had to swallow her inhale before it started to shake in her throat.

"Sarah Rebecca Rosenthal," the woman announced. "Sadie to my friends, enemies, and Costco sample distributors." She squeezed Anne's hand briefly before letting go. "Poet-professor, luxury consignment connoisseur, hostess of the greatest shindigs in Southern California, and proud mother to a first-rate human being. Your name? No, don't tell me." Her gaze swept up and down, a brush of attention that prickled Anne's skin. "I bet I can figure it out just by looking at you."

Anne's hand still tingled. She straightened her shoulders. "Is that really necessary?"

"Nothing in this world's necessary except mutual aid and a decent mattress. I've decided you look like a Celeste."

It was completely ridiculous to play a guessing game with a perfect stranger. Anne should order Sadie to get off her front porch, go email that conservation biologist with the overdue report, then treat herself to a nice cold glass of sauvignon blanc. Or two. Or three.

But instead, she found herself saying, "Wrong."

"Eleanor? Francesca? Cordelia? It's got to be something elegant. Women who could be Michelle Pfeiffer's sister and who wear Veronica Beard"—Sadie gestured at Anne's cream-colored silk blouse—"are never named Gertrude."

In a second, this woman would pull out her phone and start eagerly scrolling through baby name lists. "Listen. Sadie, right? I really have a lot of—"

"Anne?"

Anne nearly answered "What?" before catching herself. Surprise opened her mouth before she snapped it shut again, silent.

The silence wasn't one-sided. "Oh, I did it, didn't I? I guessed right! You're Anne. With an E, I hope. I always thought the other spelling seemed stingy. Anne with an E is so much creamier."

"Anne Lowell." Clearly, polite escape wasn't possible until she gave this woman something. "Yes, there's an E. From Malibu, recently divorced, two adult daughters." She didn't add *social laughingstock* or *living off my ex's alimony* or *I kept his surname because it's been mine for half my life, damn it*—although all were true.

"We're both members of the recent divorcée club." The light in Sadie's face dimmed noticeably, replaced by a flash of raw and undeniable grief. "Awful, isn't it? I'm sorry, Anne."

"I'm not." It was out before Anne knew she was going to say it. "James, my husb—my ex-husband—he came out last year. As gay. After thirty years of marriage." Shaken by her own candor, she clenched her teeth and jaw to stop herself from elaborating. This woman didn't deserve to know her private business.

Sadie whistled low. "Oh, my. And you never knew? That must've been devastating. I'm sure it still is."

Humiliating, more like. "I'm getting over it."

"I'm not sure you ever really get over something like that." Sadie held Anne's gaze. "Realizing you were the only one in a marriage you thought you shared."

Anne had never seen anyone before with a face that revealing, as though Sadie's skin was just translucent enough to expose the feelings below. Right now, her expression held sincere commiseration. Not pity. Not the condescending looks Anne had received after the divorce news broke from the women who'd made up her social circle.

Empathy. That was what it was.

It made her feel—well, she wasn't sure. Uneasy, yes. But at the kind understanding in Sadie's eyes, some strange, unnamed craving leaped under Anne's discomfort.

Usually, when faced with excess displays of emotion—or, really, any unrestrained emotion at all—Anne's reflexive response was mild disgust, glazed with a light sheen of contempt. *She* could control herself well enough to behave appropriately; why couldn't everyone else? But right now, strangely, Anne wasn't repelled.

Somehow Sadie, using her sincerity, had pushed away any disgust and made room for Anne's pain.

"You're not sorry, though," Sadie continued.

Anne started. "Excuse me?"

"You said you're not sorry to be divorced." Sadie cocked her head, the edges of her curly hair skimming her right shoulder. "That's very interesting to me. *You're* interesting to me. Why aren't you sorry?"

For just a few seconds, vertigo swept over Anne. "I told you, he's gay. There's no point in being sorry about a fact. The marriage was over. It was time to move on. For me, and"—she pointed her chin in the direction of the front walkway—"for both of us. Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I really do have to get going. Thanks for stopping by. Best wishes for your explosion."

"I see." It looked as though Sadie finally did. "Well, then, I'll leave you be, along with my hope that the rest of the day's gentle to you. Have a good afternoon, Anne."

She turned and walked away.

Anne stared after her, at this loud, blunt woman who wanted a stranger's day to be gentle, who'd looked at her with sincere compassion and warmth.

So much warmth that, on a complete whim, she could just toss armfuls of it in Anne's direction, with plenty left over.

*You're interesting to me,* Sadie had said. As though in just minutes, she'd rummaged under Anne's cool, detached exterior and touched something hidden that might be worth keeping.

Anne felt her lips slowly part, the breath high in her chest. Without her permission, an impulse began to bubble in her mouth.

Sadie was nearly at the end of the stone walkway.

"I never loved him," Anne called out, and then nearly clapped her hand over her mouth, which opened on a gasp.

Sadie stopped. Spun around. No surprise waited for Anne on that open face. Even more incredibly, no judgment either. Just calm acceptance.

"Ever?" she asked evenly. "Not even in the beginning?"

Shock and cold, sick realization gripped Anne's throat. She'd always told herself she *did* love James, at least in those early years. Told herself and told herself until she'd been convinced, mostly, and now the decades-long slow leak of that conviction had finally drained out right here, in her doorway, in front of someone she'd just met.

She'd never been in love with James.

Admired him—yes. Cared about him—yes. Had a connection with him—yes. But when Anne, her mouth dry and sour, thought back over her marriage, the strongest feeling she could remember was the sharp, bright satisfaction that came with doing what she was supposed to do: married an ambitious man from a good family, had his children, supported his career. Exactly what everyone—especially Anne's mother—had wanted for her.

What was more humiliating? Thirty years of your husband lying to you, or thirty years of you lying to yourself?

"Not ever?" Sadie repeated. "You never loved him?"

Some unknown and terrible force shook Anne's head from side to side. Sadie nodded. Just once.

They stood there for a moment looking at each other. Anne, her stomach twisting with horror, felt exactly as though she'd tripped and dropped her ugly, naked soul on the ground between them. Any second now, Sadie would run away from what was rotten and squirming and never should have seen daylight.

Finally, Sadie announced, "We're going to be friends."

Anne recoiled, stunned. "What? Why?"

“Because, you fascinating thing,” Sadie told her, “I want to know what you *do* love.”

She turned again and marched off toward her house, curls bouncing.

It took Anne a full thirty seconds to collect herself and close the front door. She was breathing quickly. Her heart hit against her rib cage like rain on the pavement.

“What the *fuck*,” she said out loud to herself. “What did you just do? Why did you tell her that?”

And a small, clear voice in the back of her head—a voice Anne Lowell had never heard before in her entire life—answered immediately.

*She asked.*

# CHAPTER 1

**Four years later.**

"I hate ranunculus," Anne muttered. "Too structured. Too many layers. No flower should be that stiff."

Sadie, her face buried in a display bouquet of purple ranunculus and pink cymbidium orchids, was apparently too transported to respond. She inhaled through her nose, long and loud, then sighed happily.

Anne sighed, too—much less happily. Normally, she'd be glad to kill an hour or more in Purple Poppy, hands down the best florist shop within a thirty-minute drive, but today's errand schedule was packed. At this rate, they'd never get out of Calabasas. "If you nuzzle that bouquet for much longer, you'll have to buy it dinner. Did you hear what I said? About the flowers?"

Sadie straightened up, her hair quickly settling. Today's wig—they were all deliberate fashion choices—was a straight, dark, chin-length bob that made her vaguely resemble Catherine Zeta-Jones in *Chicago*. "Oh, I'm very aware you hate ranunculus," she said, amusement in her voice. "You made that extremely clear the first forty-seven times you mentioned it."

No one could ever accuse Anne of being wishy-washy. "I just can't figure out the right arrangement. Every combination I can think of is—"

"—too obvious or too chaotic, I know," Sadie finished. "Don't you worry, sunshine. We'll find the perfect flowers for your birthday party. Maybe—oh, I've got a real soft spot for calla lilies." She pointed at an overstuffed white arrangement on a nearby table.

Calla lilies were for funerals. "I'm turning sixty, not dying, Sadie. Actually, I was thinking about a waterfall design, with some baker fern or eucalyptus."

"If you don't want your flowers to remind people of death, then I'd say we shouldn't pick an arrangement that's drooping out of the vase and onto the table."

Fair. But Anne, who hated admitting she was wrong, would concede the point silently.

She looked around the small shop, stuffed to the brim with color and scent and greenery, until her gaze fell on an asymmetrical, loose bouquet near one corner. White hyacinth and blush roses weren't exactly reinventing the wheel as far as floral arrangements went, but Anne, always ready to spot an unusual bloom, immediately seized on the—

"Amaranths!" Sadie cried out.

Anne turned to see her best friend staring at the same corner.

"Oh, those are *beauties*. You know, I have a lipstick that's the exact same color. Spitfire Scarlet."

"Honestly, that combination really might work," Anne said slowly, "if we balanced it with a few snowflake flowers."

"And sweet pea." Sadie's eyes were wide and bright. "In lavender. Or maybe salmon, if we want to play off the blush roses?"

Anne could already see the bouquets arrayed on her dining room table, the light through the deck's French doors shining through the rose petals. Her immediate satisfaction left no room for argument. She smiled at Sadie. "Salmon it is, then. Done."

"If you wear that gold column dress for the party," Sadie continued, still on a roll, "the one you got last year from The Row, then you'd complement the flowers perfectly. But I'm guessing you'll pick some black silk thing to offset that hair of yours." Her eyes were bright; Sadie loved talking fashion. "Do me a favor? Don't add jewelry. The only accessory you need is contrast."

"I mean, all right, but—" The accuracy of Sadie's guess startled Anne, who'd purchased an obsidian silk crepe dress just the previous week. "How the hell did you know what I was planning to wear?"

"I pay attention," Sadie said sweetly and pushed her oversized aviator glasses—no lenses—up her nose. "So do you. And that's why I like you so much. Perspicacity is power, beloved." She lifted her full eyebrows, grinning.

*Beloved.* Sadie called her that every once in a while, always breezily; other endearments, too, names like *dear heart*, *dollface*, and *sunshine*. But,

embarrassingly, *beloved* always made Anne's cheeks warm, as did the occasional reference Sadie made to her feelings for Anne.

Sure, Anne knew Sadie liked her. Liked her a lot, in fact. She'd made no secret of that over the last four years. Two or three times—no, it was definitely three—Sadie had even told Anne she loved her. Which was nice. Very nice. In fact, after the first time it happened, Anne had hummed under her breath for the rest of the day.

But it was still shocking to Anne that Sadie could just—say how she felt. So easily.

She needed to fill the silence, which was getting louder by the second. "You like me because I pay attention? Elaborate."

"I'm a poet," Sadie said, as if that explained it.

Anne raised her eyebrows and waited.

"To write halfway decent poetry," Sadie continued, "you have to pay close attention to detail first. Details give poems oxygen; clichés suffocate them. 'My love is like a red, red rose'? After three centuries, it's beige wallpaper."

Unbidden, a memory flashed behind Anne's eyes: Sadie's ruddy, miserable face two weeks ago, when she'd been fighting a bad cold. "I take it you'd prefer 'My love is like a red, red nose'?"

"Yes," Sadie exclaimed. "Good God, that's delightful. Can I steal it?" She was already fishing out a small notebook and pen from her vintage Bottega tote.

"Be my guest." Anne didn't see what was so appealing, but if it made Sadie happy, she could steal every sentence Anne had ever spoken.

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Sadie jotted down a quick note, then unceremoniously shoved the book and pen back into her bag. "Like a good poem, you, my friend, are anything but clichéd. Absolutely everything with you is detailed. Precise. Gorgeously sharp."

She'd been called *sharp* before, but never at the same time she'd been called *friend*. "You're saying that's good?"

"I'm saying," Sadie told her, "that you're what I spend my life looking for."

The Santa Ana winds had been blowing all day, assaulting innocent people with dry air, dust, and pollen. So, obviously, that was why Anne's eyes felt suddenly hot and full.

Her entire life, she'd been looked *at*. But that was very different from being looked *for*.

She remembered, suddenly, that awful day last year when one of her daughters had been rushed to the emergency room following a sudden seizure. After hours at Brooke's side, Anne had wandered back into the waiting area, planning on a granola bar from the vending machine. Instead, she'd seen Sadie sitting there, an insulated lunch bag on the chair next to her.

It was Sadie's face Anne remembered most. The way her gaze had flickered up to the opened doors. How her expression opened, too, when Sadie realized it was the person she'd been looking for.

She'd been waiting there for hours, without expectation or hurry. Waiting for Anne.

Good grief. The Santa Anas really were awful today.

"Take that little bit of extra cartilage sticking out of the top of your left ear." Sadie didn't seem to notice Anne's allergies, or that she'd gone silent again. "Even that's sharp, like you couldn't just let your helix be curved like everyone else's. Look, it's a completely necessary imperfection. Otherwise, you'd be flawless. And that's just unsportsmanlike, given the rest of us commoners."

Sadie always made specific observations about Anne. Compliments, really. She threw them out like Mardi Gras beads, pretty things that seemed to cost her nothing at all to give. It was a rare day when Sadie didn't point out at least two or three very specific details about Anne that clearly charmed her.

Giving praise didn't come easily to Anne. It never had. Whatever thoughts she had about her best friend usually remained stuck between Anne's teeth. But she could try, couldn't she? For Sadie, who deserved it?

She cleared her throat. "I like your, ah—" *Your apple cheeks. Those long, long eyelashes. The way the corner of your right central incisor slants just a tiny bit over the left one, like it's curtseying.* All true. Why couldn't Anne get any of it out? "Uh, how you—"

"Don't hurt yourself," Sadie said wryly. "Stretch first. You look nice today, Sadie."

Well, she wouldn't say *that*. Compliments didn't count if the recipient handed them to you first. And generic praise wasn't worth the effort it took to give. For crying out loud, any number of people 'looked nice today.' But

none of them looked like Sadie. None of them had dark and perceptive eyes that took immediate, meticulous inventory of everything and everyone.

Of course, Anne noticed plenty about Sadie, too. It was impossible not to pay attention to her. Even after all this time—four whole years of late-night talks and strolls by the nearby creek and raucous dinner parties with the strangest compendium of humans in LA—she found herself watching Sadie at odd moments. The way Sadie threw her head back and exposed that long neck when Anne made her roar with laughter. Her slender, ink-stained hands, their skin the color of a pale peach rose, that always moved in the air when she talked. The faint parentheses that bracketed her wide, full mouth.

Discomfort prickled faintly inside Anne. “Let’s just order the flowers and get out of here, all right? We’ve got a lot of other stops to make.”

“I want to grab ten of those moss-scented goat milk soaps.” Sadie was already striding toward the local artisan craft display on the other side of the shop. “They’d be ideal hostess gifts for your party, especially if I wrap them in calico cotton. Oh!” She gasped and spun around. “I know where to get calico cotton with a gold foil pattern. There’s this terrific print on sale at that fabric store in Beverly Grove—”

“Absolutely not. We’re keeping this one simple. But feel free to get the calico cotton for your next shindig.”

Sadie pouted. “A gold foil pattern would complement those gray eyes of yours.”

“All I want,” Anne said firmly, “are four perfectly arranged bouquets, my new Kim Seybert tablecloth, and Nobu catering. No fuss.”

“Fine. I’m nothing if not accommodating. Let’s compromise. One goat milk soap in your guest bathroom, and I’ll even put it on a kicky little zircon-encrusted tungsten stand I rescued from Mitzi Gaynor’s estate sale.”

Despite herself, Anne smiled. Sadie’s design tastes were aesthetically aggressive—her home was a Jackson Pollock drip painting come to life—but her eye, despite its occasional myopia, could find real potential in the strangest combinations. “All right, go ahead. Get the soap; tungsten stand contingent upon inspection.”

The concession earned a delighted grin from Sadie that lit up her eyes. Without pushing her luck further, she bolted to retrieve the soap.

*She’s really a very pretty woman, Anne thought, I should tell her that at some point.* For some reason, her stomach fluttered.

Admittedly, Sadie wasn't objectively beautiful—well, not according to the rigid and narrow standards Anne had always applied to herself. Sadie's nose was a tiny bit crooked, and her lips a bit too plush for the rest of her face. Her voluptuous body had soft, extravagant curves that reminded Anne of the Pacific Coast Highway curling around the cliffs of Big Sur. And Sadie refused to do anything about the tiny lines on her face besides inconsistent applications of drugstore moisturizer, even though she could easily afford cosmetic procedures.

Remarkably, she didn't seem self-conscious at all about any of it. In all the time they'd known each other, Anne had never heard Sadie make a single negative comment about her own appearance. It was—well, honestly, it made Anne a little jealous.

In stark contrast to Sadie, Anne had molded, pinched, and smoothed herself into a disciplined physique, one that looked fifteen years younger than her actual age. Nature had given her an assist—she knew she was attractive; men had always admired her—but keeping up a certain standard took far more effort than relying on good genes. She owed the ripe-wheat color of her hair to Christophe in Beverly Hills, her smooth face to Botox, and her thin, whittled frame to a diet plan she'd color-coded, labeled, and laminated.

No, Sadie looked nothing like Anne, or any of the women Anne had surrounded herself with before the divorce. But nevertheless, there was something unexpectedly appealing about the ways Sadie refused to stay within margins.

While Sadie busied herself at the crafts display, Anne made her way to the shop's front, her target the new florist Ryan had just hired: a girl who looked barely old enough to be out of college. That eyebrow piercing and forearm tattoo didn't exactly inspire confidence either.

But just before she stepped up to the counter, a woman cut in front of her without so much as a glance in Anne's direction, brushing so close, Anne could smell her vanilla-scented perfume.

"I beg your pardon," Anne said pointedly.

No response whatsoever from the woman, who was—Anne realized with a shock—someone she knew. Or, more accurately, someone she'd known once upon a time: Brenda Hughes-Foster, the wife of a once-acclaimed, now struggling film editor represented by James's agency. Clearly, Brenda hadn't noticed or recognized her.

Back when they'd volunteered together for the LA Opera League, Anne had called Brenda a friend, but that "friendship" had been all cooed pleasantries and Brenda's failure to hide her envy. Well, Brenda was no longer envious of Anne. Like nearly all the others in their circle, after the divorce, she'd dropped Anne like the Times Square ball.

Brenda was a few years younger than Anne, and just as thin. Today, her frosted hair was pulled back into a bun nearly as tight as the skin on her face, and Anne's practiced eyes recognized that burgundy *fil coupé* dress as an obvious Oscar de la Renta knockoff. Together with a garish Gucci bucket bag, the look signaled the gauche priority of loud labels over quiet quality. Brenda had always confused style with advertisement.

"You know," Brenda began, her back to Anne, "you really should be doing your job."

The new florist's eyes went wide. "Um," she said, "what do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb, honey. You *saw* me come in. I know you did. I spent ten whole minutes of my valuable time strolling around this unorganized jungle looking for a suitable graduation bouquet, and you didn't even try to help me. You're lucky I don't have time to ask for the owner."

Sadie, joining Anne with moss soap in hand, made a scoffing sound.

"I don't know why I expect better," Brenda continued. "No one your age wants to work. You're too busy whining about your pronouns or blaming your parents for all your problems."

Anne suppressed a sigh. Brenda's rants about These Kids Today—including her own children—had always been one of her favorite topics.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am." The girl's face flushed pomegranate red. "I'd be happy to help you out. What kind of arrangement are you interested in? We've got some beautiful options for commencement ceremonies."

Before Brenda could respond, Sadie stepped up, shoulders squared, and placed the moss soap on the counter with a loud *thunk*. "Look," she said to Brenda, and her voice dripped with the sweetness that always presaged her righteous fury. "Whatever she gets paid to work here isn't nearly enough to put up with that kind of disrespect."

"Actually," the girl volunteered, "my salary's pretty generous. Benefits are good, too."

But Sadie wasn't done. "You push right past my friend without so much as a brief acknowledgment of her existence, you attack this poor kid's entire generation—"

“Excuse me,” Brenda interrupted. Those cold blue eyes stapled themselves onto her new target. She still hadn’t bothered to look over in Anne’s direction. “Where do you get off telling me I’m being disrespectful? This is none of your business.”

“You made it my business when you decided to lift that leg and spray your entitlement all over this shop. That girl can’t tell you to go to hell because she needs this job, but I’ve got tenure, decent alimony, and all the time in the world to ruin your day.”

Anne suppressed an inconvenient grin. Sadie didn’t often turn on the righteousness in public like that, but she hated bullies more than just about anything. With the possible exception of unseasoned chicken.

Brenda’s smooth face shifted into white, hard marble. She straightened up, using every single inch of her cream Chanel slingbacks to loom over Sadie, and smiled coldly at her.

Anne knew exactly what that smile meant. After all, she’d honed it to a fine art herself over thirty years of marriage to James. It was a brandished weapon.

The chill from that smile settled in Anne’s chest, forming an icy knot.

“I think it’s nice,” Brenda said sweetly. “That you’re so brave.”

“There’s nothing brave at all about advocating for—”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that. I meant that you’re brave to not care”—Brenda’s gaze traveled slowly down Sadie, from her sleek bob to the feathered ruffles at the ankles of her red Balenciaga pants—“about your appearance.”

Sadie froze. “What?”

“I’d be much too self-conscious to leave the house like that.” The cold smile widened. “But somehow, you don’t seem to mind. Maybe you like the way that orange cashmere top looks like you pulled it from the Lorax’s Goodwill pile. Maybe you don’t realize those amusing glasses draw everyone’s attention to your under-eye circles. Or maybe it has to do with—well.” Her stare crawled over Sadie’s middle. “You’re just a more *substantial* person than I am, aren’t you?”

Oh, that absolute *bitch*.

Anne almost snapped back that high school insults didn’t pair well with menopause, then bit her tongue, thinking better of it. Let Sadie counterattack first. She could more than handle herself against someone as silly and insignificant as Brenda Hughes-Foster, and, after all, Sadie had dibs on the prey.

But, to Anne's surprise, as the seconds ticked by, Sadie didn't move. Didn't speak. Just stared at Brenda, those beautiful eyes huge behind her glasses. Pink spots bloomed on her cheeks. She looked—surprised? Was that it?

No. Sadie looked humiliated.

The knot of ice in Anne's chest burst, replaced by red fury that rayed through every cell. Sadie—who'd never once voiced any insecurities about her body—Sadie was *hurt*. Badly.

Nobody hurt Sadie. Not while Anne Harris Lowell was around.

"Hello, Brenda," she said softly. "My turn now."

Finally, Brenda's eyes widened in recognition. "Anne? My goodness. It's you, isn't it? Wow. It's been years. What are you up to these days?" She laughed, a false, empty sound. "So sorry I didn't see you there."

"Oh, sweetie." With very little effort, Anne could make an endearment sound exactly like an insult. "Funny. You couldn't see me, but I can see right through you. Look at how incredibly transparent you are."

"I don't know what you mean," Brenda protested, but she was visibly flushed. "And I really don't see how my honest observations are any of your concern. I wasn't talking to you."

"Understand this. When you chose to speak to my friend the way you just did, you chose to talk to me."

Brenda, a coward, flinched.

"Whoever this is isn't worth your energy, Anne," Sadie said quietly. "Or mine. Let's just order your flowers and leave, all right?"

Not tearing her gaze away from Brenda's hard eyes, Anne moved to stand at Sadie's side and, without knowing she was going to do it, put one arm around Sadie's shoulders.

Sadie went rigid under Anne's touch, clearly surprised by it, but she didn't move away.

Barely registering Sadie's reaction, Anne stood tall, mouth stiff with her resolve. This wasn't Sadie's fight anymore. Now Brenda belonged to Anne.

"Since you need me to spell this out for you," she began, "let me do it clearly. You might be under the illusion that you've fooled everyone with your knockoff dress, that mismatched cut-price bag, and your fried-to-shit hair, but this scam you're calling fashion might as well be a garbage can, given how trashy it is."

Now Brenda was turning red. "How dare y—"

“I know you, Brenda.” Anne cut through the protest like steel into butter. “You’re not a person. Not in any way that actually counts. No, I know *exactly* what you are. Your life’s a string of bitter disappointments you try to pass off as pearls. Your son hates you. You think your daughter isn’t pretty. Everyone knows your husband takes low-paying projects out of the country to get away from you. And you’ve managed to convince yourself that just one more facelift, just *one* more, will make the arms on that ticking clock move backward. Because you’ve finally realized, haven’t you, that this is it. This is all you’ll ever have. This is all you are.”

Next to Anne, Sadie made a low, startled sound.

Brenda took a sudden step backward, as though she’d been pushed.

“You’re not a person at all,” Anne repeated. “You’re a slaughterhouse. You shredded all your old hopes and left them to rot inside you.”

Brenda gasped.

“I haven’t thought about you in four years, you know that? Not once. You’re just that forgettable, Brenda. Just that easy to walk away from. But the real tragedy here is that you can’t walk away from yourself.”

“I—I,” Brenda stammered, “I have *never* been spoken to like—I...” She cast a helpless look at the cashier, who was staring wide-eyed at Anne and seemed in no mood to assist. “This is—I can’t—”

“Oh,” Sadie said, “you can.” She jabbed her thumb over her shoulder, in the direction of the shop’s door. “Don’t underestimate yourself. Just put one foot in front of the other, and make it quick. That should be easy, since you’re a less *substantial* person.”

Brenda spluttered another feeble protest, then snapped her mouth shut. Without another word, she spun around and nearly sprinted toward the exit.

“Wow.” Obvious admiration brightened the florist’s face. “That was brutal.”

“Thank you,” Anne said primly. “Natural talent.” Belatedly, she realized she was still holding onto Sadie and dropped her arm, stepping back quickly. Enough to see that her best friend still looked a little shaken. “Sadie, are you okay?”

“Yes. Yes, I am. I will be.”

It felt suddenly, enormously, vital to make something clear. “Brenda Hughes-Foster wouldn’t recognize style if it smacked her across the face.

You have more fashion sense, class, and personality in that tiny little mole on your collarbone than she's got in her entire body."

"Anne—"

She wasn't finished. "I'd like to see Brenda try to teach a creative writing class. Or give a, what was it you did, that Ted-X talk about making poetry accessible. Didn't it get something like two hundred thousand views?"

"Anne," Sadie repeated.

"And how *dare* she imply you're the least bit unattractive, when her face is so tucked it looks like a trampoline? Your grin could power Los Angeles, and that woman can't even—"

"Anne!"

"What?"

"You're a marvel," Sadie said simply. "That's all I wanted to say. You're incredible."

For some reason, Anne blushed, a deep heat that started in her chest and burned quickly up her neck to her cheeks. A lifetime of admiration from men hadn't prepared her for praise from a middle-aged poet who had eyes the color of earth after rain. She invented a small cough. "Well. You know, I think I might need a new manicure if I want to get Brenda's self-esteem out from under my nails."

Sadie tucked her arm into Anne's, patting it softly. It felt like gratitude.

Anne cleared her throat, then looked back at the florist. "We'd like to order four bouquets for this Sunday," she began, and she warmed herself on that *we*, the way it linked the two of them so tightly that there was no room anymore for loneliness.

## CHAPTER 2

On the drive home that afternoon, Sadie led them away from the rows of unremarkable suburban homes, up the twisting route into the mountains, and to the high crest that marked the beginning of their descent into a pocket paradise: the secluded community of Topanga Canyon.

The two-lane road, a century-old thread sewn between the hot San Fernando Valley and the cool Pacific Ocean, channeled them through green-and-brown hills speckled with sagebrush, chaparral, and alder. Even after four years of living in Topanga, the drive back from the city still felt like a slow, soft passage into another world, about as different from Calabasas and Woodland Hills and the rest of Los Angeles as Oz was from Kansas.

"That woman this morning," Sadie said abruptly as she turned down the road that led to their houses. "She used to be a friend of yours?"

It was the first time either of them had brought up Brenda since they'd left Purple Poppy. "I don't know that 'friend' is the right word. But, yes. I knew her socially."

Back when Anne had known everyone socially. After James came out and they'd separated, all that had ended, as if the women Anne knew were afraid her humiliation and degradation might be contagious. She'd left them, too, though; with the exception of Conserve Malibu, Anne had abandoned all her fundraising and organizing commitments after moving, too disgusted by her own vulnerability to be around people who *knew*.

"Brenda was the kind of woman who never smiled," she continued. "Just pulled back her lips."

Sadie took that in. Then, "You used to be a little like that, didn't you? Like Brenda."

"I *was* her," Anne said quietly. She didn't like to admit it. "Before you."

"Hmm." It was the sound Sadie made when she was still forming an opinion. "I wonder."

In some ways, Anne had never been anything like Brenda: never that tasteless or tacky, never that obvious, never that uncultured. She'd played the perfect wife for James as his talent agency became an industry empire, throwing lavish parties and fundraisers. The source of everyone's intimidation; the object of everyone's desire. But four years ago, Brenda's cruelty would've been right at home in Anne's mouth. She'd built herself up with the people she'd torn down.

These days, though, Anne's sharpness had gentled a little. Somehow, when Sadie was around, the mean, hard impulse to lash out rarely rose inside Anne.

Unless it was in Sadie's defense, apparently.

They pulled into Sadie's driveway, her cottage waiting prettily at the end of it. It was a cozy two-bedroom Spanish-style casita named Hedge Nettle House for the pink flowers that grew like weeds in the adjacent meadow. Sadie had bought Hedge Nettle with her ex-husband Fred when they'd moved to LA seven years earlier. In the divorce, Fred had given Sadie everything she hadn't asked for—the house, the furniture, generous alimony payments—and taken away the only thing she'd really wanted: him.

It was a typical April afternoon in Los Angeles, warm and dry with a slight crisp breeze that carried the sweet scent of chaparral. Perfect for a nice cold glass of wine and conversation on Hedge Nettle's front porch before Anne retired to her own house for the evening. Or it seemed perfect until ten minutes in, when Sadie took a small sip from her mostly-full glass, placed it on the table between them, and said, without preamble or context, "So what's your future?"

Anne blinked. "Come again?"

"Brenda's your past, you said. What's ahead for you?"

The wine was good, angular and crisp. Anne had been thinking about it for hours, craving its cold, rich slide down her throat, the immediate relief that came with her first swallow. "Do we really have to talk about this? I'm satisfied with my life as it is."

She was—mostly. Over the last four years, Anne's busy, full existence had slowed to a crawl after she'd brutally pruned away most of its obligations. For a good, long while, she'd been grateful to leave behind the

life she associated with her disgrace. Lately, though, leisure had started to feel a little more like an idle itch.

“Well,” Sadie said, “I’ve just conducted a flash poll, and fifty percent of the people sitting on this porch would very much like to have this conversation.”

Anne stared out at the small grove of ancient oaks that dotted the edge of Sadie’s property by the road. “Not everything has to be discussed to death, you know.”

“No,” Sadie agreed, leaning back in the lounge chair. “But not everything has to be stamped out like a potential wildfire either, sunshine.” She steepled her fingers. “You’re sixty on Saturday. A milestone birthday.”

“I’m very aware. We just cleaned out an entire aisle at Bonjour Fête to mark the occasion.”

“Let’s tally the facts of your present, shall we? Divorced from a man you never wanted to be married to in the first place.” Sadie began to count on her left hand. “Enough guilt-induced alimony to keep you in Badgley Mischka heels without having to earn a dollar for the rest of your life. Chairing the Board of Directors for Conserve Malibu. The occasional lunch with what’s-her-face from C.M.—Genevieve. Pilates four days a week. Monthly shopping trips to Celine and The Row. A handful of mediocre dates with men who can’t seem to hold a candle to your inferno. And the occasional visit with those grandbabies of yours. Have I forgotten anything?”

When Sadie put it like that, Anne’s life sounded pretty empty. But one very important detail was missing from that list. “You forgot yourself.”

Sadie grinned.

*I put that grin there.* Maybe it was the wine that felt like a glow inside Anne, and maybe not.

“You need to commit yourself to something bigger, dollface,” Sadie announced firmly. “You need goals.”

“I wasn’t aware that was mandatory.” Anne felt increasingly uncomfortable.

“You’ve got approximately four decades left—”

“—I don’t know where you got this idea that we’re both living that long—”

“—and without any goals, you might wake up on your hundredth birthday just overflowing with regrets.”

"I'll be impressed if I wake up on my hundredth birthday at all," Anne muttered.

Sadie turned toward Anne. Her gaze was sharp and focused. "Is anyone or anything besides Malibu's ecosystem ever going to benefit from the mechanics of that brilliant mind? Don't misunderstand me; I'm very much in favor of the survival of the Guadalupe fur seal, but all that intellect and ruthless tenacity needs more than one narrow pipeline. Same with your talent for organizing, or those leadership skills. I repeat: what's your future?"

*You.*

The thought pierced through Anne's brain—a hot, sharp spear that wouldn't be denied—and she managed to swallow a gasp. Where the hell had that come from? Yes, she was closer to Sadie than any friend she'd ever had, but even a best friend couldn't be your *future*. That just wasn't how sensible people thought about their lives.

Truthfully, Anne couldn't come up with a real answer to Sadie's question. Since the divorce, on the rare occasions Anne had tried to look at the expanse of years ahead, her vision had always blurred, refusing to focus again. Which was fine. Wasn't it? At this point in her life, did she really need a purpose?

Sadie continued to watch her.

Eventually, Anne said, "I don't really think about the future. You know, beyond"—she gestured between Sadie and herself, aiming for a casual effect—"this. Us living next door to each other, me in my ranch, you in your cottage, bothering each other into decrepitude."

A strange shadow crossed Sadie's face before she busied her mouth with another swig of wine. "I do love being neighbors," she said after swallowing. "Incredible how something like our friendship could flower in the muck of the worst thing that's ever happened to me."

Although Anne had heard plenty about Fred over the years, Sadie rarely alluded with any specificity to the ending of her marriage. Anne wasn't even sure what had happened, exactly, but she knew Sadie hadn't wanted the divorce. "Small mercies, I suppose."

"Small? Try again." Sadie's tone was light, airy. "There's nothing small about a woman who went on a four-day eBay bidding war just so she could surprise me with the mod-patterned Schiaparelli silk scarf I'd been trying to

find since my thirties. Let's face it. If Fred had to leave for you to come into my life, well, then. *Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again.*"

She was joking, obviously. Any other interpretation would be ludicrous. "That sounds suspiciously like you're quoting something."

"My favorite John Donne." The shadow on Sadie's sunny face—had it been the memory of Fred that put it there?—was gone now. Instead, a dreamy, familiar gleam shone in her eyes, the look she always got when she quoted poetry. *"Take me to you, imprison me, for I, except you enthrall me, never shall be free, nor—"*

She cut off abruptly.

"Well?" Anne asked after a moment. She'd never liked poetry—yes, it was deeply ironic that the best friend she'd ever had was a poet—but she hated unfinished things.

Sadie crossed her legs, took a deep breath.

*"Nor ever chaste,"* she said quietly, *"except you ravish me."*

The grove of oaks in front of Sadie's house seemed to tremble and slant slightly. The word *ravish* echoed, that last syllable sliding through the air. *Ravish. Ravish.*

Anne gripped the wineglass tightly in her hand and sat very, very still, only because there was no reason whatsoever to squirm.

"Never mind. Just forget all that foolishness." Sadie shook her head quickly, as though she was speaking to herself as much as to Anne. "Back to the subject. You want to live next door to me—established. But what else do you want for yourself?"

Beneath that seemingly easygoing exterior of Sadie's lay a bulldog with iron teeth. At least it got them away from John Donne. "Enough cross-examination, Perry Mason. What do *you* want?"

"All sorts," Sadie said breezily. "I want to bring as much beauty into the world as I can, right up until the very second I leave the earth. I want to write poems that make my readers ask, 'How did she know I needed that?' I want to learn how to do the Warrior three pose in yoga class without needing to lean on one of those foam blocks. I want to be a grandmother to the most incredible child ever created—tied with my Hal, of course." She beamed, clearly thinking about her daughter-in-law's pregnancy. "I want to learn everything there is to learn about the invention of agriculture, and radical compassion, and the right way to perfectly poach an egg. And I want to be your closest friend. Always."

Fast pleasure spread through Anne, and the smile she gave Sadie was nearly as large, and as honest, as Sadie's own. But Sadie's list seemed incomplete. "You didn't mention your students. What about UCLA?"

There it was again: that shadow.

Anne hadn't imagined it. Her stomach clenched.

"Well," Sadie said very slowly, and now she wasn't looking at Anne, "yes, of course. I love my job. You know that. Getting to teach those kids makes me the luckiest woman on the planet."

"What aren't you telling me?" Anne put down her empty wineglass. "Is it Diane? Is she sticking around as department chair for another term? I know you can't stand her."

"Miguel's stepping up." Sadie's sentences were shorter than they'd been. "Thank God. I don't think I could've taken three more years of Diane's mean-fisted neoliberalism."

"So what is it? Why are you acting like—"

"Stop," Sadie said softly. "Let this one go, Anne. I'm not ready to talk about it."

Despite the warm day, Anne felt a chill creep through her veins. She sat back in the chair, her spine hard against the firm cushion. What could Sadie not want to discuss? There wasn't a topic under the sun her friend didn't love dissecting until its innards splattered all over the conversation.

She nodded, unable to come up with a response that didn't sound melodramatic.

"Let me tell you instead," Sadie continued, her normal cheer restored, "about the poem I just finished drafting. It's a villanelle—you know, five tercets and a quatrain with repeating lines—about keeping secrets, and the speaker's unreliable. The repeating line is "I misplaced the place where honesty shows."

"Oh. Well-done." Anne did her best to sound supportive—for Sadie, she could manage to muster up a *little* short-term interest in poetry—but unease still pricked at her. "Five tercets? Wow. That's great."

Sadie laughed good-naturedly and stood up, grabbing their wineglasses off the table before Anne could ask for the refill she wanted. "That reaction just earned a pity participation trophy and a star sticker with *you tried* written on it. Sure *you* haven't misplaced the place where honesty shows?"

Anne's cheeks heated. "I meant it. I'm glad you're doing something you love. Even if I don't enjoy poetry. It's not personal, I promise." She knew

what came next, what always came next. *Give poetry a real chance. I know you'd like it if you actually made an effort.*

Sadie looked down at her, warm eyes sharpened, and Anne's stomach swooped.

"Of course you hate poetry, beloved," Sadie said gently. "You *are* poetry. And you don't like yourself very much."

With that observation, she strode into the house, leaving Anne sitting alone on the porch, dumbfounded.

Dimly, she felt her heart pounding, as if it were somewhere else, not attached to her own body.

*You are poetry.*

If someone else had said that to her—one of the men Anne had dated in the years since her divorce, for instance—she would've known what to do with the comment. She'd smile, put it in an inner box of compliments, and never look at it again.

But Sadie wasn't a man. Sadie was Sadie. Her best friend. And she'd said something else, too.

*You don't like yourself very much.*

That was the old Anne, wasn't it? The Anne who'd been cruel like Brenda, hating how much she loved doing it. The Anne who'd ignored a stifled, humming terror that simmered just below her attention, as though with each day that passed, her life was slowly slipping through her La Mer-moisturized hands. Back then, sometimes that terror had broken through.

*Is this it? Is this all I'll ever have? Is this all I am?*

She wasn't that Anne anymore. That Anne had never held a crying Sadie in her arms after the death of Sadie's beloved cat Wordsworth. That Anne had never opened up to anyone at all, not even a fraction. That Anne had never sat on the front porch of a pink cottage with a glass of cold wine, the light from Sadie's attention loosening her tight chest.

Now that she'd left her old life behind, she liked herself just fine, whatever that actually meant. Sadie didn't know everything.

When Anne pushed through the cottage's front door, she announced, "You're wrong."

Sadie was washing the wineglasses at the kitchen sink. She made a noncommittal noise, one that clearly meant she disagreed but wouldn't press the issue.

"I do like myself," Anne insisted.

Sadie set one of the glasses in the drying rack. "Delightful."

"I *do*, Sadie."

"You don't have to convince me, dear heart," Sadie said gently, not turning around.

Another sentence, unspoken, hummed beneath that one. Anne heard it as clearly as though it were in the house with them. *Convince yourself.*

# CHAPTER 3

As always, her eldest daughter was the last to arrive.

It was fully dark by the time the lights of Claire's car flashed as they bumped up Anne's long driveway, and Anne, watching from the brightly lit back deck, couldn't help a scowl. Nearly an hour late to the party, long after the rest of their guests had arrived. She'd had to push back the call for dinner, too; the sushi needed exactly ten minutes outside the refrigerator before serving to achieve the exact right temperature.

Claire was thirty-three years old. More than old enough to finally grow up and realize that her poor choices impacted others.

The one benefit of Claire's lateness was the excuse it provided for Anne to exit a mind-numbing exchange with her daughter Brooke's inane husband Dan, a man who used the phrase "Oh, wow!" like punctuation. She made a quick apology and ducked inside the French doors, leaving the rest of her guests in conversation.

"If you need a little patience, borrow mine," Sadie said, following Anne into the house. As always, she seemed to know just what Anne was thinking without Anne ever voicing it. She put a warm hand on Anne's upper arm for just a moment, and it burned through the crepe fabric. "You know it's hard for Claire to keep track of time."

"You manage it," Anne grumbled. Both Sadie and Claire had ADHD, although admittedly it impacted them in different ways. Claire struggled to pay attention to anything that wasn't fashion or design-related; Sadie didn't have a pause button.

"All my executive functioning skills are just a carefully-constructed costume. Let's see what's really behind the disguise." Sadie mimed removing a mask. "Well, what have we here? It's anxiety!"

That pulled a smile out of Anne's annoyance.

"Anyway, be gentle with Claire, will you? She's had a rough time lately."

"A rough time with what?"

"With Eloise." Sadie adjusted her forest-green silk trilby hat, which sat jauntily on top of her dark-brown pixie wig. "You know, the breakup."

How did Sadie always seem to know the details of Anne's daughters' lives before Anne herself did? "No, I didn't know. Wait. Claire broke up with Eloise? Why? I actually liked this one."

"She didn't tell you? Eloise was the one who broke it off. Something about Claire not being able to communicate."

"Well, that tracks," Anne muttered. "Claire's never been good at sharing her feelings."

"My goodness gracious." Sadie was all mock astonishment. "I wonder what blonde genetic tree your daughter plucked that trait from. Come on, Anne. Don't be so hard on her."

"Fine. Fine. All right. It's a party, I suppose."

"Look at you, listening to me." Sadie gave Anne a glowing smile before bustling outside again, her satin polka-dot maxi skirt swishing as she walked.

For a moment, Anne stood still in the middle of her open-plan living area and stared after Sadie. Her mouth felt strangely dry.

"If I remember correctly," said a deep, familiar voice, "Claire was late to her due date."

Startled, she swiveled toward the kitchen space to see her ex-husband James behind the counter, ladling the signature cocktail she'd batched that afternoon into a delicate coupé glass. That gray-white beard of his still startled her every time she saw it, even though he'd had it for nearly a year. "She was five days late, actually. We used the phrase *fashionable entrance* on the birth announcements."

James sipped his cocktail, a lavender syrup twist on a traditional French 75. The tasteful handwritten card next to the crystal bowl read *French 60*, in honor of Anne's birthday. "You were always so good with things like that. Announcements, invitations, decorations. Every detail perfect and above reproach. I never properly appreciated it back then."

"No," Anne said, and some of the old stiffness tightened her voice. "You really didn't. But then again, you never properly appreciated *me*."

A wry smile tightened James's mouth.

Time hadn't fully melted the frost that sometimes fringed their exchanges. Honestly, given Anne's resentment, it was incredible that they'd managed to form a mostly amicable relationship over the last few years. Any lingering bitterness was more than warranted. After she'd spent so long trying to make their marriage work—"Happiness is for children," her mother had told her on her wedding day, "don't think you'll get it from your husband"—James had returned the favor by making a public fool of Anne. She'd sacrificed her body, her energy, her best years, nearly everything that mattered on the altar of their marriage.

But, after a year of licking her wounds, Anne had begrudgingly realized it was time to move forward. She and James were permanently linked through their children and grandchildren, so polite congeniality made it easier for everyone. And, well, she wanted to be perceived as gracious. The kind of woman who rose above it all.

Old hurts didn't die easily, though; they retired first and made a home in some internal basement.

The front door opened and Claire strode in, the heels of her beige pumps clacking loudly against the hardwood floor. She held a bow-tied bottle of rosé that matched her blush-pink Tory Burch shirtdress, and her brash bottle-red hair fell in sleek, smooth waves just past her shoulders.

Claire gave Anne a perfunctory cheek kiss before handing her the rosé. "Got you a sweet and full-bodied vintage, which, now that I think about it, is a *very* ironic gift, considering—well, you. Hey, Mom, exactly how much did you pay Sades to keep her from writing you a bespoke birthday poem? Fifty bucks? A hundred?"

"A promise to help her track down a Celine box bag at *Déjà New*," Anne said wryly, and then, because she couldn't stop herself, "Claire, are you completely sure that dress is the right color for you?"

"Terrific. Not even ten seconds in *and* I haven't had anything to drink yet. Wanna criticize my hair, too? I don't think I've heard you bring up Chucky in at least three weeks."

"I don't know why you always think I'm attacking you. It's not criticism. I just want to help you look your best."

"Well, you sure did it, Mom. You helped. Amazing job."

"There's my Clarabelle," James said from the kitchen, with just a little extra insistence. Clearly trying to protect his eldest, although God knew

what Claire needed protection from. "You look beautiful, kiddo. How's things at work?"

Claire brightened. A fashion designer, she'd recently taken a job with a small luxury brand. "We're getting a display at the Beverly Wilshire Neiman's. One mannequin. Xiomara's thrilled."

"That's wonderful! Congratulations!" James exclaimed, just as Anne asked, "Only one mannequin?"

She'd meant that the department store should've given them more, but the excitement slipped from Claire's expression. "Thanks, Dad," she said and then glanced through the French doors at the deck. "Oh, hey! There's my dazzling diva!"

Anne didn't need to watch. Claire would rush onto the deck for a bear hug, and Sadie would return the hug just as enthusiastically, rocking Claire side to side. They'd taken to each other the first time they'd met, a bond begun when Sadie had cooed over Claire's garish arm tattoo, then cemented once they discovered their shared neurodivergence and a mutual obsession with avant-garde haute couture.

It wasn't surprising that Claire loved Sadie. Her entire family loved Sadie. In fact, Anne had an uneasy suspicion that their willingness to drive into Topanga every once in a while was due more to Sadie's perpetual presence than wanting to spend time with Anne herself.

James strolled over to Anne, coupé glass in hand, and clinked the bottle of rosé she still held. "You could be nicer to Claire, you know."

"*She* could be nicer to *me*." Anne hated the sulk in her voice. "An hour late, and I didn't even get a 'happy birthday.'"

"Well, I can give you that." James raised his glass. "Happy birthday to the most magnificent woman I've ever known. May the coming year bring you everything you deserve."

Anne gave him a look.

"It's not a threat," James protested. "You should have the best, kid. Don't you know I want that for you? I want you to be as happy—"

He stopped, but Anne heard the rest of his sentence anyway. *As I am with Arthur.*

James didn't have to tell her how happy he was. Anne could see it in the way he'd transformed entirely, almost nothing remaining of the man she'd lived with. His posture, his smile, his entire demeanor had softened.

For their entire marriage, she'd always had the sense that James held himself at a distance, that parts of him were locked away. Now when Anne looked at James, she felt in a way she couldn't explain that there was more of him to look back.

That was Arthur's influence. They'd met less than a year after James had come out to Anne—"You'll never meet anyone at your age," Anne had snarled then—and married just six months later, two men in their sixties not wanting to waste the time they had left. Arthur was everything Anne hadn't been and never would be: outgoing, joyful, soft, expressive, easy. Male.

James took a sip of his cocktail. "Are you still seeing that financial advisor?"

"Investment banker. And no. He was too clingy." Since the divorce, Anne had dated a few fawning men, all with generous portfolios and generous hairlines. None of them had lasted. "We can't all have your luck."

"Right." James cleared his throat. "Anyway, I should get back out there." He gestured with the hand holding his glass toward the back deck, where Arthur stood in animated conversation with their younger daughter. "I'm pretty sure he's telling Brooke about the identical paint swatches he can't decide between, and as a dad, it's my job to rescue her."

The tightness of Anne's smile didn't cancel out her genuine amusement. The dry affection in James's voice sounded just like her own wry, fond responses to Sadie's rants about quantitative meter, or when she'd wax lyrical on the topic of Stella McCartney's fabric draping.

Come to think of it, in some respects, Arthur was a bit like Sadie.

"James," she said.

He stopped at the French doors and turned around.

"How did you know?"

The question left her mouth before Anne had a chance to realize it was there. She gripped the rosé bottle harder, deeply regretting that it was unopened. For some reason, she felt horribly exposed, like she'd pulled open her sternum, shown her ex-husband the bones and meat and gristle that disproved the lie of her smooth surface.

"How did I know I was gay?" A note of wariness lanced James's voice.

No. Anne didn't want to know about that. She'd never wanted to know about that. Never would. "How did you know about Arthur? That he was—the one?" It hurt to say. "That you loved him?"

"Well," James said slowly. "I didn't know, for a little while. And then—I just knew. All at once. Are you sure you want to hear this, Anne?"

*Absolutely not.* And yet something inside Anne pushed her forward. "I asked, didn't I?"

"We were having dinner at Spago, about six, seven weeks after I met him. The conversation turned to dream trips. Bucket list items. You know."

James had always hated vacations. They'd taken him away from his work. "Go on."

"Arthur said he was planning to spend a few weeks in Europe later that year. Hole away in some renovated chateau in France, do nothing but go for long walks, drink wine, eat cheese, watch the stars. And I thought, *We could do that together.* Then I thought, *I can't not do that with him. I can't be apart from him. I have to be with him.* And then I thought, *I can't live without him.* Simple as that."

"Simple," Anne echoed. Her heart knocked painfully against her ribs. "How could it be simple?"

James shrugged. A gentle smile opened his face and made it look so much younger than his sixty-five years. "With Arthur, everything's simple."

Once he'd gone outside, Anne stood there, unable to move. She watched James through the doors while he put a hand on his husband's shoulder, leaning in as though he couldn't bear another minute away.

On the other side of the deck, Sadie laughed so loudly that Anne could feel it hum through her body.

"I need another drink," she said to nobody and then went to open the rosé. It was a party, after all, so she wouldn't store the bottle in the pantry, next to the crate of wine hidden inside a back cabinet. Hidden for no reason at all, really, except that, for some reason, Anne didn't want Sadie to see it.



A good hostess always sat apart from her spouse at dinner.

Of course, Anne hadn't had a spouse in nearly five years, but as her co-organizer, Sadie *was* a little like a spouse, at least when it came to dining-party etiquette. So Anne sat at one end of the long dining table and Sadie sat at the other, each responsible for ensuring the guests nearest to them had a nice time.

Because it was impolite to cluster family together, Claire and Arthur were at Sadie's end while Anne had Sadie's son and daughter-in-law on either side of her with Brooke, Brooke's husband Dan, and James in the middle. *Seat me across from Dan, I'll take the bullet*, James had texted Anne that morning—probably the best birthday gift he could give her.

Honestly, Anne found Sadie's family easier to relax around than her own. Hal was a pretty remarkable kid, only a couple years out of business school and already an internal auditor for Disney. His wife, Talisha, a lawyer, had the kind of sharp intelligence behind her eyes that was obvious to anyone who knew how to look.

As much as Sadie loved Hal, she hated the professional choices he'd made.

"For God's sake, Sadie, he's an *accountant*," Anne had told her once. "Successful, kind, smart. He worships you. He's never given you a second's worth of trouble. I don't understand how you could be even the slightest bit disappointed by him."

"He's an accountant for *Disney*." Like it was a crime. "That brilliant brain, that gorgeous heart, and he throws away those gifts on generating more profit for one of the world's richest corporations. I used to hope he'd show interest in rabbinical school, I told him repeatedly we need more Black Jews on the bimah, but—oh, Talisha—now *there's* someone who's giving back to the world. An environmental rights lawyer! Thank God he married her. Maybe she'll rub off on him."

They'd rubbed off on each other, apparently. Talisha was five months along and glowing, her dark skin rich beneath the lights that illuminated the dining table.

"Have you two discussed names yet?" Anne took a delicate bite of her salmon sashimi. She'd had Nobu include a separate order of lamb rosemary miso for Talisha, who couldn't eat raw fish at the moment. A good hostess always made sure her guests' dietary restrictions were seamlessly addressed.

"Right now, *Elijah* and *Ayana* are the front-runners." Hal grinned. "Although Mom is pushing hard for *Sonnet* or *Barnabas*. I told her we'd take them under consideration."

"We will absolutely *not* take them under consideration," Talisha cut in. "Baby, you know how I feel"—a quick glance at the end of the table,

where Sadie sat engrossed in conversation—"about your mom's name preferences."

Hal's full name was Halston Du Bois Abraham Rosenthal-Clark. His mother had named her only child after her favorite fashion designer, her favorite intellectual, and her favorite grandfather, using the same madcap principle with which she decorated and dressed: assembling from a rich bag of treasures. Apparently, as a child, it had taken Hal years to learn how to spell the entire thing.

"With all due respect to Hal," Anne said, "I agree strongly."

The corner of Talisha's mouth quirked.

"I like Sonnet!" Hal protested. "And Barnabas isn't the worst name I've ever heard. Anyway, I don't think it's terrible to let her think she's helping. It makes Mom happy to feel like she's participating in the whole thing."

"'The whole thing,' meaning the fetus inside *my* body," Talisha said wryly.

As important as Sadie was to Anne, she could readily admit that Sadie wasn't exactly an ideal mother-in-law. "I'll get her to back off."

Talisha sighed. "Good luck. Anyway, she's stopped bringing it up in the last couple weeks. I guess she's had other things on her mind lately. You know, that job."

A few days earlier, Sadie had reacted so strangely when Anne mentioned UCLA. Maybe Talisha and Hal knew more. "What about Sadie's job?"

"The one she might take at Barnard College," Hal said. "In New York?"

Every molecule of Anne's skin seemed to tighten instantly. Her vision tunneled rapidly, blackening at the edges until all she could see was the oval of Hal's unperturbed face.

"New York," she repeated. The syllables felt thick and clumsy in her mouth. Oh God, hadn't Sadie said something vague a few days ago about an upcoming trip to Manhattan? For the few seconds Anne had thought about it, she'd assumed Sadie was visiting her brother. "Barnard? Barnard. In—New York City?"

"Oh shit." Hal glanced at Talisha. "Mom hasn't told you yet? Shit. I'm sorry."

"We don't really know how it all works," Talisha added, looking a little embarrassed, "but Sadie told us yesterday that they reached out—something about a failed search—and asked her to apply. Invited her for a *pro forma* campus interview. Apparently they want..."

Anne couldn't look at Talisha, couldn't move. Talisha's voice began to jumble in Anne's ears, words tumbling over themselves until they detached from meaning and became pure noise. New York. Sadie had applied to a job in New York. Sadie was going to interview in New York. Sadie might move to New York.

Sadie might leave her.

"Is she planning to accept?" Anne's voice cracked on the only question that mattered. "Does she want to take the job?"

Talisha set her fork down on her plate. "I don't think she knows what she wants to do yet. The campus visit isn't for a couple of weeks anyway."

That sent a few more pumps of oxygen back into Anne's lungs. But it wasn't a reprieve, just a possible stay of execution. "What about—" *Me. What about me?* "You two? The baby? She wouldn't leave California right before the birth of her first grandchild?"

"Apparently, it's a really big deal," Hal said quietly. "An endowed position at a prestigious liberal arts college, which means a lot more money and a lot more time to write than she has now. I really don't—Anne, you should talk to her yourself. I just assumed she'd folded you in on this. I mean, you're Mom's best friend. This impacts you, too, obviously."

Obviously.

The strangest thing was beginning to happen. Anne, motionless in her chair, could feel the room slipping away, as if the furniture beneath and around her had become runny paint.

Sadie sat across the table from Anne, at the far end, but Anne couldn't look in her direction.

"I'll talk to her," she managed.

The rest of the dinner passed in a blur. Someone else spoke through Anne's mouth, someone who wasn't Anne. Through her haze of shock, Anne could feel a small pinch of gratitude for this calm voice that took over.

Plates were cleared—by whom, Anne didn't see. The lights were dimmed—by whom, Anne didn't know. And when a cake with blazing candles was set down in front of her and the room filled with singing, Anne forced her mouth to lift in a counterfeit smile.

On her shoulders, she felt the hands of the person who'd set down the cake in front of her. Sadie's hands. Warm, strong. They were ink-stained, Anne knew. Sadie had tried as hard as she could to scrub them before the party, but the marks wouldn't come off. They never came off.

When the singing stopped, Anne let her lungs fill with air, then extinguished the candles. Soft clapping rose around her. For a dazed moment, Anne wondered why anyone would ever want to applaud when the light had just gone out.

Sadie squeezed her shoulders. *I'm here, that squeeze* said.

When she was a girl, maybe eight or nine and in unrequited love with the future, Anne, always hovering during her mother's nightly cold cream ritual, had received permission to look through the jewelry case on the dressing table. "One piece, five minutes, then put it back," Mother had said, not looking, and Anne had traced the edges of her favorite brooch, a cluster of Tahitian pearls nearly the size of her small palm. Tried to memorize the feeling of it in her hand, its contours, the quiet pleasure of guarding something this precious. Tried not to think: *Just three more minutes left before I have to give this back. Two more minutes. One.*

To continue reading,  
please purchase

# The Second Draft

by Carrie Byrd

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.  
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.  
Ylva Publishing | [www.ylva-publishing.com](http://www.ylva-publishing.com)