

CHAPTER ONE

CLAY

The sun disappeared, leaving murky twilight and thunderheads piled over the Smokies. Lightning charged the sky in jagged lines. Fat drops spattered the windshield. Thunder rattled the air like a personal assault. I pummeled the dashboard with my fist. The Hummer closed in fast behind me. Headlights blinding.

“Bullshit,” I roared.

Despite the tailgater, the storm, and the mountain, I popped open the glove box, palmed a pint of corn liquor. Twisted the cap off with my teeth. It burned going down. The truck climbed an incline, the roadside fell away to the right. Scrubby trees and boulders clung to the edge. Felt like I was driving into hell. Maybe I was. The Hummer pulled closer. Closer. Then made a move to pass where the road narrowed. That’s when I knew I had watchers.

Damn. Rory didn’t see them in time. Otherwise, his butt would be on the seat beside me.

I swerved to the middle. The SUV fell back, laid on its horn. I took another belt from the bottle, propped it between my knees, lowered the window, and extended a middle finger into the rain. Wet to my shoulder, I raised the window, grinning like a maniac.

The SUV edged closer, almost on top of my trailer now. We started around a steep switchback. I gunned the truck forward, tires squealing. The Hummer fell away so I

could put some distance between us. As I sped around the next curve, I spied an opening in the trees to my left. I cut my lights, spun the wheel hard, and skidded onto a gravel road before the Hummer made the bend. The watchers passed by.

Heart racing, I sat in the dark truck, nestled among tall pines, and smelled my own panic. Jesus H. Christ. I made an effort to slow my breathing, wiped my brow, then switched the headlights back on. Half a mile further down the road, I found a deserted trailhead parking lot. Mindful of the flatbed trailer I towed, I backed into a space behind a National Park sign, posted with hiking maps and faded pictures of bear and deer. Loaded shotgun beside me, I watched lightning flicker through the trees. Tuned the radio to classic country. Patsy, Waylon, and the Man in Black sang me through the bottle.

When the storm had played itself out, I climbed out of the truck. The world spun as nausea cramped my guts. I propped my palms against the slick wet hood to keep from keeling over. Beyond the sound of my own wretched breathing played a different song: the breeze in the trees, crickets, owls screeching. The full moon's lonely reflection broke into a thousand pieces on my windshield. I stumbled a few steps away from the truck to relieve myself. Drunk and tired and blue as I'd ever been, I bedded down in the cab.

North Carolina. Kentucky. Illinois. Iowa. Mountains flowed into rolling hills, flattened into plains of soybeans, and oceans of corn. I kept an eye on my rear view all day. The watchers weren't behind me. Slept at a cheap hotel in eastern Iowa. Next morning, I took a shower, shaved, and changed my clothes.

Following GPS directions, I drove to the address in Iowa City, a few miles off I-80 and landed in an historic neighborhood perched on the bluff. My pickup blended with other work trucks, contractors, and landscapers busy with summer maintenance on grand old homes. I parked just down the block from a large, two-story Victorian with green siding and a sagging porch. Boxes at the windows were crowded with thirsty petunias, their faces withered and dusty.

I became the watcher.

Tall and thin, with high cheekbones, and long, dark curls, she wore black and gray, a T-shirt and flowing skirt. I watched as she went about her day, in and out with groceries or mail, supervising the play of two little girls.

They rode bikes with wicker baskets, or dug in neglected flowerbeds. When the woman adjusted the strap of a bicycle helmet, tied the errant lace of a shoe, or ran her hand over smooth shining hair, she offered distracted smiles, and then settled on the porch step, chin in hand. She never seemed to notice me. The smaller girl waved to me once. It nearly stopped my heart.

I wanted to introduce myself. But how could I? What did I have to offer? I meant her no harm, but how could she know that? So I watched. And maybe I would have stayed there all summer, parked at the curb during the day, in a campground at night. Maybe I would have found the courage to say hello. I don't know, because the third day brought something unexpected: a woman in an older-model Chevy. Small and blond, in sneakers and workout clothes, she unloaded a vacuum and a tub of supplies from her car. She rang the bell, then opened the door with a key, and hauled her gear inside. A while later, she reversed the process and pulled out of the drive. It was Friday afternoon.

CHAPTER TWO

EVERYTHING

Lila

When you pick up clutter and take out the trash, you learn things about people. What they keep or what they toss says a lot. Juicer box in the recycle bin, kale and spinach bundles in the fridge? Somebody's cleansing. Spare rooms stacked with unopened QVC packages? A binge shopper, maybe a borderline hoarder. And then there's other stuff: DUI summons, triple X DVDs, male enhancement pumps tucked under the sink. It's hard to hide anything from me.

I know when kids start experimenting with cigarettes or sex. I can tell if somebody gets sick or if the lady of the house is going through the change. In ways you might expect, like hormone pills showing up on the bedside table. And, in ways you might not. Couples sleeping apart when it's too hot to sleep together. I know which bed she used. The sheets and pillows are soaked through.

Every now and then, I can tell when the husband's having an affair or going to strip clubs. A crumpled receipt falls behind the trashcan. Rogaine in the bathroom when he's been bald for years. It seems to me that husbands often do their cheating out of town—though not always. It's easier to tell if a wife's been cheating since she usually does it at home. She'll have me tidy up after. There might be a different color hair on the sheets or the shower, or a foil wrapper in the garbage that doesn't belong. You notice these things when it's your job to clean.

But I don't judge folks. They're people blundering through, doing their best to find happiness. They don't always make the right choices, but who does? I'm honored to share the details of their lives. They trust when I come into their homes, I'll do my best to clean them, and keep their business to myself. I steer clear of my client's private troubles. Or I did, until I met Clay.

The Friday I first saw him, my hands ached from scrubbing Joanna Sinclair's big Victorian. Soon as I finished, I loaded my Chevy with cleaning supplies, relieved to head off before Joanna returned home. She could be awful persnickety. But that's not the only reason I rushed. I had other things on my mind. Which is too bad, really. Had I been less distracted, I might have noticed a particular truck parked nearby. Spared us all some grief. Instead, I sped away from the neighborhood of historic homes, past summer green corn fields, eager for something to drink.

Twenty minutes later, I parked on Main and eased out of my car. I half opened the door of the pub, and stood for a minute, letting my eyes adjust.

Big John's was the finest drinking establishment in all of Trotter, Iowa. Which is to say, it's the less dingy of two. People needed a place to cut loose. Long winters, the price of soybeans, dangerous farm work. It's not for the ball-less, unless you're a woman. Then it's best to have cleavage, the plentiful kind that keeps you warm.

I peeled the damp tank top away from my not-too-shabby chest and bent to catch a breeze from a box fan on the floor. Cracked vinyl booths lined one side of the room, an old-timey bar stretched along the other. The pool table sat smack in the middle and two pinball machines held down the back corner.

Only a handful of folks were there, getting a head start on the weekend. The local veterinarian I cleaned for twice a month. One-Eyed-Bill, by all appearances happy to live in filth. And a couple of farmers in John Deere ball caps. Plus me. Fridays, since Robbie left, this is where I'd end up. Sometimes with a friend, often on my own. I usually could find somebody to talk to.

Cleaning houses is quiet work. Most of the time, my clients left before I showed up, except for the older folks who'd lost their spouses. Their loneliness ate a hole in me. One plate in the sink, half the closet empty. That's why they'd ask for me to come by while they were home. Just so they could talk. I did more than clean for them. I gave them a reason to keep breathing. Nothing's harder than being lonesome. I'd had to find ways to keep breathing, too.

Big John stood behind the bar, thumbing through a newspaper. He glanced up. "Hi-ya Lila." Grabbed a glass and worked the tap. Winking ladies and gap-eyed skull tattoos circled his forearms. The hard tub of his belly pressed against the counter as he set a beer in front of me.

“TGIF to ya,” he said. “All done for the week?”

“Just about. I’ve got the barber shop tomorrow morning.” I took a drink, letting the cool coat my throat before I licked foam from my lips. “How’s business?”

“Same shit, different day.” John’s never been long-winded.

Bubbles tickled my nose while I sipped, drowning the scent of deep-fried pickles and hot wings that hovered in the tavern air. I set the pint on a napkin and watched water bead down the glass. I pictured how Robbie used to clink his Kool-Aid or milk or juice against my drink, and grin. Cute dimples, spaces between his teeth.

Five years of Fridays. Five years since I’d seen my boy. In a couple of weeks, he’d be twenty-one. It was hard to imagine him grown. What would it be like to buy him a beer? Laugh while he got tipsy?

Mostly, when I thought of Robbie, I remembered him as a small boy. The sweet dry smell of his hair, the huge laugh that burst out of him at the oddest moments, like when I plopped him into the tub. Sometimes, in nice weather, we’d blow bubbles on the porch. Robbie would dip the wand in the container, load it up with a liquid rainbow, and bring it to his lips. But he didn’t have to blow. The prairie wind would do the work, swirling bubbles across the fields. They became shining specks in the distance, and before you could wish them back, they’d be gone.

I didn’t notice the stranger who parked himself three stools down, at first, until John took his order. In the lukewarm bar light, he had the look of a construction worker. Threadbare jeans, dusty work boots. All bones and stretched sinew. His gaze stumbled on mine and hung there a little too long.

Despite myself, I felt a tug.

John brought him a pint, and he turned it in his hands a few times, making smeary rivers in the frost. That's when I saw his fingers were covered in scars. Burn scars is what I thought. Purple and newish and odd in shape; not like cigarette burns, which I knew a thing or two about.

Curiosity caused me to ease off my stool. The fan on the floor hummed—the AC at Big John's had been busted for over a month. That was okay. The way I saw it, the heat covered the flush that crept up my cheeks when I slid my beer down the bar and propped myself next to the new guy.

He flicked his eyes in my direction and I almost lost my nerve. But then he smiled in a crooked way, like a glimpse of moon on a stormy night, and I said the first thing that popped into my head. “You're a new face. What's your story?”

The man looked me over. I knew what he saw, a woman knocking on the door of menopause, but cute enough. I had blue eyes my grandma called snappy, a crop dusting of freckles over my nose, and sunny blond hair I kept that way with the help of my friend Cheryl. She ran a beautician/pest control service, called Lady Bugs. She came out to the house every couple of months, did my hair, and sprayed for ants.

“Well now, I could tell you, sweetheart,” the man said, in a voice like slow-pour molasses. “But then I'd have to kill you.” And he winked.

I shivered a little, from the wink or the cold beer, I'm not sure which, but I didn't let on. Instead, I squared my shoulders. “That doesn't impress me. I carry pepper spray. Besides, I can keep a secret. What are you, some kind of spy out here in the Iowa countryside?”

“Sorry honey, as much as I’d like to, I just can’t answer that. If I did, I’d have to, you know . . .”

“Kill me?”

“I’d hate to do that. You seem like a nice woman.”

“I’m not that nice. Ask John.”

John nodded. “It’s true. She carries that spray and she ain’t afraid to use it.”

The stranger raised salt and pepper eyebrows. “What do you need that for?”

“To put down stray dogs,” I said. “Anything else you want to know?”

He peered at me over wire-rimmed glasses, duct-taped on one side. “Everything.”

“Is that all?”

“Just about.”

“It’s a lot of ground to cover,” I said.

“I’ll give you five minutes.”

“Huh. You’re one of those types. Want to get right to it.”

“Why waste time?” He grinned and creases gathered beside his eyes. They were like cat eyes or pirate eyes: gold as rum with a hint of crazy. For a moment, he took my breath.

“Let’s get a table,” I said.

The man followed me to a booth past a couple of farmers I knew, who waved in my direction. I scooted across the seat on one side and he tucked long legs in the other. Hank Williams twanged from the jukebox. On the table, a flickering candle in an empty bottle of Bud lent a certain ambience. Romantic, you might say.

“I can’t tell my life story to a stranger,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Clay Carpenter.”

“Nice to meet you Clay. I’m Lila Dillon.” I tapped my beer against his. “To new friends.”

A curious expression came over his face, sort of sad. Which made me think of Robbie and where he might be. But I smacked a friendly smile on anyhow. The man in front of me drank. His throat bobbed fetchingly, and it started a mini fire in my belly.

Big John’s wife, Karen, emerged from batwing doors that separated the kitchen from the bar. She headed in our direction. Karen had a moon white face and wore a peasant dress that stopped just short of the floor, showing off ankles that were thick as rolled down socks and wide feet jammed in flip flops. Her hair was her glory. Curly and fire red, it went halfway to her knees. Whenever she walked within arm’s distance of John, he’d grab it and wrap it around his fist. It made my chest hurt sometimes, to see how much he still loved her. I’d pretty much given up on that kind of commitment.

When she got to our table, Karen batted pale eyelashes at Clay. “Well hello there, sugar. What can I get you?”

I needed some grease to settle my stomach. Before Clay had time to answer, I blurted, “Want to share some cheese fries?”

“Sure.”

Karen tapped her pen on the order pad. “You want chili on them fries or some chopped up onions? I know how you love raw onions, Lila.” She smiled sweetly.

It was true, I liked raw onions, but I didn’t want them just then. “No thanks.”

“What about you, fella? Anything else I can get you? Maybe a nice juicy burger or some extra spicy wings?” She tossed her hair.

Clay shook his head.

“Well, let me know if there’s anything else you need.” She put her hand on Clay’s shoulder for a moment and then sashayed into the kitchen. His eyebrows arched. Karen’s a married woman, devoted to John, but she’s still a shameless flirt.

“Don’t pay her any mind,” I said. “She likes to mess with me.”

“You come here a lot?”

“Every Friday after work.”

Clay cleared his throat. “What kind of work do you do?”

“I clean houses for a living.”

“That must be interesting.”

I leaned forward. “Most people think it’s boring, but it’s not. I see some crazy shit.”

“Like what?”

I thought for a second. “Well, for instance, there’s this one client that loves animals. She has three cats and two dogs and half a dozen ferrets.”

“That’s a lot of pets.”

“It is, and let me tell you, ferrets stink. But she’s very particular on how I clean. Even with all those animals shedding fur all over the place, she’s a clean freak. The weirdest thing of all is she keeps a little green garter snake wrapped in her hair.”

“You’re kidding me!”

“I wish. The first time I saw it, I about peed myself. I snatched it off her head, threw it on the floor, and started to stomp its guts in when she screamed for me to stop.

She said its name was Sunshine. I don't understand having a snake for a pet. Where I'm from, if there's a snake in your house, you kill it."

"Snakes belong outside, that's for sure," Clay said.

"You ever have a snake in your house?" I took a sip.

"A few times."

"What'd you do?"

"Depends. A king snake I'd pick up with the end of my shotgun and toss it in the woods. A rattler I'd take my machete and cut in half. Either way, I damn sure didn't put it under my hat."

"Amen to that." I brought my glass up and knocked it against his.

We both took a long swallow and he asked, "You ever get worried, working in a stranger's house?"

"Not really. It takes a lot to spook me. I've been through some stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Oh, family stuff, ex-husband stuff. You don't want to hear about it."

"Sure I do," he said.

"You don't."

"I do."

I cocked my head, suspicious. It's not often a man wants to listen to a woman talk. But his eyes looked sincere, and sort of hypnotizing, so I thought why the hell not? The beer fizzed in my mouth and loosened my lips. I started talking and didn't quit for a while. I told him about my ex-husband, James; I told him about Robbie. After a second beer, I mentioned the couple I cleaned for in Iowa City that afternoon. Clay asked a few

questions and I kept going. Karen brought cheese fries and two fresh beers and batted her lashes some more, but Clay's gaze never left my face. Honestly, I don't know what got into me. I don't usually go on like that. When I stopped, he leaned over and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. I felt it all the way to my toes.

I reached in my purse and put cash on the table. "You ready then?"

"For what?" he asked.

"Everything."