

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday, July 9, 10:30 a.m.

Cathy and Roxanne

It was sunny and mild the July morning Roxanne and I headed up the state highway into the Verdugo Hills. But the Santa Anas were blowing in from the desert, and those aptly called *devil winds* rocked our car with gusts of heat and dust that caused tiny sparks of electricity to snap against my fingertips every time I touched my hair.

I looked forward to the Santa Anas each summer because they cleared every trace of smog from the vast L.A. basin and left the air sparkling. But that day they were weeks early and their intensity increased a sense of foreboding I'd awakened with.

I squeezed my hands together and glanced at the woman sitting next to me, for she was the true reason for my uneasiness.

My best friend and I should have been relaxed and chatty, but we hadn't been either lately. There was tension between us. She was distracted and distressed by calamity in her personal life and I felt at a loss to help.

Roxanne had recently broken up with the guy she'd been seeing for years, and her mood alarmed me. She had barely said a word at the front door when she picked me up, and nothing at all since we'd been in the car.

Slowly I turned my head from side to side, trying to ease the knot of anxiety in my neck. I reached up to massage my shoulder but the seatbelt held me snugly, so I undid it. The lock made a sharp click as it released.

"What's wrong?" Roxanne asked.

"Nothing." I spoke quietly. "Just a kink. I must have slept weird."

She snorted and shifted gears and the road rose higher in front of us.

I noticed then that she wasn't wearing lipstick. Roxanne always wore lipstick, a shade called *Dangerous When Red*. For her to have left the house without makeup of any kind was one more sign she wasn't in a good place. Though even without it, Roxanne was gorgeous.

I stared out the windshield and thought about how wrong the cliché was that drop-dead beauty guaranteed happiness. If it did, Roxanne would have been delirious from birth. She was so stunning that people stared at her wherever she went. Men and women and kids. Even animals liked her.

Wasp-waisted but voluptuously curvy, she had dark hair and chocolate brown eyes and possessed a laugh described in our high

school yearbook as 'midnight sexy with whipped cream on top.' While that teenage compliment was hormone-fueled and extravagant, I had actually seen men stop in their tracks when they heard her laugh, noses in the air like bloodhounds intent on tracking her down.

I joked once that the only body parts of mine that were better looking than hers were my hands and feet. Roxanne laughed and gave me a hug, but we both knew it was true.

Our physical inequality could have made me envy or resent Roxanne, but I didn't. I'd loved her since she befriended me in seventh grade, and had never regretted it. Yes, she was ridiculously good looking, but she was also the most loyal friend a girl ever had.

I wondered if I should just ask her what I could do to help. Roxanne seemed oblivious to everything but what was going on inside her head. Whatever that was.

"What time is it?" she asked suddenly.

I glanced at my watch. "Ten-thirty. What time is your appointment?"

"Now."

"We'll be there in five minutes. Seth will wait."

She gripped the steering wheel tighter. "Hell with it. I'd rather go shopping this morning. It will do me more good than sitting in a doctor's office." Roxanne hit the brakes and steered toward the edge of the road.

"Wait a minute," I replied. "What are you doing?"

She brought the car to a full stop. "Can you dig out my cell and call Seth? Tell him I have to reschedule. His number is in my contacts."

"For heaven's sake, Roxanne! We're almost there. You can't cancel now."

"Yes, I can. I don't need to see him anyway. It won't help."

"You don't know that. And Seth will charge you for canceling. And you'll have to wait a month to get another appointment." I crossed my arms. "And by the way, I changed my plans with Nick because you asked me to come all the way out here with you today. Remember?"

"I know. You and hubby and 'date-day Saturday.'" She grabbed her sunglasses from the visor and stuck them on. "Sorry, but you'll have tonight, like you have every night with Nick. But today I get to buy you lunch. And some new jeans." She looked down at my legs. "What are you wearing anyway, Wranglers?"

"I love these jeans."

"Why?"

"What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing if you're forty and the mother of two." She craned her neck to see behind us and turned the steering wheel hard.

I clutched my stomach and felt a small bulge under my tee shirt. I wasn't fat, but my jeans were too tight, though that wasn't the reason Roxanne had commented on them.

"Okay, my jeans are kind of frumpy. But you're trying to change the subject, which is that you've been a wreck for weeks. Don't you think it's time to get serious and get help for what's bugging you?" I put my hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged it off.

"Come on, Rox. You're suffering, but you always say Seth helps when you're feeling depressed. So go see him."

The car idled rough and another wave of devil winds rattled the windows.

Rox turned to me. "I'm not depressed, Cathy, I'm broken-hearted. Which is a normal way to feel considering I've lost the only man I ever really loved, isn't it?"

I lowered my voice. "No one thinks you're not normal."

"Then I don't need to see a shrink, do I?"

"I don't know what you need." I pointed toward the road. "But Dr. Seth might. He's that way. Let's go."

Rox sighed, but straightened out the wheel and stepped on the gas. The car fishtailed in the gravel along the road before jumping back up to speed.

"So you do think I need a shrink?" Her voice was flat.

"Seth isn't a shrink." He wasn't. He was a psychologist who used a holistic approach with his patients. Meditation. Exercise. Therapy for the mind, body, and soul.

"Okay, but all he wants to do is talk. I'm sick of myself. Too sick of myself to rehash everything I feel bad about."

"Then let him talk. He likes to talk. That's been my experience."

She stared straight ahead. "There's really no point. I know what's wrong. I want Michael. I want to get married and live happily ever after. Like you. I can't see how Seth can help with this, unless he knows someone who will pull a gun on Michael and order him to marry me or die."

This remark upped my nervousness. Roxanne's humor was usually wry, not morbid. "Well, if marriage is what you want, then you should consider changing your taste in men."

"My taste in men is fine. Michael is perfect for me; it's just that I'm not enough for him. If I were, he would have asked me to marry him by now." A sob caught in her throat. "I don't seem to be enough for any man."

"Come on, that's bull, and you know it. Before Michael, three different men asked you to marry them."

"None of them were Michael."

"No, they weren't. But hasn't Michael always said he didn't want to get married? Didn't you tell me Seth said you're picking the wrong man, out of the hundreds willing to date you, to punish yourself for something? You need to work with Seth and find out why you keep doing that."

"Oh, screw Seth! I'm sick of shrinks. My mom. Him. All five of them before Seth. Everybody has problems, I know. I just want the normal ones. The ones normal people solve. I could handle those. It's all these other flaws I have that get me down."

A warning flickered in my brain. For all her physical beauty, Roxanne was self-conscious about being treated for mental illness early in her life. She'd been diagnosed as bi-polar before she was a teenager.

I wondered if Roxanne had gone off her medications. If so, the situation was serious. Roxanne had attempted to commit suicide twice in the past sixteen years. Both times after she'd stopped taking her antidepressants.

I rubbed my palms against my knees. "Look, don't get mad at me for asking, Rox, but have you been taking your meds?"

She snapped on the radio and filled the air with the Rolling Stones, who were in the midst of reminding us that we can't always get what we want.

I turned the music off. "Come on, talk to me, okay?"

Roxanne turned it back on and upped the volume.

I should have reacted with the anger I felt, but I didn't, because Roxanne was crying. And Roxanne rarely cries. I could count on one hand the times she's cried in my presence since we've been friends. Instead, I pinched the back of my hand to stay calm.

Seth was a few minutes away. All I had to do was get her there and hopefully he could stop this meltdown before it happened.

Ahead of us the road narrowed. "Don't judge all men by Michael," I yelled over Jagger. "That guy's an asshole."

He was. My mind flashed on one particularly uncomfortable 'Michael' memory. He hit on me at last year's New Year's Eve party. Nick was sleeping like a baby under the dining room table, and Roxanne was drunk, dancing like a madwoman outside on the patio with our friend, Bradley.

Michael walked up behind me and whispered, "Happy New Year's, Cathy." When I turned he kissed me on the lips, open-mouthed, his hands on my ass before I could register an objection. The image of a quick, hard toss in the bedroom we were

standing next to had roiled through my mind like a shot of tequila, which I'd had way, way too much of.

For a second I had considered Michael on me. *In me*. I felt a physical jolt of lust as surprising as it was real. Then the party sounds shifted back into my brain, reminding me of who I was.

I put my hands against his chest and pushed. "Michael, don't be an asshole."

"You're begging for it, babe." He took my hand and pressed it on the bulge in his jeans. "Give me twenty minutes in the dark and you'll be a new woman." He pulled me into the bedroom and shut the door behind us.

"You're crazy!" I reached around to grab the doorknob but he held the door closed. "Michael, get out of my way. Roxanne's right outside, for Christ's sake."

"So?"

"So open the door."

"Is that the only reason, Cathy? Because you're friends with Roxanne?"

"You're insane. And I'm very married. Remember?" I waved my left hand, my tiny diamond glittering. "You know Nick and I don't play around."

"I don't know that." He kissed me again.

I slapped his face.

He didn't seem to feel it. "Tell yourself the truth at least. You want me and you know it." He grinned and walked out.

Now, I yelled, "Michael *really* is an asshole." I heard more disgust than anger in my voice.

"Okay. Don't rub it in." Roxanne snapped off the music.

"I'm not. I'm just trying to get through to you."

"Yes, you are rubbing it in. You always compare how Michael treats me to how Nick treats you."

"If I do, it's only to remind you that you don't have to settle for someone who cheats."

My words were tactless, but I didn't care. Michael had cheated on her for years. "Nick doesn't lie to me. I trust him, which is the most important part of a relationship. We don't have a perfect marriage, and you know that as well as anyone, but we get stronger together every day because we're true to each other. You deserve that kind of relationship, Rox. You deserve to be happy."

"No I don't." Roxanne cried harder.

When she cries she isn't beautiful. She looks like a sick kid, all swollen and blotchy. I put my hand on her arm and squeezed. "Come on now, don't cry. He's not worth it."

She sobbed louder and made the last turn toward Seth's office, veering onto Arroyo Crest.

"You'll feel better if you work through this with Seth," I continued. "You'll get your confidence back and enjoy the rest of the summer. Why don't you come stay at the house for a few days again, like you did last November? We'll watch *That Seventies Show*. Or *I Dream of Jeannie*. 'Nic at Night,' here we come."

"My life is more like *Night of the Living Dead*. Maybe someone needs to shoot me in the head and put me out of my misery." She didn't sound as if she was joking.

"Since when are you watching crap like that?"

"I love horror. Always have."

"You do not. You like American classics. *Casablanca*. *The Thin Man*. You've watched those twenty times with me."

"Tastes change. You don't know everything about me, Cathy."

"Really? Well, whatever you want to watch, I'm game. We'll sit on the sofa all night and be scared silly and Nick can make us blueberry waffles for dinner."

"I hate waffles."

"That I know is a lie. You love waffles. Last time you stayed at my place, you and Nick were up in the middle of the night eating them cold. Remember?"

Roxanne made a strangling sound.

I lifted my hand to pat her arm again but stopped midair when I noticed the speedometer. It registered 66 mph. In a 25 mph zone.

I pointed to the dashboard. "Hey, slow down. Even you won't be able to talk yourself out of a ticket going this fast."

"I'm the one driving the car," Roxanne yelled. "And why would you care if I got a ticket? Because it would take time out of your weekend? Do you actually care about *me* at all anymore? All you talk about is Nick, Nick, Nick. Who is so perfect? Who you spend *all* your spare time with. Don't pretend to care about me or my problems when you don't."

Her words cut deeply. While I hadn't made as much time for her as I used to, she was still a huge part of my life.

But maybe there had been too much talk about Nick. I suddenly felt terrible, realizing how smug I must seem. "Rox, I don't pretend anything with you. I never have. You're my dearest friend, and you know that. Haven't you always said we're as close as secret sisters? Nothing's changed."

"I say a lot of things. And so do you. Just stop lecturing me, Cathy. And don't think you know everything. You don't. Not about men. Not about me."

"I never said I know everything."

"You act like you do!"

I sighed and crossed my arms. Somehow my caring about her was turning into a discussion of how I was letting her down. We said nothing for a few moments.

Roxanne wiped at her eyes and sniffled, then poked my arm. "New topic. So, do you like this blouse? It's new. Thirty percent off at Nordstrom's." There was regret in her voice.

The top was red-and-white striped silk, with a simple ruffle at the neckline. She looked like Jennifer Lopez's prettier, younger sister.

"It's gorgeous. Like you. How does that feel, anyway? Being more beautiful than any other woman in the room?"

Roxanne's voice was edgy with bitterness. "Trust me, dear friend, it's not often fun to be me, no matter how I look."

"I wish I were you, Lupeyloo," I said softly.

Roxanne tilted her chin up, surprised by my words, and I caught the shadow of a smile.

This dumb little verse was a line from a school play we'd both seen in middle school, a story about nerdy twelve-year-olds who always want to be someone else. In the script, someone got leukemia or a flesh-eating disease or something, and the kids realize they were special just as they were. The play was hokey, but both of us had remembered the line to great laughter in high school. And we'd said it to one another a hundred times over the years.

Mostly me to her.

Rox tossed her sunglasses into the backseat. "I can't remember the last time you said that to me, Cathy. You wouldn't really want to be me for a second. Would you?"

"I always want to be you. Look at you. Angelina Jolie would want to be you if she was sitting here."

"Don't lie. You never judge people by how they look, but how they treat other people. So fair and kind." Her voice was dreamy, but not particularly happy. "That's why everyone loves you. That's why Nick loves you. Why he's there to watch over you. Believe me, Cathy, it's me who would love to be you. I really would."

I had never heard such yearning in her voice. "You'll find the *right* man someday, Rox." *A man like Nick.* I kept that thought to myself.

"If I can't have Michael, I'm done with men. All men."

"Don't be crazy." Which was a dumb thing to say. I bit my lip.

"I wish I were you, Lupeyloo." Roxanne laughed then, but it sounded more like a gasp, or a cry.

I turned my eyes back to the road, thinking I should offer to come in with her to talk to Dr. Seth today, if Rox wanted me

to. Maybe that would help. We'd done this in the past, given the doc an inside and outside view of Roxanne's aching heart. I opened my mouth to suggest it, but didn't get the words out.

Because that's when I saw the truck.

It was coming directly at us, forty yards ahead. Way, way too close. It veered to the middle of the road, as if the driver didn't see us.

I inhaled to scream and grabbed Roxanne's arm, remembering only then that my seatbelt was unfastened.

Roxanne cried out, "Oh my God!"

I thought, *Nick . . .*

She didn't swerve or brake and the truck struck us head-on. The noise of the impact was crueler than I ever imagined a sound could be. The windshield split with the sound of ten tons of ice falling on pavement, the horn blared, the airbags burst with an explosion that burned my eyes and smacked me as senseless as my stepfather did the time he broke my cheekbone.

I smelled gasoline and rubber and hot steel.

The car skidded and flipped sideways and slammed into the granite mountain beside the road. I was thrown through jagged glass and pain poured over me like napalm.

My arm was wrenched behind me as the asphalt flayed skin and meat off my body and I skidded like a human Dunlop, finally cracking my forehead against a curb. As I lay there, a dizzy, faraway feeling like I remembered from the dentist's office enveloped me.

My ears bled and my teeth were in pieces. I couldn't swallow. Or breathe. I sank into blackness, one hundred, ninety-nine . . .

And I floated upward. Below me, the blue Chevy lay on its side. I saw my body on the ground nearby, sprawled and unmoving.

My arm—*my arm?*—rested several yards away in a flood of red running down the middle of the street.

Suddenly, a dark-haired woman grasped my shirt and pulled me closer to the sky. *Don't look down.* She didn't speak aloud but I heard her anyway.

Higher I rose, into fog and blue stars as chimes and flutes pinged around me. A whoosh of air carried me toward the opening of a tunnel.

I was so cold.

The woman whispered, "Cathy, don't be scared. I need to tell you something."

My mother died when I was nine. I couldn't remember exactly what she looked like, but this woman could be her.

"No. Leave me alone, I'm not going!"

"You have to listen. I'm going away." Her voice was so loud. "But I want to do something for you."

"Don't touch me." I flailed wildly to push her away. But I had no arm.

The woman laced her fingers in my hair. Her face had turned away from me but I knew she was crying. I could hear her thinking. She wanted to make things right. Beg my forgiveness for not telling me her secret.

The light at the opening of the tunnel got bright, too bright to look at, too bright to bear.

I wish I were you, Lupeyloo.

The words were a chant, a lullaby. A dirge.

I felt so cold. Dead cold.

Then, I felt nothing.

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