

Writing a Novel: Artist at Work

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English

by
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Chapter 1

Rachel Cowell flicked her index finger against the curled corner of the watercolor that hung crooked above her desk. The watercolor, painted the day Rachel began at Howard Middle School, had faded in the fluorescent light of her office. The colors of the early morning North Carolina mist, which Rachel had captured rising from the grass and skirting the trunks of pines, blended smoothly into the pale orange sky. Usually, Rachel sealed her watercolors after finishing. This one, however, lacked that protection. It marked the passing time spent in rural North Carolina.

She pressed the corner down with her fingernail, smoothing out the cracked paper against the painted cement brick wall. Her thumb rubbed her inked initials.

As if an alarm sounded, Rachel turned her head to the open door and let her hand fall to her side. Her wrist brushed through the gauzy folds of her skirt as she walked to her desk and sifted through the pile of sketched still lifes on the corner. She counted through the first fifteen and checked the names on the back of each piece before carrying the stack into the classroom.

Rachel flipped through the sketches and set three on each table, one in front of every cushioned stool. She tilted each paper until it sat parallel to the edge of the grainy wood tables. A hopeless endeavor, of course, because the moment her students darted into the classroom, pieces would inevitably flutter to the unswept floor.

Her rainbow-colored bracelets jingling along her forearms, Rachel walked swiftly across the room and to reached up on a shelf for a large paint-speckled plastic cup filled with cleaned paintbrushes. The wooden handles clattered against the plastic as she carried the cup to the tables and tipped a few brushes out in front of the artwork. The only times the room was ready were the first class every day and the class after her planning period—this one—early afternoon. Otherwise,

she and the students took up too many minutes, pouring the paint and retrieving in-progress pieces. Enough time already got used at the end of class cleaning.

Rachel pulled six bottles of Tempera paint from the small closet over the counter next to one sink—a pair of each primary color. The assignment for her eighth graders was a transitioning one—not too difficult but still educational. Each student first sketched a basket of fruit or a bouquet of flowers or an arrangement of seasonal leaves, and now none of those objects could be found. So they had to redo their sketch as a painting, using only the colored-pencil sketch and only the primary colors. In order to achieve the correct effect, Rachel hoped they would understand the importance of mixing the colors while painting and not in cups beforehand.

She squirted the paint into small plastic cups and arranged one of each color on the tables. A glob of the blue paint missed and fell to her wrist, and she smeared it when she moved, the liquid cool against her skin. Once the caps were neatly snapped back on and the bottles stored on her demonstration desk, she scrubbed off the drying paint under a stream of warm water. She swayed in front of the sink and filled clay bowls.

Over her shoulder, the Mona Lisa clock ticked out the minutes until the next class. Soon the mechanical bell buzzed on the other side of the open door, and excited chatter filled the hallway. On each table, Rachel carefully set a filled bowl. She moved smoothly to the front of the room after setting up the paints and arranged her own sketches on the table.

Rachel disliked wearing shoes. She usually padded around her house or classroom barefoot, but after one of the other teachers complained, she began wearing something at least while teaching. She wore slip-on sandals with woolen socks in the winter, well-worn, with the soles under the inside toes rubbed away. Dirt wouldn't come off the fake leather with water or

soap. She had two minutes left, she knew, judging by the thinning conversation in the hall, and she ducked into her office.

When she bent down to slide the sandals out from under the three-legged stool she used in front of her pottery wheel, her skirt scalloped on the chipped tile floor. She wiggled her toes as she put them on. She gathered her thick hair off the back of her neck, tying it with a rubber band from her wrist. With a soft lead pencil behind her ear and her favorite paintbrush in hand, Rachel walked back out into the classroom.

Juleah Miller, a small girl with limp brown hair hanging past her shoulders, sat eagerly at her place behind the first table. She kicked her sneakers against the wood and plucked a paintbrush, twirling it between two fingers. “Why do we only have three colors?”

Rachel leaned her lower back along the edge of her table. “Well, you’ll see, now won’t you?” She counted her students off under her breath as each walked in.

Juleah moved the dry brush awkwardly against her sketch. “Are we coloring in our drawing? How can we do that with only three colors?”

The bell rang. Rachel noticed she’d forgotten fresh paper. “How about you go over to the shelves and find enough of that big paper for everyone and set them out?”

Juleah hopped off her stool and scampered to the wire shelving by the door to Rachel’s office. She was an enthusiastic student but sadly had little talent for art. She bent low next to the shelves and fingered the corner of a stack of thick paper.

“Not that—just above it there, the white paper—that’s it.”

Juleah shoved both arms under a thick stack. “I got it. Does everyone get one?”

A large boy, with a crew cut and a Carolina Panthers jersey, snatched a sheet of paper off the pile. “No, dumbface, don’t give yourself one.” He looked at his two friends and sniggered.

“Michael. Enough.” Rachel clapped once, sharply. “Quiet down. Juleah’s handing out new paper to each of you.” She nodded encouragingly at the young girl, who skipped from table to table, her cheeks pink. “Please don’t start anything yet,” she said, and she looked at Mike, who was sniffing the paint.

“What are we doing with just these dumb colors?” he asked loudly, tipping the small cup over. The thick paint slid down the wax and hovered at the edge.

Rachel seized it and set it on the wood heavily. “Can anyone tell me what kind of colors these are?”

“Stupid ones.” Mike drummed the handles of two brushes on the table.

She took those from him too. “Yes, Juleah?”

“Primary colors,” she said. She leaned forward and spread her palms flat on the wood. “Why are we only using them?”

Rachel skirted the front table and held up her sketch and the example she had done earlier. “I’ve transferred my still life sketch to a larger sheet of paper, see? I used only the primary colors.”

The boy sitting next to Juleah accidentally kicked his crutches over when he squirmed to face the front. “How come you have green and stuff on yours, too, though?”

“When I started painting,” she said, “I made sure that whenever I needed a color I didn’t have, I mixed it on the paper.”

“Why do we want that?” Mike pushed himself back from the table, balancing his chair on two legs.

Juleah turned over her shoulder. “So we can learn new things, stupid.”

“Juleah,” Rachel said, warningly.

She slouched, her chin pressed down against her chest. “Sorry, Miss Cowell.”

Rachel cleared her throat and set her sketch down. She slid the painting onto the easel propped next to the table. “Go on then,” she said. “We only have a limited time.” She sat carefully on her stool and pulled a fresh piece of paper in front of her amid the sounds of paintbrushes scattering and paint globbing onto paper. One sandal fell off as she curved her foot around the rung of the stool. “If you have any questions, please ask.”

Mike ripped the corner off his paper and balled it up. He tossed it in a hook, and it hit Juleah in the side of the head. “Yeah, do we have to get this done today?”

“That would be ideal,” Rachel said. She slid off the stool and kicked the crumpled paper at the trash can. “If I see this again, you’ll stay after and beat erasers.”

“Coach won’t like that.”

The class watched Rachel put a new sheet in front of Mike. “I’ll take care of that.” She stood beside the first table and looked, measuredly, at the boy.

“Yeah, cause he’s your boyfriend.” Mike nudged his friend in the side, and both boys laughed.

Rachel’s gaze didn’t waver. “Apologize to Juleah.”

He shrugged with one shoulder. “Sorry.”

Juleah never looked up from her painted fruit basket. She swung her legs. The end of her paintbrush tapped the tabletop when she set it down. Juleah strained a smile and mouthed her thanks.

Rachel wove through the tables once to check that the students had their paintings under control. She stopped behind two girls mixing paint on a scrap of paper and instructed them not

to. “I want all the colors made on the page,” she said loudly enough that the whole class could hear. “I don’t want to see anyone mixing anywhere else.”

A rumble moved through the classroom, and Rachel nodded, satisfied when her students set to work again. She slid onto her stool and dipped her brush in the yellow paint. Carefully, she painted the stems of the flowers, her gaze flicking briefly to her sketch every now and then. She had already done the assignment, as an example for the class, but she liked to repeat it while they worked. It gave her the feeling of learning all over again. After covering the yellow lines with enough blue to garner the shade of green she wanted, Rachel stuck her brush in the small bowl of water and folded her hands. She looked from student to student, making sure each was working.

Mike’s paper, unsurprisingly, was covered in shades of taupe and moss. He stirred his brush in the water violently, and it splashed over the uneven sides. “This is dumb,” he said, leaning over his friend’s relatively realistic rendition of the same bowl of fruit. “I don’t like apples.”

In the front row, Juleah’s hand shot up. “Miss Cowell?”

Rachel nodded once.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course you can.”

Juleah struggled off her stool, and her sleeve caught the edge of the table. She knocked her knee off the leg, and Mike guffawed behind her. She cringed and tugged her sleeves down over her hands. “Can I come in after school to finish this?”

“You don’t have to have it done today. We have class tomorrow.”

Juleah's hair fell like a curtain over the sides of her face. "I actually have to take a test for Mr. Parker," she said, "because I missed class the other day. So, I have to do that and I don't want to get behind in here."

Rachel couldn't remember Juleah missing class that week. "When did you miss class?"

Juleah looked up and pushed her sleeve down to her wrist. "Wednesday. I don't think I missed this class. I was just at the nurse. So, is it okay if I stay after?"

"Sure. Just come down here at last bell."

She smiled and moved jerkily away from the desk and knocked the clay bowl over, sending a cascade of water over the table, soaking both Rachel's sketch and the painting she had started. "Oh my God. I'm sorry." Juleah stumbled as she ran to the sink, tearing off a strip of paper towel.

The class laughed. Mike led it with his cackling.

The water streamed off table's edge and seeped into Rachel's skirt before she stood to take the wad of paper towels that Juleah thrust at her. "It's okay," she assured the girl, trying to stop the repeating apologies. "Don't worry about it." She shoved her now-ruined drawings into the trashcan.

The bell rang in the middle of the chaos. Rachel straightened, one hand full of dripping paper. She rubbed her forehead with the side of her arm. "Please make sure you put your paintings on their proper drying rack. I'll see you all tomorrow."

Juleah pushed more of the paper towel at Rachel, offering to help clean up.

"It's fine," Rachel said, and she sopped up the yellow stream. "I have it taken care of. Don't be late for your next class." She offered the girl a smile.

Juleah's chest heaved and her cheeks were blotchy and red. "Oh—okay. I'll see you after school, Miss Cowell." She turned, her hair swinging over her neck, and, after scooping up her book bag, hurried from the room.

Rachel pressed her fingers to her temples and breathed deeply.

That afternoon, while Juleah worked quietly and without supervision in the classroom, Rachel sat with her legs open, hugging the pottery wheel in the middle of her office. She dragged her forearm across her forehead, leaving a trail of clay sticking to her hairline. She tossed her head to get her long hair off her face.

Her hands returned to the wet wheel, and she started working again. She kept her fingertips steady against the forming bowl and watched it closely. She pulled the side of her lower lip between her teeth and narrowed her eyes.

She heard Juleah tell someone that Miss Cowell was in her workshop finishing a pot.

Rachel kept her focus on the wheel.

"Rache, are you in here?"

The door opened all the way and her boyfriend, Nick, in rip-away pants and an East Carolina University t-shirt, hurried in, knocking a can of paint off the table.

She jumped and half the clay on the wheel flew off and splattered across the floor. She slammed her palm against the edge of the table and stood, reaching for the towel that had slid from her lap. She rubbed at the clay sticking to her hands and then threw the towel down as the wheel stopped spinning.

"What, Nicholas?" she asked. She picked at the drying clay between her fingers.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” he said sheepishly. “Are we still on for the symphony?” Nick flipped through a sketchbook Rachel had left open on her cluttered desk.

She closed it, pressing her palm into the back of his hand. “I find it hard to believe, Mr. Delarosa, that you’re really interested in attending the symphony.”

“I’m interested in going to the symphony with you,” he said, sliding his arms around her waist. He played with the gauzy material at her lower back. “Besides, I already got the tickets.”

“Pity,” she said with a pout. She ran the heels of her palms up his arms and under his shirtsleeves. “I’m afraid you’ll have to find someone else to go.”

“You’re always so difficult,” he murmured, moving his mouth across her jaw. “Be ready at six.”

“Miss Cowell,” Juleah called out, pushing through the door without knocking.

Rachel and Nick jumped apart.

“What is it?” Rachel asked, and she smoothed her tank top over her stomach.

“I forgot that I have to be home right away after school,” she said, quickly, close to a panic. “My Dad’ll kill me. I’m sorry. Can I—can I come in during lunch tomorrow to finish this? I’m almost done. I promise.” She twisted her hands in front of her oversized sweatshirt.

“Don’t worry about it. You don’t have to have it done right away.”

“I just don’t want to be behind.”

Nick squeezed Rachel’s shoulder and brushed past her to the door. He stopped in the doorway and held up six fingers, smiling.

She nodded once, then noticed Juleah squirming out of the corner of her eye. “You can go. You don’t have to wait around.” Rachel led her back into the classroom.

Juleah nodded vigorously. “My dad’s gonna kill me,” she said, and she shoved her notebook into her bag. When she spun around to get her painting from the table, her bag crashed into Rachel’s easel, and it clattered to the floor. She jumped.

Rachel rushed across the floor and put out an arm. “I got it.” She squatted next to the easel and stood it upright.

Juleah’s lower lip was trembling, and she nodded. “Did I break it? I didn’t mean to knock it over. I can be so stupid sometimes.”

“It was just an accident.” Rachel’s painting fluttered to the floor, and the sheet was upturned against the wall. She moved it to a folder sitting in the corner of the table and slid the whole thing onto the easel. “Will you be able to get home?”

Juleah looked over her shoulder and dragged her toe in a circle on the ground. “I’ll walk.”

“How far do you live?”

She shrugged. “A mile. Two.”

“I’ll drive you,” Rachel said quickly, and she hurried into her office. “I just have to grab my bag.”

Juleah protested, but Rachel waved her off and lifted her shoulder bag. She pushed her grade book in and also a handful of paintbrushes. She found her sketchbook covered in dried clay on the floor beside what was left of her ruined bowl. The pottery wheel speckled with light gray spots and the soiled towel draped over the stool. She unplugged the machine and flicked the light off.

Juleah hovered in the classroom doorway and looked over her shoulder every few seconds until Rachel caught up with her. “You don’t have to,” she said and hitched her book bag higher on her shoulders, and watching the floor as they walked down the hall.

The five-minute car ride in Rachel's beat-up Honda was quiet, except for Juleah's one-word directions. She turned onto a poorly paved road and dodged a pothole. The car squeaked in a bounce over the warped pavement. One house, half hidden by pointed pines, sat on the left side of the road. The shutterless windows appeared to have screens but no glass, and the paint peeled. The dirt path to the front door was overrun with weeds. She slowed the car next to a crooked black mailbox.

Rachel hadn't even put the car in park before Juleah tumbled out the door, thanking her over her shoulder. The seatbelt caught, and metal slapped against the car.

"Sorry," Juleah said, and she opened and closed the door again.

A Walkman, twisted in its own headphones, fell to the floor with the force of the door shutting. Rachel clicked off her seatbelt and stretched across the passenger seat to jerkily roll down the window. "Juleah, sweetheart, you dropped this." She waved the Walkman. Rachel got out of the car and left her door open.

Juleah met her at the curb and seized the Walkman quickly. "Thanks. See you tomorrow." Her hair whipped across her neck as she spun back around and scurried up the path.

"I'll see you in class," Rachel said, and she leaned against the hood and waited for Juleah to get inside.

She turned and waved, meekly. A few feet from the front door, she crashed into a tall, burly man in a white undershirt and jeans, where his stomach spilled out over the waist. "What's this?" His voice was deep, raspy like he'd had one too many cigarettes. He hacked up a wad of spit and spewed it into the bushes.

"I-stayed after to do my art project. I forgot to tell you." Juleah hugged her Walkman to her chest.

“Art? Who’s this?” He spit again and nodded towards Rachel.

Rachel wiped her hands on her thighs and walked briskly to them. “I’m Rachel Cowell. Juleah’s art teacher.” She offered her hand.

He flicked his gaze from her hand, past the thin layer of silk over her chest, up to her face. “You don’t look like no teacher.”

Rachel pulled her hand back. “Juleah stayed after for some extra time on a project. She was upset that she hadn’t told you she was staying, so I offered to bring her home.”

He turned to Juleah. “You’re supposed to tell me when you stay after.”

“I know.” Her voice was a mouse’s squeak. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“Sorry ain’t gonna cut it this time, girl. In the house.” He jerked his hand to the door handle and shoved it open.

Juleah flinched and stepped backwards, then tripped on the single step into the house. The screendoor swung shut behind her.

Rachel squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. “Mr. Miller, it was my fault she stayed after. I asked her to, because she was going to miss class tomorrow.”

“She’s not missing school tomorrow.”

“No, just my class. She has to take a make up-exam.”

“Make up what? She hasn’t stayed home from school since the day her momma died.” He scratched the stubbled hair on his chin and coughed.

“She said she missed a test. She was at the nurse.”

He turned over his shoulder and huffed deeply. “I see. I don’t want her working on no more art projects. Art’s got no place in my house.”

“It’s a required course, sir.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, the skin on his forehead crinkling unattractively. He snorted. “She’s got chores to do.” He turned and walked, with a slight limp, inside. The screendoor rattled.

Rachel spotted Juleah rush by the front door. Rachel slid her hand along the side of her neck and walked back to her car.

Chapter 2

While Rachel fumbled with her keys at the front door, Nick smoothed his hands over the silk on her stomach. She shoved open the door and they stumbled inside. He kicked it shut with his heel and fingered the fabric along her hip.

Rachel tripped over her cat but was steadied by Nick's secure arm as he pulled her in for a kiss. She dropped her grandmother's lace shawl, and it fell on the cat's head. The flowered, thicker edges of the lace fell over his front paws. His claws clicked and scattered on the hardwood floor and he somersaulted backwards to free himself.

Nick led her into the living room as they kissed, his mouth open and wet on hers. He pulled away and smacked his lips to hers once more. "Did you enjoy the show?" He unknotted his tie and left it loose around his neck. The ends hung unevenly next to the column of buttons. The middle button was already undone.

She nodded, breathless, and backed away. She pressed a hand to her forehead. A smile quirked at the corner of her mouth.

Her living room was littered with a tipped-over easel, paint-splattered newspapers on the floor in front of the hearth, and cans of paint for the unfinished mural. Next to the fireplace, an old claw-footed bathtub overflowed with a rainbow of tulips and daffodils. A puddle of water stained the floor underneath.

"Come here," he said and sank onto the couch, patting his thigh. He shimmied his jacket off and left it bunched around his back.

She slipped out of her kitten heels and slid them under the end table with her foot. "Do you want something to drink?"

He shook his head and reached out for her. He caught a fold of her dress between his fingers but she twirled away.

“I made sweet tea.”

“I’m not thirsty,” he said, his voice hoarse.

She pulled the corner of a heavy patchwork quilt over the arm of the couch as she walked into the kitchen. “I made some just this morning.” She found a tall glass in the drying rack and dropped in a few ice cubes. “It might be too sweet.”

“I told you, I’m not thirsty.” Nick slid his arms around her waist from behind and pressed his open mouth against her neck. The metal on his wristwatch was cold. He rubbed his hands up and down her bare arms. His palms were rough, calloused from weightlifting, and it felt like the sandpaper he’d used once to finish the banister.

She twisted the plastic lid to pour the amber liquid. Rachel turned to him, the glass between them. “For you.”

His shoulders sagged and he took the glass from her. He sipped it, his lips peeling back as he made a face. “Sweet.”

She frowned. “I always do that. I can never get the right amount of sugar in.”

He wrapped his arms around her and set the glass on the counter. “I don’t care,” he said, dipping his head to kiss her. He moved his lips over hers and slipped his tongue across hers. Her vanilla lip gloss made her mouth slick. He pressed his tongue in. Nick spanned her waist with his hands, his thumbs rubbing circles in the dips beside her belly button.

The counter dug into Rachel’s back. She lifted a foot and slid it along the hem of his pants, his coarse hair rubbing erotically. She pressed her palms into the muscles along his back,

the prominent shoulder blades, and down his biceps, feeling the firmness through his dress shirt. She dragged her mouth from his and ducked her head, her temple pressed into his jaw.

He slid his hand up the back of her neck and tangled his fingers in her hair. “I love watching you get all flustered,” he said, his voice low, his lips touching her ear.

She shivered a little and straightened, looking him in the eye. The lustful darkness clouding her eyes disappeared. “Do you have Juleah Miller in your class?”

He blinked, and his hands stilled along her sides. “What?”

“Juleah Miller. It’s spelled weird. J-U-L-E-A-H. Do you have her in class?” She sidestepped away and opened the pantry next to the refrigerator. The cabinet was the same height, but slimmer, and the top hinge was rusted and loose.

Nick ran a hand through his hair.

“She’s a mousy girl. Plain to look at. Nothing exceptional about her at all.” The box of cat food shook like a baby’s rattle when she pulled it from the cupboard and pinched open the corner.

“Yeah, I think I know who you mean. Why?”

She squatted next to the earthen clay bowl in the corner and dumped in the food. “I had to take her home today. I was just curious if you ever noticed anything about her.”

“What do you mean? She’s quiet. Never talks. She’s always picked last.”

Rachel drummed her fingers on the tile and whistled until DaVinci trotted into the kitchen, tail straight. “I think there’s something going on at home.”

He set his tie over the back of a chair. “That’s not any of our business.”

She rubbed behind the cat's ears, fluffing the fur on the back of his neck. She stood and slid the box back into the pantry. She crossed her arms. The neck of her dress spilled over the swell of her breasts. "Why not?"

"Because. If there's something going on at home, it's supposed to stay at home."

She shook her head. "That's ridiculous." Her voice was light.

"I didn't really think we'd be talking tonight," he said, and he pulled on her pinky finger until she gave him her hand. He spread his fingers against hers and interlaced them. He shimmied up against her and dipped his mouth to the side of her neck. "I can think of a hundred things I'd rather be doing." He flicked his tongue over her skin.

Rachel let her head roll to the side. "Not right now."

He buried a hand in her hair, gently pulling out the pins holding her curls in place. He dragged his mouth along her throat and over her jaw. He kissed her slowly.

She moved away from him and pulled her hand loose. "I'm not in the mood," she said, but her cheeks were hot and her eyes heavy. She pressed her palm against his chest.

He covered her hand and lifted it to his mouth. "What's on your mind, baby?"

"I told you," she said. "I'm worried about Juleah."

He let go of her hand and rubbed the side of his neck. "There's really nothing you can do about it," he said firmly.

She shook her head. "There has to be something."

Nick pressed his fingers to his temples, then picked up his sweet tea. He gulped and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Okay," he said. "I really think we need to push this aside for the night. You know I don't like talking about work on the weekends."

She rolled her eyes and skirted the kitchen table for the same cabinet with the cat food. She opened it and reached in, but then withdrew her hand and shut it again. “I know, but I can’t stop thinking about this. I want to talk about it.”

“Usually you don’t want to talk at all.”

“That’s because we don’t have much to talk about,” she said too quickly, and she turned her face from his. She wished she could stop thinking and start doing.

“What’s that mean?”

She shook her head. “Nothing, sorry.” She opened the cabinet again and looked inside.

“What are you looking for?” he asked.

“Nothing.” She closed it. “Why don’t you go get comfortable in the living room? Check the scores. I think I have some cheesecake left over from dinner on Sunday.”

He narrowed his eyes at her and nodded. “Do you have strawberries left too? Whipped cream?”

She moved to the refrigerator and bent into it. “I think so. Now go—go get comfortable.” She waved him away as she leaned on the fridge door.

“You’re sure?”

She rested her cheek on her hand and pulled her lips into a smile. “Course I am,” she said, and her gaze faltered from his for a split second. “I’ll be right out.”

Nick nodded once and left. The back of his dress shirt was ruffled and the shirt tail hung out over the waist of his pants.

Rachel waited until she heard the TV before shuffling through the fridge for the glass plate of cheesecake and a Saran Wrap-covered bowl of strawberries. She shoved both onto the

counter and tugged the can of whipped cream out from between the pickles and ketchup. She nudged the door closed with her hip and returned to the cabinet.

With a quick glance over her shoulder, she reached inside and pulled out a tall, green bottle of whiskey. She tore the foil and dropped the sliver into the trash can. She twisted the cap quickly. The bottle was heavy in her hand as she carried it to the counter and stretched for a glass. She hugged the bottle to her chest and juggled the glass toward the refrigerator. She shoved it under the ice dispenser. The ice grumbled and clanked into the glass, and she pulled it away quickly and carried both the glass and the bottle of J&B into the dining room.

With perfect vision to the edge of the couch, she lined herself up. The television flickered across the wall. She poured the alcohol over the ice. She capped the bottle and stashed it behind a decade's worth of art supplies catalogs.

The whiskey smelled sweet. She lifted the glass and flicked her tongue out to catch the condensation and alcohol around the rim. She swallowed back the bitter taste and closed her eyes. The room was spinning, and not from the alcohol. She stared over the top of the glass at the doorframe, where a chunk of wood was missing from the day she moved her easel from the living room into the kitchen to finish a sunset watercolor.

Her mother used to sneak off into the bedroom while Rachel was watching "All My Children" on the black-and-white TV in the kitchen. She would hide the bottles in the laundry basket, folded into dirty clothes. Rachel found them once, when she was twelve, and she dumped all the alcohol into the sink and broke the bottles outside on the sidewalk.

Rachel lowered the glass and tipped it into a potted fern on the window sill. She left the glass there too, against the clay pot. She wiped her hands on her skirt, the condensation leaving finger-sized spots on the silk.

“Do you need more tea?” she called out, fighting her voice to keep from shaking, as she twisted on the faucet and let the cold water wash over her hands.

The sound on the TV went down. “No, I still have half a glass to suffer through.”

She shook the water off her hands.

Less than a third of the cheesecake was left. She scooped two forks from the drying rack and balanced the cake on her hand, tucked the whipped cream under her armpit, and carried the bowl of strawberries on her palm out to Nick.

He took the cake from her and set it on his thighs. “Is it still good?” He crunched over and sniffed.

She sat next to him. “Should be. Sorry it took so long. I couldn’t find the whipped cream.” She fibbed easily but didn’t meet his eye. She looked, instead, at the cheesecake. A thin line of blue-green mold streaked the edges. “It’s moldy,” she said. “But we can just eat the mushy strawberries with whipped cream, right?”

“We can scrape it off,” he said.

She took the plate from him. “That’s not healthy.” She leaned over the couch to push the plate across the floor. She peeled the wrap off the strawberries and poked at the gooey mess. “Just whipped cream?”

He laughed and pressed his mouth to her temple. “I can think of a thing or two to do with it.”

She let the can roll out of her arm and hit the floor. She pressed her cheek against the couch. “You always have one thing on your mind.” She took a deep breath and stretched her legs across his.

He leaned into her, his breath hot on her cheek. “You usually do too,” he said, and he moved his lips over hers. His hand slid up her thigh, pushing up the hem of her dress.

Rachel let him kiss her, his mouth warm and wet against hers, and he pressed his thumb into her hip and leaned her back onto the couch, crawling over her, one hand holding her thigh. She never had any qualms about it before, never any objections. She ran her hand over his back, feeling his spine pressing through the soft fabric of his dress shirt.

Nick kissed down her chin and nudged her cheek to the side with his nose, opening her throat to him. He moved his mouth down her skin and his hand up her dress.

She panted softly and opened her eyes. Her grade book lay open on the stool in front of the easel. Nick’s unshaven jaw felt rough on her cheek, and she twisted her mouth back to his.

His hand slipped past the waist of her underwear and to her stomach.

She broke the kiss and touched her forehead to his. “Not tonight.”

He breathed heavily with her. “What?”

She put a hand over his collarbone and pushed him off her. “I have a headache.”

He dropped his mouth to her neck and sucked on a spot that always made her tremble. “I’ve heard,” he said against her, “that sex can actually help reduce a headache.”

“You’re ridiculous tonight,” she said, and she squirmed out from under him and stood, her dress falling back down to her knees.

He sat and straightened the collar of his shirt. His hair fell messily over his ears and forehead. “It’s Friday night, Rache,” he said. “Leave work at work.”

She swallowed and looked down. She pointed her toes and rocked on the balls of her feet. “I’m sorry.”

He stood and tugged her elbow until she let him hug her. He kissed her forehead. “Get some sleep,” he said, and he didn’t sound quite as frustrated as she thought he ought to. “We’re still on for pizza after the game tomorrow, right?”

She nodded vaguely.

He touched her cheek and winked. The door echoed when he left.

Rachel pulled the elastic from her hair and combed her fingers through it as she walked upstairs to her bedroom.

Chapter 3

Rachel fingered the bundle of mail from her box as she walked down the main hallway to the faculty lounge. She read through the first paper—a memo about the skills workshop she had missed that morning on account of not receiving the reminder in time. She flipped to the next, her pay stub, and the next, a pink envelope addressed in lopsided calligraphy. One of the math teachers was marrying an English teacher. This was the second such invitation in three months. Whoever said university was a marriage mart never taught at a public school.

Rachel slipped the envelope to the bottom of the pile. She cut her knuckle on the corner of a glossy flyer. A local artist had a gallery opening at NC State that week. From the black-and-white replications, he appeared to specialize in the photography of couples engaged in washing the dishes, making the bed, reading. She frowned. She'd like to go, but she used up her one cultural excursion with Nick on the symphony, and there were only so many sports matches she could suffer through in return.

She darted across the hall as Nick was leaving the faculty lounge. She smiled. "You don't usually eat in here."

"Wanted a Coke," he said, and he waved the can at her. "How are you?"

She shrugged. "Fine, I guess. What are you doing Wednesday night?"

"Away game at Patterson," he said. "It's on your calendar. I wrote them all down like you wanted." He was a little out of breath, and his cheeks were flushed.

She smiled and leaned back against the doorframe. "Oh, that's right, thanks."

"Why?"

She held up the flyer. "Just thought it would be fun to go. Maybe talk to this guy and see if he'd take our picture."

“We could do it like in *Ghost*,” he said. “With your pottery wheel.” He waggled his eyebrows and stepped toward her until his wrist brushed her hip.

She shook her head. “Been done before. But I’m sure he could come up with something sexier. What about vacuuming the car?” She touched his arm.

He pulled a face. “That’s not sexy.” He laughed. “But, yeah, got that away game.” He actually sounded disappointed. “But we can go to just the gallery, right? I mean, I’ll go look at the pictures with you.” He turned to glance down the hall in both directions.

“Sure.” But the artist wouldn’t be there, she wanted to point out. “Maybe I’ll go by myself on Wednesday. Could be fun. We don’t have to be attached at the hip.”

“No, but I know you like that.” He ran his finger down the inside of her arm and kissed her quickly, his lips barely touching hers. “See you after practice.” He winked and jogged down the hall toward the gymnasium.

Smiling, Rachel ducked into the lounge and closed the door. She ran her thumb over the smooth paper. If it weren’t after school hours and weren’t photography, she would take some of her students. She had proposed a photography unit for her eighth graders, but it was too expensive.

She slid the pile of mail onto the table and tapped the flyer again, staring at the Coke machine. She fished through her corduroy shoulder bag for a handful of change. She plucked two quarters from her palm, slid them in one at a time, and waited until they clanked hollowly at the bottom before hitting the large dimly illuminated Diet Coke button. Nothing happened. She slammed her elbow into the plastic and the can fell. She slung her bag over the back of the chair at the end of the table and sat. When the door squeaked open, she turned.

Chuck Baxter, with his white shirtsleeves rolled up over dark arms, squatted in the doorway to retie his dull, black shoes. “Miss Cowell,” he said, looking up as his fingers flipped through the laces. “Anything good for lunch today?”

She held up the insulated lunch bag she’d brought from home.

He crossed to the small refrigerator in the corner. He came back to the table with a mostly crumpled paper bag. “I know. I get heartburn from everything in the cafeteria.”

She laughed and popped open a Tupperware container. “What did you bring?”

“My wife made me a ham salad sandwich with lettuce and hot peppers.” He unwrapped it from excessive layers crumpled plastic wrap.

Rachel unscrewed the top of the small bottle containing her homemade Italian dressing, and she dribbled it into the Tupperware, saturating the salad. She poked her fork around the lettuce. Her gaze flicked to her stack of mail. “Chuck,” she said slowly, her head cocked to the side. “You’re in charge of extra-curriculars, right?”

He wiped a crumpled napkin across his mouth and nodded. “Yes ma’am, I am.”

“I was thinking about something,” she said carefully. She rolled a cherry tomato around and then jabbed it. “Maybe an art gallery?”

“What do you mean? Like a show?”

“Yeah, like a show.” She chewed thoughtfully for a moment. “Maybe I could choose a few students to help me put it together. The students put their work in, and I could have it in the gym, and we could have refreshments and invite the faculty and parents. Maybe the band could play.”

“Doesn’t sound like a bad idea.” The plastic wrap ball blew off the table, and he jerked to swipe it out of the air.

“What would I need to do?” As an art teacher, Rachel had never gotten involved in the extra-curriculars. The only ones even offered were book club, Model UN, and some community service. She talked to Nick about soccer, sometimes, but sports didn’t fall under the same category.

He bit a corner of his sandwich and held up a finger. After he swallowed, he picked up a bag of low-sodium potato chips. “I’d need a written proposal, along with a list of students involved, and any parts of the school—like the gym—that you’d need to obtain a permit for. Tentative dates, publicity, and everything would need included too.”

“I need to talk to my students about this before I can make it official? What if you don’t approve it? I don’t want to get their hopes up.”

“I think the committee’s only not approved one organization, and it was because none of the teachers wanted to support it.” He wiped his greasy fingers on a new napkin.

“What do you mean?” She pulled the tab her soda and poured it into a ceramic mug she’d painted in a graduate class.

He scooted his chair away from the table and leaned to pitch the ball of plastic wrap and napkins and sandwich crusts into the trash. “It was proposed by a student, a group of students, really, and no one wanted to head it up, so I had to say no. Sad thing too, when we had the interest.”

“But there are hardly any activities here to begin with. I just thought —” She just thought that the lack of activities meant that no one was allowed to do them. She could count the after-school activities, not including sports, on one hand.

He shrugged. “No one’s interested. Most of the kids go home right after school if they don’t play a sport. Gotta help around the house—chores, little siblings, that sort of stuff.”

She nodded. She knew a lot of her students took care of their brothers and sisters. Some missed school when one of them was sick. “Right. I just think sometimes they should get something fun, too.”

“It’s hard in a neighborhood where both parents work, or one works and the other’s gone. The kids don’t get much say in what they can do.”

Rachel knew all that too. “Are you saying you don’t think they’ll even want to do this?”

“I’m saying you need to have names of interested students or we won’t even consider it.”

She dropped her fork into the Tupperware. “Alright.”. She wiped the condensation down the side of her Diet Coke. “When do you want it?”

He chuckled, deep in his belly so that his shoulders shook just a little. “You’re the one making the proposal. Whenever you get it done.”

She pressed the lid over her salad and slid it back into her lunch bag. She cleaned up the small splotch of dressing left on the table. “You’ll have it by Wednesday. I really want to do this.” She slipped on her shoulder bag and smoothed her skirt over her thighs. “Thanks, Chuck.”

“Not a problem,” he said. He picked up her Diet Coke and tapped the side. “You finished with this? I forgot my water bottle.”

She nodded. “Yeah, go ahead. Make sure you recycle?”

He finished the soda in three gulps and tossed it into the basket she’d set out for cans and glass. “See you later,” he said on his way out the door.

Rachel smiled weakly. “Thanks,” she said as the door swung shut. She gathered her mail and shoved it deep into her bag, then hurried out, turning left, and down the stairs to the art classroom.

Later that afternoon, Rachel pushed a box of student pottery into the backseat of her car. She picked up her thin, scratchy army blanket from the floor and tucked it under her arm. Her skirt caught in the door when she closed it, and she had to dig through her bag again for her keys. She hurried down the hill to the soccer field and spread the blanket at the base. She sat, curling her legs under herself, and arranged her skirt like a fan.

Nick was down the field, whistle loose in his mouth, and his players were sprinting in formation, back and forth, at the sound of a blast. He waved.

Rachel smiled and waved back, then rummaged through her bag for her sketchbook and a pencil. The tip was broken, and she twisted it into the plastic Lisa Frank sharpener she'd had for a decade. She sat, poised with the lead tip touching the paper, but didn't draw.

She pushed her sketchbook off her lap and found her legal pad, the only source of lined paper she kept with her. She flipped to a page that wasn't sprawled with poor attempts at poetry and started a list of things she would need for a student art show.

She hadn't gotten far—just tentative dates, but she didn't have her calendar—when she started sketching Nick on the field. She liked drawing him. She had been tempted more than once to ask him to sit for a nude, but she hadn't gathered the nerve yet. Watching him coach one of the players at using elbows and knees on the ball, and knowing he had once been all-state at the sport, made Rachel smile.

“Miss Cowell?”

Juleah and another eighth grader, Becky, stood over her. “Hey, girls. What are you still here for?”

Juleah shrugged. “We had to help Mr. Parker clean up the science lab.”

Rachel tucked the pad of paper under her knee and folded her hands over it. “Did you make a mess in class today?”

Juleah shook her head and looked at Becky.

Becky pushed her glasses up on her nose and coughed once. “No. We all rotate in shifts and every time when we have an experiment, two of us have to stay and clean. Today was our turn.”

“What did you have to do?”

“Just wash the beakers and tubes and stuff. He won’t let us touch any of the chemicals or anything.”

“That’s probably smart of him. Hey –” Rachel opened her bag and took out the gallery flyer. “Do you girls know what an art gallery is?”

They looked at each other. Juleah pushed her bangs off her face with the back of her hand. “You mean like when a painter has all their paintings in one place and people go look at them?”

She nodded. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

“Yeah. Are we gonna go see that one or something?” Juleah pointed at the printout in Rachel’s hand. “Are those photos from a gallery?”

Rachel sat up on her knees and offered the flyer to the girls. “Yeah. But we’re not going. I asked because I was thinking about holding a gallery here at school.”

“With your stuff?” Becky asked. She craned her thin neck over Juleah’s shoulder.

“No,” Rachel said slowly. “With your art. I mean, all the students’. If someone wanted to show off something, they could. We would have it in the gym, and maybe we could have food and music, just like a real gallery.”

“I’ve never been to a real one,” Juleah said, thrusting the flyer back at Rachel.

“Can you drive us to my house?” Becky asked suddenly. “Her dad was supposed to come get us, but she called him from the payphone and he said he had to work an extra shift. I mean, you drove her home Friday so we just thought—” Her mouth was almost moving more quickly than her words.

“Of course.” Rachel tucked the advertisement into her legal pad and slid both into her bag. “Where do you live, Becky?”

“Just two streets away from me,” Juleah said quickly. “It’s not far, but we didn’t bring our bikes so that’s why my dad was supposed to come.”

“It’s not a problem,” Rachel said. “Let me tell Nick—Coach Delarosa—that I’m leaving.”

“Yeah, yeah thanks.” Juleah nodded a few times. “So, what are you gonna do about a gallery? I think that’s cool. Can I put something in?”

Rachel stood and caught Nick’s attention. She scooped up her bag and folded her blanket over her arm as Nick jogged over to her. “Hey, I’m gonna take these girls home real quick but I’ll meet you back here?”

“Why don’t you just head home,” he said, out of breath. “And I’ll meet you there.”

She nodded. “Sounds good.”

He touched her cheek with his thumb, then jogged back to the huddle of soccer players.

“Alright you two, let’s go.”

“Are you and Coach Delarosa dating?” Juleah asked as they rounded the crest of the hill. She held her book bag against her chest with both arms.

Rachel unlocked her car and ushered the two girls inside. “That’s none of your business.”

“But that’s pretty cool,” Juleah said, “if you are.” She crawled into the backseat, and Rachel had to lean around her to pull out the box of bowls and move them to the front passenger seat. “He’s awesome.”

“She likes him, if you know what I mean,” Becky said to Rachel. She fell onto the seat next to Juleah, who slapped her arm. She looked at her. “Well, you do!”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to say it,” Juleah grumbled. She pulled her seatbelt across and wrapped her arms around herself. Her face was bright behind her stringy hair.

Rachel got into the car and adjusted the rearview mirror so she could watch the girls. “It’s okay,” she said. She winked. “I really like him too.”

The girls looked at each other and giggled like pixies.

Rachel backed out and sped from the faculty parking lot. She turned away from the road to her own house and drove toward Juleah’s. The girls spoke in whispers. They talked about the gross concoction Matt Newhouse had mixed up at lunch, then ate, then about Mr. Parker lighting his lab coat on fire. When Becky brought up Nick, though, Juleah squeaked.

“So, do we have to be good to be in the art show?” Juleah asked loudly, suddenly. She leaned up to the side of Rachel’s seat.

Becky laughed breathlessly beside her.

“No, I don’t think so,” Rachel said.

“Turn here,” Becky blurted.

Rachel stepped on the brakes harder than she would have liked and turned down a pine-lined street. “Anyone who wants to show something can. We’ll work on our penmanship too and draw up posters and invitations if you want.”

“For who?”

Her gaze flicked to the now-curious girls in the mirror. “Your parents. Other teachers.”

Juleah rubbed under her nose and sat back. She twisted her hair around her finger.

“We’re right here.” Becky pointed to a modest two-story on the right with pastel pink shutters and a basketball hoop in the driveway.

Rachel stopped next to the mailbox. “So, what do you girls think?”

Becky pushed her door open. “I don’t even have art this semester.” She leapt out and slammed it.

Rachel swiveled to Juleah.

She smiled weakly and lost hold of her bag as she climbed out. She bent to shove a math book back inside. “I think it’s a cool idea. I’d put something in the show.” She backed up onto the curb. “Thanks for the ride.”

Rachel twisted the window down and leaned out. “Would you want to help out with it? Like help me plan and everything?”

Becky was already up the driveway, petting a golden retriever on a chain.

Juleah glanced over her shoulder. She shrugged. “Yeah, sure. I guess so. Thanks again.” She shifted her bag on her back and shuffled quickly over to Becky, head down.

Chapter 4

Nick recommended Oscar's Auto Body shop when the Check Engine light in Rachel's car wouldn't go out. She parked in front of the rusted garage door and dug through her bag for the extra set of keys and her checkbook. Her car still hummed as it simmered, and she touched the hot hood before hurrying inside.

Inside of the garage stood a counter cluttered with overstuffed magazine racks, open plastic binders, and a piece of a blackened muffler. No one was around. Rachel peeled back the corner of an auto magazine and found a small metallic bell under it. She gave it a tap, the sound barely loud enough to hear it. She stood apart from the counter, frowning. She could drag her finger along the countertop and leave a long clean line. She swallowed and glanced around again. "Hello?" She touched the bell with the tip of her finger and it chirped again.

She held her bag in front of her, the heavy bottom bouncing lightly against her calves. She stretched to look over the counter, but no one was there. Her sandals left ribbed imprints on the floor as she walked into the garage.

Metal clanged against metal, and someone muffled a curse word.

"Hello? I'm looking for some help. My boyfriend said he made an appointment for me." She pulled her bag against her stomach and walked around the side of a car with the hood up. "Excuse me?"

The man working on the car coughed from the back of his throat and spat into a tin can behind the wheel. A steady swirl of cigarette smoke rose above the man's head. "What can I do for you, little lady?" he asked, and he adjusted his hat as he straightened. "Oh, it's you."

Rachel blinked. She squared her shoulders and tightened her grip on her bag. "Mr. Miller, I didn't know you worked here."

“Going on fifteen years now,” he said. The cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth wobbled.

She nodded. “Nick Delarosa called in an appointment for me. I need an oil change and my Check Engine light has been on for two weeks.”

“Took a while to get you in here then,” he said. He plucked the cigarette from his mouth and twisted his fingers around the burning end.

“I don’t think you should be smoking around cars. You know, with the gasoline and oil and everything?”

“Those fifteen years? Haven’t had a problem yet.” He shoved the stub behind his ear and wiped his hands on an oil-coated rag at his hip. “You got the car here? Gotta finish this one first, then I can take a look at yours.” He banged his palm off the raised hood. “You sticking around or someone here to pick you up?” He spoke slowly, his words almost slurring at the vowels.

She glanced over her shoulder quickly and felt him follow her gaze. She wished she had called Nick. “No, I’ll wait. I have my sketchbook.”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “You’re the art teacher. What’s this about some show? My girl gonna have something in it?”

She relaxed her arms and shook her hair off her shoulders. “I don’t know. It’s still in the creation process. I thought maybe she would want to help with it. She could stay after school to set things up.”

“Juleah’s got chores to do,” he said. He bent for the toolbox, and the tools banged as he pulled out a wrench. “She don’t have time to do extra work. School’s over at three. That’s late enough.” He ducked behind the hood again. “Leave your keys on the counter and I’ll get to it when I get to it.”

“It’s the Honda,” she said quickly.

He poked his head around the hood and narrowed his eyes. “I know. Only other car here. Now go on. I got work to do if you want your car before my bowling league starts.”

Rachel blinked at Juleah’s father for a few seconds before she walked back to the counter and set her keys on the edge, making sure they were visible between the magazine and the bell. She looked back over her shoulder at her car and heard Mr. Miller humming hoarsely and off-key. Her bag hit her knee as she walked outside and tilted her face up into the sunlight. She shielded her eyes and glanced around the old building for a non-industrialized, non-concrete, piece of shade.

A rust-orange trash can lay on its side against the brick of the wall. She walked past it and found a thin strip of grass between the auto shop and the back entrance of the diner next door. Rachel hurried back to her car and unlocked the trunk. She unfolded her army blanket, slammed the trunk and walked briskly back to the side of the building. She sat cross-legged on the blanket on the ground.

The corner of her sketchbook was bent backwards, and she smoothed it down and flipped to a blank page. She stared at the white for a moment before shuffling back to the sketch she’d started of Nick at his soccer practice a few days before. The sketch was complete, and Rachel looked at it from all sides before pulling a box of colored pencils out of her bag. She squeezed open the box and spilled rainbow next to her knee.

She traced the outline in black, pressing the tip hard against the paper. She kept glancing up, towards the front of the garage. Her car hadn’t started up yet, and Mr. Miller hadn’t come out to look for her. She didn’t have all night to sit around waiting for him to get done with her car. Then again, she didn’t have much else better to do. She hadn’t expected it to be him though,

working at the car shop. She had imagined him as the type to sit on the recliner with a beer in hand and the TV blaring. Or maybe that was just because that was how her father had been, when he was around.

Rachel breathed in the oily air and wiggled her nose.

“Dad!” a voice called. “Dad, I brought you dinner!” A bike bell jingled.

Rachel pushed onto her knees and leaned toward the edge of the building. When she couldn’t see anything and couldn’t hear anything more than muffled voices, she quickly shoved her things back into her bag and hurried to the edge of the garage.

The hood of the car slammed.

“Can I go with Becky to the mall? I want new shoes.”

“What’s wrong with the shoes you got now?” he asked gruffly.

Juleah sighed and kicked something hollow. “Nothing. Just—there’s these shoes I really like, and Becky has them, and she wants to go and get me a pair too.”

“You got money for them?”

Juleah didn’t answer.

“What? You think I’m made of money? I told you, you gotta do the laundry tonight. I need my overalls for the weekend, for Uncle Jim’s.”

“I know. I’ll do it.” She sighed heavily. “I wanna go with Becky.” Her voice was higher, pleading.

“I have my bowling league tonight.”

“I know. So why can’t I go? Her mom’s taking us.”

“I never met her mom.” His voice drawled thickly. An engine rumbled then pattered out again. “Damnit. Get me that rag.”

A scuffle and a grunt.

“Not that one. No, I’ll do it.” He spoke in grumbles and banged around the car.

Juleah was quiet. Then she kicked at the rubber tire, the sole of her shoe squeaking. “Are you sure—?”

“Don’t ask me again, girl.” He shouted. The phone rang, and a car door slammed. “What are you doing? Don’t just stand there. Answer the phone.”

Rachel held the corner of the brick and peered around.

Juleah stood on a two-step ladder and leaned on the counter, phone pressed to her ear. “It’s Oscar,” she called out. “Says he can’t come in tonight. Danny’s throwing up.”

Her dad swore and whipped the rag at the hood of the car. “I’m not gonna have time to do this.” He scratched his lower back and bent to pick up his toolbox. “You tell him I’m not gonna come in tomorrow if I miss league tonight.”

“But Daddy, you can’t do that—”

He slammed his fist off the hood. “Yes, I can. Tell him that.”

Juleah sighed and tapped a pen on the magazines. She repeated what her dad had told her. Her face grew red. “Dad, he wants to talk to you.”

He kicked his toolbox over. He pushed his way in front of the stool, making Juleah stumble off and knock her wrist on the countertop. He snatched the phone from her and grunted into it.

Juleah backed away and rubbed her wrist.

“Fine.” Mr. Miller slammed the receiver down. “Your teacher’s here. That art lady. Go find her and tell her she better get a ride home. I won’t get to her car till tomorrow morning.” He growled the words and slammed a folder shut. He stalked into the garage.

Rachel ducked back around the building and jogged to her blanket.

“Miss Cowell?”

She turned, halfway to the ground, and stood straight again. “Juleah,” she said, forcing a grin. “What are you doing here?”

“My dad works here. He says you should go home ‘cause he won’t get to your car tonight.” She held her arm tight at her side. “Can you find a ride?”

Rachel nodded and squatted to shove her book back into her bag. “Yeah. I just need to use a phone.” She hitched the bag over her shoulder. “Do you think your dad’ll let me use the one inside?”

Juleah shrugged. “Ask him.” Rachel walked toward her, but Juleah ducked around the corner. “Dad, I’m going home.” She tucked her foot under her bicycle and pushed it up. She straightened the handlebars.

He dragged himself toward them and cupped his hand around a new cigarette. “I better not hear you went to that girl’s house. You go straight home and get your chores done.”

She nodded weakly and hopped onto her bike. “Yeah, bye. Bye, Miss Cowell.” She peddled off down the street, standing up to gain momentum.

Rachel watched after her until Mr. Miller cleared his throat behind her. She looked at him. “I need to use the phone.”

He stepped aside and puffed on his cigarette, the smoke clouding his face. “If she ever give you any trouble at school, you let me know,” he said roughly. He hitched his coveralls up.

She picked the phone up with two fingers and dialed with her fingertip. “She’s never been any trouble,” she said carefully, as the phone rang on the other end. Nick picked up on the

third ring and Rachel told him she needed a ride. She replaced the receiver. “He’ll be here in ten minutes,” she said, and she didn’t know why she was explaining anything to him.

Mr. Miller squeezed the tip of his cigarette out again and pushed it behind his ear as he had earlier. He moved his leer slowly over Rachel, his hand curling against his stomach.

“I’ll wait outside,” she said quickly.

That evening, Rachel touched her finger pad to her tongue and fingered the dollar bills in her hand as she walked to the front door. She stumbled over the cat as she opened it before the delivery boy could ring the bell. “Thanks,” she said, exchanging the money for the plastic bags. “Keep the change.” She smiled and hugged the bags to herself as she closed the door.

Nick took one from her. “Do you want your tea or just water?”

She followed him into the kitchen and peeled back the sides of the plastic. She opened the cardboard carton and poked her nose inside, sniffing. “I think this one is yours.” She lifted it out and opened the next to find tightly packed white rice. “Yours, too.”

Nick clattered plates together as he pulled two from the cabinet and arranged them on the table. “Rache? Tea or water?”

She pushed his cartons toward him. “Water with ice,” she said. “Not from the tap. I just bought one of those filters, so use that. It’s in the fridge”

He laughed. “Yes, ma’am. You know, tap water alone has all sorts of good stuff in it, like iron and sulfates.”

She swatted at his hand when he reached into her carton for a baby corn. “Are those good for you? I failed chemistry. Besides, I don’t like the chlorine taste.” She pulled a large spoon out of the drying rack. “*You* can drink it from the tap though.”

He puffed out his chest. "I think I will." He moved past her for the fridge. "You know, you've been living here an awfully long time drinking the tap water. What's with this sudden insistence on a filter?"

She shrugged. "It was on sale. Can you get a new roll of paper towels out? This looks messy."

He dug through the cabinet under the sink then tossed her a roll. "Did you finish your proposal?" He brought the two glasses of ice water to the table and sat down.

She held her vegetable stir-fry upside down and let it drop onto her plate in the shape of a square. "I think so. It's a little odd that they've never done an art show before."

Nick fumbled his chopsticks and dropped one in his lap. He picked it up and twisted his fingers around the pair. He lost one to his soy sauce, and Rachel, exasperated, reached across the table to help. He shook his hair off his forehead and looked at her. "Thanks. I hate these things."

"You can use a fork."

"And be outdone by you? I don't think so." He stabbed at his chicken, stuck the whole piece in his mouth, and chewed loudly. "Anyway, they used to do art shows. We had them when I was a kid. Mrs. Hanson used to do them. She'd set up these big wooden boards in the lobby and we'd tack our watercolors up."

"She was right before I got here?"

He nodded and pushed his broccoli to the edge of his plate. "Yeah. It was weird teaching with her after I had her. She was really old. Ancient, really. She's probably dead by now."

She whipped him lightly with a wet chopstick. "Why wasn't I told?"

"Well, she stopped doing them a few years ago, since she was so old. She couldn't stay around as much anymore."

“But why didn’t someone tell me to do it when I started?”

“You’re doing it anyway.” He coughed and stretched across the table to poke at her vegetables. He couldn’t work the chopsticks right, so he used his fingers to pick up a water chestnut.

She set her chopsticks down and sank back in her chair. “Maybe. I have to be approved.”

“Well, why wouldn’t you be? You’re doing everything right.”

She reached for her water. “I have to have student interest and all I’ve gotten is a ‘Sure, whatever’ from Juleah.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is about.” Nick picked through his chicken and rice and separated his broccoli. He picked up the pieces of chili pepper and wiped them on his napkin.

She blinked. “What’s that mean?”

“It means I know why you’re doing this.” He picked up a fork and scraped the rest of the white rice into his carton of chicken, shaking it.

She took her plate to the sink and dumped the leftovers into a Tupperware container sitting in the drying rack. She flipped on the faucet and pushed in the plug. “I’m doing it to promote art awareness.”

Nick snorted.

She dropped the plate and turned. “What.”

“I’m not stupid.” He leaned his chair back on two legs and handed her his plate. “It’s not going to do anything.” He poked around in the carton and sucked his thumb.

“You don’t think having a show will help people appreciate and talk about art?” she asked measuredly. “Isn’t that why your teacher did it?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” He spoke with his mouth full.

She stared at the back of his head for a moment then returned to the sink. She turned the water off and wiped a saturated sponge over the plates. Her hand slipped when she squeezed out lemon-scented soap and she had to fish the bottle from the water. She wiped her nose and left suds.

Nick ate loudly and his fork beat hollowly against the insides of the carton. When he tossed it to the trash, the plastic bag rippled.

Rachel jumped when he touched her hip and leaned around her to drop the fork into the sink. "I just want to make sure she's okay."

"Why?" he asked. "You never noticed her before." He moved his hands up her arms and rubbed her shoulders.

"I just—when I—you already think I'm being dumb."

He chuckled, and she felt his chest rumble against her back. "You? Dumb? Never. Come on. Talk to me."

She moved away from him and picked up the towel on the counter. She tossed it at him. "You'll just tell me not to get involved like you already did."

Their hands brushed when they reached for a dish. Nick let the plate drip before wiping it down. "I don't want you to get in trouble."

She pulled on the edge of the towel and dried her hands quickly. "It's just an art show."

"No, I don't think it is." His voice was slightly louder, firmer than normal. "What do you want this to do?"

"I want Juleah to get away from her father."

Nick blinked and slowly his shoulders relaxed. He squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Jesus, Rachel." He breathed deeply and when he spoke again, he was angry, his tone sharp and grating. "You don't know anything's wrong with her dad."

"And you don't know there isn't," she said. "You saw him today." She crossed her arms.

"There was nothing wrong with him," Nick said. "He was just doing his job. Sure, he's a little rough, but you've met *my* dad."

"You didn't see him when Juleah was there."

Nick breathed deeply and closed his eyes for a moment. He exhaled. "I know that it's not our place to even consider it."

"What if she's getting abused? What if he's hitting her? Shouldn't we do something?" She was short of breath, her voice high.

"No," he said, calmly. "We shouldn't do anything."

"I would have liked someone to do something for me." She pushed up her sleeve and drained the sink. She closed her eyes for a second and took a deep breath. "On my tenth birthday, I was supposed to go to the San Diego Zoo with my grade school. I wanted to see the panda. But that morning, my mum hurled a bottle at the wall and it broke and sliced me in the side."

"Your scar." His fingers spread over her waist and brushed the jagged, raised line they both knew was there. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She waved her hand. "I had to go to the hospital with the lady across the hall because mum passed out, so I missed the zoo trip. I missed school for two days, and when I went back I split my stitches at lunch, and it bled straight through my uniform and no one even asked what happened."

"What would you have said?"

She took the towel from him again. “What do you mean? I’d say that my mum threw a bottle at me because she was drunk and angry that I didn’t do the dishes.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment. “No, I don’t think you would have.” Nick sprayed out the sink, his finger pressed tight against the underside of the faucet. The suds shrank and slipped down the drain. He turned to the table and closed her fried rice and stir fry boxes.

“Excuse me?”

He looked over his shoulder and straightened. “You were a kid. You wouldn’t have said anything. It was your mother.”

“I didn’t want to be there with her.”

“But you wouldn’t have done anything about it.”

“How do you know that?” She opened the fridge when he carried her leftovers there. “You weren’t there. You don’t know how it was.”

“No, I don’t, but I know kids. I work with them every day.” He wiped down the table and threw the towel at the laundry shoot next to the cellar door. It hit the corner and fell.

“At least you don’t play basketball,” Rachel said quickly. It wasn’t a tease.

He strode across to it and shoved the towel in. “A kid has a certain loyalty to family. That’s why it’s a big deal to separate them. You’re not going to get a kid to cry abuse because that’s betraying his parents.”

“The abuse is the betrayal.”

Nick opened his arms. “Fine.”

“You don’t know because you weren’t there.” She shut her mouth with a snap and turned her face away. Her chest was tight, and she could feel a knot pulse at the back of her neck. “I’m sorry,” she said quickly, looking at him over her shoulder.

The chairs scraped as he pushed them in one at a time. He stepped close to one and gripped the back with both hands, palms tight on the hand painted wood. His shoulders tensed, his shirt tight across his back. He let out a long, slow breath and turned to her. “I know you want to help, baby. I think that’s noble.”

She rolled her eyes and huffed.

“But I think you need to deal with the kids at school and not bring anything at home into the mix.”

“Fine,” she said. She walked into the family room and pulled an afghan off the back of the couch. She wrapped it over her shoulders and stepped around a can of paint to get to her easel. She straightened it and ripped off the top sheet of her sketchpad. She straddled the stool, the afghan curtaining around her legs.

A minute later, Nick rapped on the doorframe into the family room. “Do you want me to stay over tonight? I’m weightlifting at five.”

She took the top off a paint can. “No. I need to do something.”

“What are you working on?” He stayed a few feet to her side.

“I don’t know. Something. I need to do something.”

“I want you to do your art show,” he said. He sat on the edge of the couch and pulled on his sneakers. He tugged the laces tight. “I think it’ll be fun.”

“You just don’t want me to get Juleah involved.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t say that. I don’t want you to get involved with her. If you want her to help you with the show, that’s great. Get all your kids into it.”

She stirred the thick paint. “Fine.”

He let out a breath through his nose. “Rachel—”

“What? I said fine. I’m glad you want me to do the show. I’m going to do it.” She picked up a paintbrush and held it over the paint for a second, then dropped it and stood. She lifted a speckled lab coat from the floor and slipped it on under the afghan. Then she bunched up the afghan and tossed it behind her to the floor.

“Please don’t do this.”

“Do what?” She plopped back onto the stool and opened a second paint can to stir.

He shook his head. “Thursday night I want to take you out to dinner.”

She dipped her fingertips into the creamy aquamarine paint. She frowned, her temples pulsing dully, and she looked at him. “What? Why?”

Nick slung his dusty sports bag over his shoulder. “There’s a new Japanese place I heard about. I think they do sushi and hibachi. It’s a drive, but I want to take you. What do you say?”

She flicked her fingers at the white paper. The paint spots were small, erratic. She tilted her head to the side, wiped her hand off on the side of her coat, then looked back to Nick.

“What’s the occasion?”

“Nothing special.” He moved her scarf on the end table and picked up his watch. He slapped it over his wrist. “I figure it would be fun to eat something that isn’t cheap takeout or your cooking.”

She scowled. “I thought you liked it when I cook.”

“Oh I do,” he said, “but I also like non-experimental foods. And meat. I’m a carnivore.” He chuckled and then grunted. “Me like meat. Me kill meat, bring home to woman.”

Rachel actually laughed. “You are too much. Okay, dinner sounds good, now go. I want to do this.”

“What are you doing? That’s not art. *I* can do that.”

She slid her fingers into the maroon and did the same thing at the paper. “I’m not finished yet. I had a burst of inspiration.” She spread her legs and moved her stool away from the easel. She stood and kicked it to the side. “I think I’m going to make a mess. Will you hang it in your apartment when I’m all done?”

He laughed and shook his head. “Not a chance.” He crossed to her and kissed her forehead. “Don’t have too much fun without me.”

“You can stay if you promise to paint one too. You said you could. Want to?”

“Maybe next time.” He maneuvered around the mess of newspapers and boxes on her floor and walked to the front door. “Don’t inhale too many fumes.”

She shook her head and laughed as the door clicked shut quietly. She could see the bright lights of his headlights and hear the rev of the engine as he backed out of the driveway.

The paper was dotted now, in aqua and maroon, with wall paint and not acrylic paint, Tempera paint, or even finger-paints. She smiled and bent down to knock the lids off the rest of the cans.

Chapter 5

Rachel dumped a cup of brushes into the sink in her classroom and turned on the water. She gathered a handful and squeezed them out down the drain and down her arm. She bent over the sink to keep the paint from running onto her skirt. The brushes knocked the sides of the sink as she dropped each when the water began to run clear.

A light knock rapped at the door. She turned and smiled wildly at Juleah. “Hey, come in. What can I do for you?” She dropped the rest and shook the water from her hands. She quickly turned off the water.

“Coach Delarosa said your art show got approved. He said you might need help with it.”

Rachel’s smile widened and she reached across the sink for paper towels. “Yeah, definitely. Do you want to?”

Juleah hadn’t come all the way through the door yet. “What would I do?”

Rachel wove through the tables to the front desk and dropped the wad of paper towel into the small metal can beside her. “Whatever you want. Maybe you can help me get some other students involved.”

Juleah’s cheeks colored and she slid her hand up the doorframe. “I don’t think I’m really who you want to do that. You should ask someone else, like Mike.”

“Nonsense, of course I’d want you. Why not?”

“No one likes me.”

Rachel’s shoulders sagged. “Well, what about being my master of ceremonies?”

“What’s that?” Juleah asked. The line of her hair cut her eye and cheek in half.

“Sometimes, when there’s a show, there’s a person who welcomes everyone and talks about the different displays so that people know what they’re looking at.”

“Wouldn’t you do that?”

Rachel shrugged. “You don’t want to help me with it?”

Juleah stepped inside and spread her hands out on a table. Beside her palm were two drying portraits. “Why do you want me to?”

“Can you bring those paintings over here for me?”

Juleah nodded and picked the closer painting. She stretched her arms out and carefully settled the heavy paper onto her forearms. She walked delicately, the paper taut between her arms, not sagging. “Where does it go?”

“Does it look dry?”

She shrugged, holding the piece straight in front of her. “I don’t know.”

Rachel opened her grade book, leaning her elbows on the table. “Yes, you do. What did I teach you? Look for the darker, wetter spots.” She didn’t look up from the book.

“I think so. Where does it go?”

“Is the other one dry?” She slid a stack of written tests out of the book and glanced at Juleah.

She twisted to look at the back table and the movement made the painting in her arms slip. She caught it with a gasp before she dropped it. She pushed it onto the table. “Maybe you’d better do it.”

Rachel straightened the stack of tests and slid a red pen out of the spiral binding. “You have it under control. Dropping a painting won’t break it. It’s dry enough that you wouldn’t smear anything. It goes over there with fourth period.”

Juleah's chest rose and she gathered up the painting. She lifted it close to her face and carefully touched a spot of wet red paint. "Can I put this one on the bottom anyway if the other one's still really wet?"

Rachel glanced at the second piece. "I think they'll both be fine. You could do this the day of the show. Handle the art and everything. Do you have nice handwriting?"

"Not really. Sometimes I can't even read it." She set the first painting easily on the shelf labeled fourth period then shuffled back to the second one. "How come you're being so nice to me?"

Rachel blinked. "Am I?"

She nodded over her shoulders as she slipped the second sheet under the first. "Yeah. You're talking to me like—like I'm a friend or something, and I don't know why you want me to do anything in this show. I'm not even good at art."

"I'm not asking you to paint me a masterpiece. I just want your help with this show."

"How come you're not asking other people?"

"I thought you'd be interested. You always ask about art and the process."

She pushed her loose hair off her forehead. "That's because I don't understand stuff."

"At least you ask questions. A lot of kids wouldn't. That's how I learned too. You're a lot like me."

"How?" Juleah asked. She hopped up onto the front table and swung her legs.

"You don't think you are?"

Juleah rolled her eyes. "Oh come on, Miss Cowell. No one likes me. *Everyone* likes you."

Rachel slid onto her stool and set her test key next to the students' tests. "I'm a teacher. I hope everyone likes me."

Juleah shrugged. “There are some teachers I don’t like,” she admitted, her voice low. She twisted her toe against the table leg.

Rachel laughed lightly and shook her head. “You know, I wasn’t very good at art when I was your age either.”

“Yeah, right.”

“It’s true,” Rachel said matter-of-factly. “Just between you and me, I was quite bad at drawing. I used to make stick figures.” She leaned slightly across the table as if sharing a secret.

Juleah’s nose twitched. She rubbed it. “But you’re good.”

“Now I am, yes,” she said. “But that was because I loved it, and I wanted to be better. Some people aren’t masters at anything right away. Sometimes it takes a lot of practice and work.” She was speaking more quickly now. “Maybe it’s not art for you. I don’t know. That’s what you need to find out. But whatever it is, you have to work at it.”

Juleah nodded a few times, her eyes darting back and forth. She drummed her knuckles on the table. “My dad doesn’t like art,” she said slowly.

“Do you?”

Juleah nodded. “I know I’m not any good.”

“You’re not horrible,” she said. Rachel had encountered a lot worse before. “If you want to work at it, I’ll help you. You can be my—like my apprentice. Do you remember when we talked about that?”

She nodded eagerly. “Wasn’t DaVinci an apprentice? Like he worked with some other guy who taught him everything about painting so he could be good at it too.”

Rachel smiled. “Exactly. The first thing we can do together is go to this photography show so we know what we’re supposed to do. What do you say?”

Juleah chewed on the corner of her mouth and nodded slightly. Then she looked at Rachel and smiled. Her cheeks and her face brightened. She looked almost like a different person. “That sounds cool.”

Rachel straightened her cardigan and tugged her gauze scarf until both ends hung at the same level at her ribcage. She raised her fist to knock and jumped when the door opened immediately and Juleah peeked through the screen.

“Give me a few minutes,” she said, out of breath, and she hurried away.

Rachel nodded even though Juleah had rounded the corner into the other room. She rocked on the balls of her feet and leaned forward, trying to see through the screen.

“Dad, dinner’s heating on the stove. Don’t forget it.” Juleah pushed open the door and pulled on a windbreaker. She had clipped the sides of her hair back lopsidedly behind her ears. A thin, white scar ran from her hairline to her jaw.

“Where are you going?” Mr. Miller called, his words slurring.

“Downtown with Miss Cowell. I told you.” She started down the weed-covered front walk. She stopped and jerked her head to Rachel. “Come on,” she hissed.

Rachel hesitated. “Is this okay with your dad?”

She nodded fervently. “He just forgot. Come on.”

The screen door slammed open and Mr. Miller belched loudly. “Did I say you could go?” His fat fingers curled around the side of the open door.

“Yes!” Juleah’s tone was defiant. “You said because it was Miss Cowell, I could go. I made dinner and washed your jumpsuit and the bathroom is cleaned and I want to go.”

Rachel held up a hand. "I'll have her home early," she said. "We'll only be out for a few hours."

He narrowed his eyes. "Where are you going?" He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Juleah answered before Rachel could open her mouth. "An art show. I told you about it."

He grunted. He nodded at Rachel's car. "It running alright?"

She blinked and looked at her car too. "Yes, it is. Thank you." She let out a breath and glanced quickly from father to daughter. "Is this alright?"

Behind her, Juleah whimpered and whined something sounding a lot like "Dad."

"Fine." He turned and slammed the door.

Rachel jumped again. She looked to Juleah.

The younger girl's expression had fallen, and her mouth was in a tight, straight line. She sucked in a breath and turned sharply, her hair flapping over her shoulders. She jerked open the car door and crawled inside, sulking.

Rachel pinched the bridge of her nose and then jogged to the car.

The next time Juleah spoke, she asked where the bathroom was at the gallery. Once Rachel pointed her down the hallway and she disappeared into the bathroom, Rachel sat and waited. She held her program against her knee and jiggled her foot. She tipped her head back against the wall. She closed her eyes and changed her breathing through her nose. The single rose in a vase on a granite table beside the bench was wilting, and it smelled bitter, like wet pavement.

"He's so unfair."

Rachel turned and opened one eye to look at Juleah. She scooted slightly and patted the bench beside her. “Did you tell him we were going tonight?” She let out an even breath through her nose and opened both eyes.

Juleah nodded. “Yes,” she said boldly. “He said as long as I did my chores and made him dinner I could go. And I did.”

Rachel sat up, dragging her neck and shoulders away from the wall.

“He never lets me do anything.”

“What do you want to do?” Rachel touched the stem of the rose and pushed her thumb against a thorn, but she didn’t break the skin.

“I don’t know. Go to the mall. Watch a soccer game. Do this.”

Rachel turned, lifting a knee onto the bench, her skirt falling over her foot. “You like soccer?”

“I like Coach Delarosa,” she said quickly. She slapped her hand over her mouth and her eyes widened. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

Rachel laughed lightly and stood, a hand at her lower back to crack it. She offered Juleah a hand. “Oh yes, Becky said. He is quite likeable, isn’t he?”

“He has really nice arms.” Juleah let Rachel pull her to her feet. She blushed and ducked her face away. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for?”

“I shouldn’t be talking about that.” Juleah stopped in front of a photograph of an older couple around a checker board.

Rachel tapped her knuckles against the corner of the frame. “Do you think that’s too stereotypical?” she asked.

Juleah shrugged. "I guess so. My grandparents used to play on the front porch in the summer. Pa used to let me stack all the checkers sometimes."

"So you see your grandparents a lot?"

She shook her head and moved down the narrow hallway. "They got old and died. I remember the checkers, and the sweet tea. Dad says I'm the only person he knows who can make sweet tea like Grandma's."

"Nick won't drink mine. He says it's too sweet."

Juleah giggled. "That's because you're not from the South. Everyone down here knows how to make it."

"Exactly. I drink my tea hot and strong. My mother never even had sugar in the apartment."

"Do you brew it in the sun?"

Rachel looked at a collage of a young couple and their child. The woman held the infant on her thigh. Her husband had his hand on the baby's head. She looked at Juleah. "No. I just leave it on the kitchen table."

"That's your problem. I could show you how to do it," Juleah said. She stepped around Rachel and turned down the opposite wall. "It's not that hard."

"I'd like that," Rachel said. "Maybe I can convince your dad to let you stay for a game one day."

Juleah's cheeks fell and the creases at her eyes disappeared. She sighed. "You can try. I have to be home after school every day."

"You went to Becky's the other day."

“We had to do a science project, and she wasn’t allowed at my house because my dad works.” The photo she leaned toward glared in the light and Rachel stepped behind her for a better angle. “I want to see the ocean.”

Rachel watched Juleah’s reflection gaze at the wave at the couple’s feet and traced the curve with her eyes. “You’ve never been?”

She shook her head and jerked away from the frame. She crossed her arms and sagged against the wall. “We were supposed to go one summer but that’s when Mom died.”

Rachel frowned. “When did your mom die?”

“Three years ago,” Juleah said hollowly. “I was ten.”

“What happened?” Rachel asked quietly. When Juleah cast her eyes downward and shifted, she shook her head. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

“It’s okay. Dad and I don’t talk about it.” She snaked an arm to her neck and wrapped a piece of hair around her finger. “Dad had a car accident and Mom died. That’s all.”

Rachel tensed. Her shoulders felt heavy as they tightened. She opened her mouth to ask for more details but merely nodded instead. “I’m sorry.”

She exhaled shakily and turned her face toward Rachel. Her chin was firm. “It’s cool. Hey, why don’t we do photography in class?”

Rachel glanced across the hall at another photo gleaming behind its glass frame. “I wanted to, but it’s expensive for all the equipment and developing.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Juleah bent her knee and twisted her foot against the wall before pushing off. “It looks fun.”

Rachel nodded again. “If you still want to teach me how to make sweet tea,” she said, “I can lend you my camera and teach you how to use it.”

Juleah's hair fell loose out of its clip and shielded her face. "Really? I might not be any good."

"So? You can try. Maybe you'll surprise yourself."

She smiled. "Okay. Maybe I can take pictures at a soccer game." She reached up to her hair and reattached it to the barrette. Her haphazardness left a bump of hair above her temple.

"Can we do that now?"

Rachel stepped aside to let an older gentleman look at the photograph she and Juleah were surrounding. She touched Juleah's elbow and ushered her toward the door. "We sure can. We could take some pictures before it gets dark out."

"What kinds of things should I take pictures of?"

The sun had moved behind a cloud and the air chilled the hair on Rachel's arms. She shivered. "We can start out with stationary things. Flowers and trees are good to practice with."

"What's your favorite flower?" Juleah jiggled the car door handle then looked around the windshield as Rachel dug for her keys.

She unlocked the door. "I think I like roses best. Especially the exotic ones, like orange or white-and-pink."

Juleah twisted the radio dial from Rachel's classical station to a top 40 one. "Did Coach Delarosa ever give you flowers?"

Rachel backed out and navigated the cramped lot to the main road. "He did once," she said.

"What for?"

Rachel's cheeks burned as she remembered Nick's one display of intense romance. Rachel had sold a painting to a gallery—an English countryside landscape with the rising sun

rounding the top of a hill. Nick had celebrated with roses, which he then destroyed to strew the petals about her bed.

She cleared her throat. "For my last birthday. He had them sent to my house."

Juleah clapped once. "That's so sweet. I want someone to send me flowers."

"You're a little young for that," Rachel said. Yet she could recall Daniel O'Donahue giving her flowers in fourth grade just so she would spread her legs for him. She'd slapped him when he said her mother did it for his father without the flowers. "You'll get your flowers someday."

Juleah nodded and sang along, not off-key, with the pop ballad on the radio.

Chapter 6

Nick weaved through the tables dribbling a soccer ball. He skidded into a kick, and the ball sailed a few inches off the ground and hit the rim of the trash can. It clattered to the floor, a lump of drying paint and crumpled papers spilling out. He pulled the ball back to him and kicked it up under his arm before squatting to shove the garbage back into the can. He rubbed a piece of the paper hard against the paint now staining the floor.

“Make sure you wash that off with water,” Rachel called from her front table. She looked straight down the aisle at him.

He smiled sheepishly and righted the can. “I was going to,” he said.

She shook her head and laughed. In front of her lay a collection of necklaces her students made with clay beads and she’d hardened in the kiln. She picked up a long necklace and held it close to her face, examining the beads’ patterns. “You have paint up to your elbow.”

Nick twisted his arm to look at the streak of blue. He scowled. “How can you work with this? I’d have it all over me.”

“I usually do too,” she said.

Nick wet a paper towel and wiped the paint off the floor first, then off the back of his arm. He brushed his arm across his hip, and the wet blueness transferred to the white of his t-shirt. “How much longer are you gonna be?” He bounced the soccer ball like a basketball.

“Since you refused to help put the paints away earlier, I’m going to be longer than I intended.” She picked up a second necklace and rolled a bead over her thumb. It was mostly smooth.

Nick dropped the ball onto the table in front of Rachel and made all the beads jump. “I didn’t know it would make you stay here longer. What are you doing?”

“Grading,” she said. “Something you never do, since you just kick a ball around and count sit-ups and see if any of your students can make it to the top of the rope which, by the way, I can probably do faster than you.”

“Doubt it,” he said. He squatted and leaned his cheek on the wood. He tapped the side of a white-and-black bead. “I like this one. How come you’re making jewelry?”

“Because it’s a good pattern exercise, and the kids can give the necklaces to their moms.”

“I’d give mine to you,” Nick said. He grinned and pulled the necklace closer to his nose. “How do you get the colors to do that?” Each bead was multi-colored in a pattern of circles and lopsided squares. It was intricately detailed.

Rachel plucked the necklace from between his fingers and sighed. “It’s going to take me longer if you keep talking.”

He chuckled. “All you’re doing is looking and jotting a letter grade down. It doesn’t take that much thought. Let’s see.” He started at his left. “A–C–B–B–B–A–D.”

“D? That’s the best one on the table.”

He shrugged and stretched to look at the name. “I don’t like her.”

Rachel kicked his shin playfully under the table and shook her head. “That’s not how it works. Did you learn nothing at ECU?”

“I’m not a Vassar-bred student like you.”

She set a necklace down heavily and cocked her head to the side at him. “You know I didn’t get into Vassar,” she said. “I didn’t even want to go to Vassar. Now move, before I kick you somewhere else.”

He backed up with his hands raised, waddling because the soccer ball rolled off the table and he caught it between his knees.

Rachel couldn't keep her attention on the jewelry.

Nick sat back on his heels, the soccer ball between his palms, and he spun it. The ball lobbed just past the edge of the table. He pushed his lips out and whistled tunelessly, the hiss dropping as the ball did.

She raised her head to stop him. Juleah hovered past his shoulder at the edge of the room, one hand on the knob of the open door. Rachel set her pen down. "Is everything okay?"

Nick braced his forearm along the edge of the table behind him and looked to the door.

Juleah rubbed her wrist. "I wanted to talk to you." She moved her gaze briefly to Nick before back to Rachel.

She nodded to the camera hanging around Juleah's neck. "How's the photography going?"

Juleah pressed the heels of her hands against the sides of the camera. "Good, I guess. I just take pictures. I don't know if they'll come out."

"What have you taken pictures of?" she asked.

"Things. One of my bike. Some of the dog across the street. I don't know. Whatever I see, I guess." Juleah's cheeks were swollen from heavy breathing.

"Have you finished the roll yet?"

She turned the camera over and squinted. She shook her head. "I have a couple left. Four, maybe."

Rachel smiled. She pushed her pen into her grade book and closed it. "That's good. Once you're done we can develop them. I have a makeshift dark room at my house."

"I was just going to go to Wal-Mart."

"It's more fun to do it yourself," Rachel insisted.

Juleah nodded twice. “I didn’t come about that.” She shuffled about a foot into the room and glanced again nervously at Nick.

He pushed to his feet. “I’m thirsty. Does anyone want a drink? I think I have enough change for a couple Cokes. Rache?”

She smiled thankfully and shook her head. “I’m fine, thanks. Juleah, would you like something to drink?”

The girl shook her head quickly and stared at the floor.

Nick picked up the soccer ball and hooked his arm over it as if he were putting it in a headlock. He left, closing the door most of the way behind him.

“He’s gone. You can talk to me now.”

Juleah scuffed the tile with her toe and shook her head.

Rachel was patient. She didn’t want to push Juleah, but she also didn’t want to assume it was something bigger than it was. All sorts of horrible happenings littered her thoughts.

Juleah scratched the inside of her wrist and pulled her sleeve to the tip of her thumb. “My dad’s going to my uncle’s on Saturday,” she said. She looked at Rachel, who nodded. “So I’ll have to stay by myself Saturday night, and I don’t really want to. Can I—I mean, is there any—what should I do?”

Rachel scraped at the dry skin along her jaw and started to shake her head. She could hear Nick telling her to do nothing, but she could remember seeing long shadows on bare walls from the cars outside and hearing the pounding of footsteps in the hallway as she waited for the knob to jiggle, holding her breath. She exhaled quickly, panicked, and shook her head to clear it.

“Why don’t you stay with me?”

The corner of Juleah's mouth tried to smile. "I thought that too, but I don't think Dad will let me."

"Does he know you get scared alone?"

Juleah squared her shoulders. "I'm not scared," she said.

Rachel tipped her head to the side.

"I'm not. I just get lonely."

She nodded. "Well, you're more than welcome to stay with me if you don't want to be alone. We could rent movies and develop your pictures." Surely there wasn't a rule against this?

Juleah swallowed. Her eyes were wide. "So, if I came over around suppertime, and then I would leave real early on Sunday—would you tell my dad?"

Rachel squeezed the edge of the table. "I think you should ask him first." If he said it was okay, then there was nothing wrong with the situation.

Juleah's cheeks drooped, but she nodded suddenly. "Okay, I'll ask as soon as I get home. Will Coach Delarosa be there?"

Rachel knew Nick was waiting on the other side of the door. She shook her head. "He has a soccer tournament this weekend. Maybe we can go see a game."

"Is he playing or coaching?"

Rachel stood and began gathering the necklaces, looping the thick black strings over her wrist. She walked, heavy beads jangling against one another, to a line of wicker baskets along the counter. "He's playing," she said. "He's in a community league."

Juleah's face flushed. "My dad's not leaving until the afternoon."

“You can ask him if you can go when you ask him about staying with me.” Rachel checked that each necklace had a tag before dropping them into the baskets. She rubbed her palms against her thighs.

“Right,” Juleah said. “Okay. Cool. I’ll let you know tomorrow. Thanks.” She was smiling now, showing her teeth, and she spun to the door.

Nick walked in as she turned and she ran smack into his chest. His hands steadied her by the shoulders. “Easy there, sweetheart.”

She squeaked and hurried around him so quickly that her hair whipped against his arm. She apologized in a tight breath as she darted out the door.

Nick chuckled, but his lips pressed in together in a straight line when he looked at Rachel. “You really think this is a good idea?”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Did you really have to stand outside like that?”

He shrugged. “I’m glad I did.”

She shook her head. “I would have told you anyway.”

“This is a bad idea.”

“She’s going to ask her dad.” She pulled her bag off the knob of her office door and slipped her grade book inside. “I’m not going to let her come over if her dad won’t let her. But it’s hardly proper that she even has to stay alone. She’s only thirteen.”

“These kids baby-sit at thirteen.”

“Not overnight. Not alone. That’s not right.” She shrugged her shawl around her shoulders.

Nick brushed a hand back through his hair. He bent and heaved a box of clay bowls off the floor. “You all done here?”

She crossed her arms and looked at him. The veins in his forearms rose above his skin, and his eyes were slightly narrowed, both signs that he was still upset. “What time are our reservations?” she asked. She waited at the door until he stepped out, then flipped off the light and pulled the door shut and locked.

“Seven,” he said, “and I’m even going to wear a tie.”

She glanced down at her sandals and gauzed skirt. “Is it that special of an occasion?”

He shrugged and walked down the hall, Rachel following several steps behind.

The light in the kitchen was on. It glared awkwardly off the television screen. “I’ll be right back. Do you want popcorn?” Rachel untucked her leg from under herself and dropped the afghan over her lap onto the couch.

Juleah shook her head from her spot on her stomach in front of the TV. She kicked her legs up.

Rachel pulled her pitcher of water from the fridge and poured a glassful. She stretched across and flipped off the light. With the television on in the other room and the half-moon’s light through the windows, Rachel had little trouble seeing. She sipped the chilled water slowly, and she smiled when Juleah laughed in the other room.

Juleah hadn’t gone to the soccer game, but around half-past six she had shown up on her bike, breathless, at Rachel’s front door. She had an overstuffed book bag on both shoulders and a faded Atlanta Braves ball cap over her fly-aways. “Dad said I could stay with you,” she had said quickly, looking over her shoulder the entire time.

Rachel set her glass down. She didn't believe for a moment that Juleah's dad had given the okay. She didn't even believe that Juleah had asked. While Rachel knew Nick would shake his head and frown, she didn't care.

As she set her glass down, her stomach rumbled and turned over. She leaned against the counter. Her breathing slowed for a moment, and she closed her eyes and willed the nausea away. She didn't want to take part in anything that would put Juleah in trouble. But she did want to know for sure what went on at Juleah's home, and she wanted to ensure that it was nothing like what had happened to Rachel at Juleah's age.

When Rachel was younger, it had been just her and her mother. She never went out with friends until she met Peter Rattner at sixteen. Peter was some ex-child actor, now producing B-movies with horrid alien-breeding scripts, or so he said, and he took his share of firsts from Rachel. He took her to the best parties on a fake ID, where drinking and smoking were the highlights along with bumping and grinding.

She overturned the glass in the drying rack and returned to the couch in time for the credits to roll.

Juleah crawled to the television and cut off power to the VCR. The television filled with cackling snow. She rolled to her back and leaned up on her elbows.

"Did you like the movie?" Rachel asked.

"Sure," Juleah said. "Her mom was kinda like you."

Rachel's cheeks heated. "What do you mean?" Admittedly, she hadn't been watching much of the movie.

Juleah rubbed the side of her chin on her shoulder like a cat with a flea in her ear. "Her mom was artsy. They did that paint-splatter thing together, with the balloons and darts."

Rachel smiled. "I think I missed that part."

Juleah looked down and nodded. "Well, it was cool." She stretched out to pat DaVinci's head, and she scratched behind his ears. "Why don't you live with Coach Delarosa?"

Rachel straightened the edge of the afghan lying across her lap. "He has his own apartment."

"How long has he been your boyfriend?"

Rachel tried to do the math quickly in her head. "Almost a year. He was the first person I met when I moved here."

"Why did you move here?"

"I wanted a change after my mum died. So I packed up, moved across country, and ended up here. This house was my uncle's, and he's dead too, so it was just sitting here."

"It's really big."

"It used to be a plantation. The cellar's still all dirt. My uncle used it for wine. Most of the rooms upstairs are unusable. Everything's covered in sheets or dust." She reached behind her to touch the wood paneling. "Nick says he wants to fix it up some day, but we don't have the time or the money."

"Are you going to marry him?"

The back of Rachel's mouth cottoned. "He hasn't asked me."

Juleah sat up fully and crossed her legs Indian-style. She scooted to the couch and leaned her chin on the cushions. "Do you think he will?"

"I don't know," she said. Her entire throat was dry. She coughed, and it hurt.

She could still hear the cling of her mum's ring against the window pane. Then came the crash, when her mother broke the window with the chair to fling out the diamond.

“I hope he does,” Juleah said. She pushed her hair behind her ears. Her cheeks were flushed. “You should put flowers in your hair if you get married.”

Rachel moved her fingers against the stitching at the sides of the blanket. She didn’t know if she wanted to get married. “I can’t imagine Nick in a tux, can you?”

Juleah giggled. The high-pitched sound used to annoy Rachel. “I never see him in anything nice. He’s like my dad. Dad never gets dressed up. Even at Christmas church he wears jeans, but he makes me wear a dress.”

Rachel felt her face clam up. She didn’t particularly want Juleah making a connection between her father and Nick. “You don’t like wearing dresses?”

“I don’t like the dresses I have.”

“You’d have to wear a dress if you came to my wedding,” Rachel teased.

“I’d get a new one for it,” Juleah said quickly. “All the ones I have now are lacy and have ruffles, and I think they’re from the Civil War.”

Rachel laughed. “Do they have hoop skirts?”

“No, but there’s a picture I have of my mom and she wore a hoop skirt once. She was in a re-enactment in high school.”

“My uncle left a whole wardrobe of old dresses upstairs,” Rachel said.

“Really?” Juleah started to stand up. “You should get all dressed up so I can take pictures.”

Rachel shook her head thoughtfully. “I don’t know about that,” she said, and she held up a hand when Juleah started to whine. “We’ll see. It’s already late, and your dad wants you home before lunch tomorrow.”

Juleah sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

“Why don’t we watch another movie?”

Juleah bounced onto her feet and shuffled through the stack of videos on the coffee table. She yawned and covered her mouth at the tail-end. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “We can watch this one.” She pushed it into the VCR and sat back on the floor against the couch, knees drawn to her chest.

Rachel took a deep breath and tried not to sound tired or exasperated. She liked having Juleah around because she was another girl, not Nick, who dragged in mud and smelled sometimes like a locker room. Rachel watched the top of Juleah’s head as she watched the movie.

Juleah’s laughter during the movie wasn’t high-pitched, though. It was restrained, breathy, as if she weren’t sure she should be laughing. She glanced over her shoulder every few minutes at Rachel, smiling shyly. Her shoulders began to relax about twenty minutes in, and she uncurled herself, resting her cheek against the couch. She watched the television sideways. When her breathing evened, Rachel leaned over to discover Juleah’s eyes closed and lips parted.

Rachel slipped off the couch and pushed her afghan away. She picked Juleah up, her arms under her back and knees. She lifted her onto the couch and tucked a small, round pillow under her head.

Juleah snorted and curled her arm under her cheek.

Rachel pulled the afghan over Juleah, tucking it up under her chin. She smoothed her hand over Juleah’s hair and reached across her for the remote control. She turned off the movie, the TV hissing before going dark. She walked upstairs quickly and sank onto her own bed tiredly.

Chapter 7

In the middle of the night, Sunday, when Rachel awoke, Nick's arm was pinning her to the bed, his fingertips curled under the waist of her underwear. She lifted her head and squinted at the clock hooked to the corner of the headboard. She had no reason to be awake. Outside, the faint shriek of sirens played background noise to the silence. She closed her eyes and pressed her hand over his on her hips. She nuzzled the pillow.

The rocking chair squeaked, and she opened one eye. DaVinci sat on the chair, batting at Nick's jeans. The cat stopped, as if he sensed Rachel looking at him. His yellow eyes glowed. Rachel shook her head and laid back down, tangling her fingers in Nick's chest hair.

A few seconds later, there was a thump against the wall.

She sat up, extracting herself from Nick's arms. She slid out of bed and tugged her tank top down over her bottom. "DaVinci, come here. What are you—" She rubbed the top of the cat's head and reached out to pick up a small velvet box on its side next to the wall. "What's this?"

She sat. DaVinci crawled into her lap and pawed at her knee. Rachel scratched him behind the ears. She ran her thumb over the velvet of the box and bit the inside of her cheek. She turned her head toward the bed.

Nick was still sleeping, his chest rising and falling evenly. He hugged the pillow.

She dropped her gaze back to the box. As curious as she was, she couldn't bring herself to open it. She nudged DaVinci off her lap and crawled to Nick's jeans, which were bunched up on the chair. She slid the box back into the folds, stood, and ran a hand through her hair. Her fingers got tangled in the knots and she fought with her hair for a second.

Rachel looked at Nick and then passed her palm over her eyes, taking a deep breath. She felt a headache coming, and she suspected it had something to do with what may or may not be

inside that box. She almost didn't crawl back into bed with him, but she did, lying on her side and watching him sleep, unable to sleep herself.

The next noise came from downstairs; someone started pounding wildly on the front door.

Rachel sat up quickly, elbowing Nick between the shoulder blades. She pressed a hand to her forehead and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She snapped on the lamp next to the bed.

Nick pushed the quilt down to his hips. He squinted in the bright light. "What's going on?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea." She swiped her robe off the back of the rocking chair and pulled it on. She fumbled under the bed for her slippers.

Nick got out of bed and scratched his side and yawned.

She looked at him over her shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"Going to see what's going on," he said.

Downstairs the banging continued.

"No, go back to bed. I can take care of it." She strode past him, but he caught her wrist as she got to the door. She twisted toward him. "What?"

"It's three am. Who could possibly be pounding on your door?" With one hand wrapped around her wrist, he bent and pulled his jeans on, both legs at once, and hopped into them.

She sighed and nodded. Vaguely, she heard her name screamed, but it was 'Miss Cowell,' not 'Rachel.' Her eyes widened. "Oh my God, it's Juleah." She tore out of Nick's grip and pounded down the stairs.

When she got the door open, Juleah's fist hit her shoulder. "What happened?"

Juleah's face was wet, her hair sticking to her cheeks. She was shaking. "My dad," she said. "He—there was an accident."

Nick swore behind Rachel.

She turned and he was pulling his shirt over his head. She braced herself against the doorframe. "Are you okay? What happened?"

Juleah heaved and shook her head. "I don't know. The hospital called me. He's—they said his truck went off the road. I came here."

"You—what?" Rachel spotted Juleah's bicycle overturned on the grass behind her."

"I didn't know where else to go. Can you take me to the hospital?" She wrung her hands against her stomach and flicked her gaze over Rachel's shoulder.

Keys jangled as Nick shuffled for them on the table beside the door. "I'll take her," he said. He put a hand on Rachel's shoulder. "Let's go." He squeezed Juleah's shoulder and jogged outside.

Rachel hurried out after them.

Nick stopped her with a raised hand. "You're not dressed," he said.

"At least I'm not wearing that skimpy thing you bought me," she said. She changed her slippers to the flip flops scattered at the bottom of the stairs. "Don't leave without me." She tripped out the front door as she shut it without locking it. She held her robe tight across her stomach and climbed up into the truck cab. The door was heavy, and she struggled closing it.

Juleah was squeezed uncomfortably between the two of them. She twisted her arm out from against Rachel's side and wiped at her cheeks.

“What did the hospital say? Is he okay?” Rachel turned to give them all more room and slid a hand over the back of the bench seat behind Juleah. She brushed her fingertips against Nick’s shoulder.

He looked at her, his mouth a straight line.

“I think so,” Juleah said. Her voice was tight, on edge.

“What exactly did they say?”

Juleah’s back was straight, her eyes wide, and for once, her hair wasn’t hanging over her face. “I don’t know. I don’t remember.” She breathed shallowly and curled her fingers against her thigh.

Nick shook his head sharply, and Rachel knew he wanted her to let it go right now.

She pushed her fingers comfortingly through Juleah’s hair to her back. She rubbed in soft circles. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

Juleah swallowed loudly but said nothing. Her chin trembled but she held her head straight.

Rachel removed her arm and touched her forehead to the steamy window. The truck grumbled around her.

Rachel paced. Her flip flops snapped on the tile. The hospital waiting room was white. The floor squeaked. The cushioned chair Nick sat on was a faded cerulean, threaded with maroon, and the edges were rough where the threads splintered.

“You’re making me dizzy,” Nick said. He crossed his ankle over his knee and patted the seat next to him. “Come, sit down.”

Rachel stopped and looked at him. Her arms were folded over her tank top. She pulled the sides of her robe over her chest. "What?"

"Sit down," he said. "You're not doing anything by pacing."

She sat on the edge of the chair beside Nick, as far from him as possible. Nick touched her shoulder, and she shrugged away. "Why hasn't she come back out yet?"

"Because she's with her father," Nick said. "She's upset."

"We don't even know what's wrong."

Nick's thumb stroking against her shoulder blade tickled. His touch was whimsical, not comforting.

She fought a shiver and turned, her knees against the front of the chair until she was facing him. "Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Touching me," she said, and his hand fell down her back, then moved away completely. She stood again and resumed her pacing.

Nick covered his eyes and sighed.

"What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"She's been in there a long time."

"It's been fifteen minutes," Nick said.

"It has not," she said, but when she turned and looked at the clock on the wall above the reception desk, she found he was right. "I'm going back there to find out what's going on."

Nick sat forward and reached out for her. "Don't. Juleah will come out when she can, and when she wants to. I'm sure everything's fine."

“We have no idea if everything’s fine. She was really upset. We don’t know.”

“Her dad’s the one in the hospital,” Nick pointed out. “Shouldn’t we be worried about him?”

Rachel waved her hand in front of her face. “I’m only worried about Juleah.”

Nick half-rolled his eyes and nodded past her shoulders. “Here she comes.”

Rachel spun, and her expression changed from worried lines on her forehead to flushed relief. “Are you okay?” she asked, crossing to her quickly.

Juleah held her chin straight and didn’t meet Rachel’s gaze. “Dad’s sleeping. He’s gonna be in here for a couple days then he has to go to this place, some rehab center.”

“That’s good,” Rachel said. “That’s really good. They’ll be able to help him.”

Juleah shook her head. She stood a few feet away and shifted from one foot to the other. “I guess so. He won’t be able to work. He’ll get fired.”

Rachel straightened. She knew Nick was staring at their exchange. “I’m sure his boss will understand.”

Juleah didn’t seem to hear her. “And if he’s here, where am I gonna go? I can’t stay at home and I don’t wanna stay here. It smells. And then what do I do when he goes to rehab? Where am I supposed to go?”

“Relax,” Rachel said, louder than she’d meant to. She jumped, and so did Juleah. She looked to either side, but none of the other patients or orderlies had noticed her outburst. “You can stay with me as long as you need to,” she said.

“Rachel, I don’t think–”

She shot a glare over her shoulder. “Nick, not now.” She put her hands on Juleah’s shoulders. “I’ll take care of you.”

Juleah still didn't look at her. "I have to go see my dad again. You can go home. I'm sorry I woke you up." She exhaled shakily then turned and shuffled back down the hall.

Rachel made it three steps towards Juleah's retreating back before Nick secured a strong arm around her waist and pulled her back against his chest. "Don't. Leave it alone right now." He spoke against her ear. "You have to let it go."

She struggled to pull away from him. "Nick, why are you acting like this? She needs me right now."

"Right," he said dryly, "which is exactly why she ran away from you to see her father." He let her go, backing from her with his arms open. "She needs him right now."

"She doesn't know what she needs," Rachel said quickly. She crossed her arms against her stomach again and shook her hair out of her eyes.

"I think she has a better idea of what she needs than you do," Nick said. He gathered his wallet and keys from the back of the chair and held out a hand to Rachel. "Let's go. It's the middle of the night."

She shook her head. "I'm staying here."

"If Juleah needs you, she'll call you, or she'll get on her bike and ride back to the house."

"Her bike's at the house," Rachel said. She closed her eyes, her head pounding behind her temples. "She's stuck here."

"Then it's because she wants to be here."

When she opened her eyes, she was surprised to find Nick looking worried. His hair fell over his forehead, and his eyes were wide, lips slightly parted, and he was looking at her intently. "She's just upset."

"Exactly." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Why are you so exasperating?"

“I don’t know what you mean.”

She paced again, her balled fists on her hips. “Why don’t you want me helping her?”

“Don’t you think it’s a little weird? You’re her teacher. You shouldn’t be offering your home to her, offering for her to live with you. She has an uncle, and he should take care of her. Not you. You don’t know her. She doesn’t know you.”

“She knows me enough,” Rachel said. “Her father is in the hospital right now,” Rachel argued defiantly, “because he was drunk and crashed his car and has a problem.” She tapped her foot hard and pushed her hair off her cheeks. “She doesn’t need him. She needs me.”

“You’re not her mother,” Nick said through clenched teeth.

Rachel tensed, a knot at the back of her neck pulsing. She stepped back, distributing her weight, keeping her balance. “I know that.”

“Really?”

She cut her hand through the air. “I’m not stupid,” she said. “I just want to help.”

“You keep saying that over and over again. You just want to help. But have you considered that you’re not going about it the right way?” His voice was slowly getting louder.

“What’s your right way?” she asked. “How is that different from what I’m doing?”

“You’re not supposed to interfere!”

She opened her mouth to argue, but she snapped it shut and shook her head. “Fine, let’s go home.” She stalked toward the elevators.

Nick grabbed her by the elbow as she walked past. “Don’t walk away from me.”

She shook his hand off. “I’m not arguing with you here. Not in public like this.”

He threw up his hands. “Fine.” He pushed past her and jammed his thumb against the elevator button. He stood facing the elevator, fists at his sides.

Chapter 8

Rachel pushed the strap of her tank top over her shoulder and padded down the long hallway in her bare feet. The rising sun colored the walls pink and cast an orange glow over the wooden floor. The wood under her feet was cold as she passed the top of the staircase, dragging her hand along the smooth railing along the balcony overlooking the front hallway. Light sparkled through the dusty chandelier. At the end of the hall, she gently nudged open the cracked door and peeked inside.

Juleah lay flat on her back, legs and arms askew. Her right pajama leg was pulled around her knee, and the quilt and sheets were bunched at the foot of the bed. A grayed stuffed rabbit with floppy ears was half-covered with bed sheets.

Rachel rapped lightly against the frame. “Juleah,” she said. She cleared her throat.

Juleah didn’t stir.

Rachel knocked again. She should have set an alarm clock. She realized she had no idea how Juleah would handle morning wake-up calls. “Juleah,” she said again, more forcefully. “We have to get to school.”

Juleah rolled onto her side, facing away from Rachel, and she burrowed her cheek against her pillow. She groaned. “Too early.”

“If you’re staying with me, you have to go early with me.” She knocked on the door one last time, left it open, then returned to her room to shower and change.

When Juleah finally stumbled into the kitchen, Rachel shoved a bowl of whole grain cereal at her and set a carton of milk out on the table. “Good morning,” she said cheerily. She ate the last bite of her jam-covered toast and brushed her hands across her thighs.

Juleah dumped milk into the bowl and grumbled. Her hair hung in strings on either side of her face. She knocked her spoon about in the bowl.

Rachel turned to the sink and twisted the lid back on the jam. She sucked the strawberry stickiness from her thumb and put the jar away. “I have bananas if you’d like me to cut one up for you.”

Juleah shook her head and, eyes still half-closed, shoved a spoonful of cereal into her mouth. “Blech! What is this?” She leaned forward and peered at the milk carton. The ends of her hair fell into the milk. “This isn’t milk.”

“Yes, it is. It’s soy milk. It’s good for you.”

Juleah pushed the bowl away and folded her arms over her lap. “It’s gross. Don’t you have regular milk?” She shook her hair from her face.

Rachel put the milk away too. “Just the soy. Do you want toast instead? I have red grapefruit juice.” She dumped Juleah’s not-yet-soggy cereal into the sink. “And I still have that banana.”

Juleah shook her head. “No, thanks.” She got up from the table and squatted to tie her shoes. “Why do you got to be there so early?”

“All the teachers do. We have to be there to set up and be ready before all of you come.”

“Can’t I just ride my bike later? I’ll make sure I lock your doors.”

Rachel cupped water in her palm and rinsed out the sink. “I’d rather you just ride with me. You’re already up anyway.”

“Well, tomorrow then,” she said, and she yawned loudly as she straightened and stretched. “Cause I don’t want to get up this early again.”

Rachel glanced at the clock. “It’s not that early. School starts in a half hour. What time do you get up at home?”

“Not this early,” she said. “I get up and go, usually. Dad never has breakfast or anything.”

Rachel dried her hands on a dishtowel and tossed it on the counter. “Do you need anything from upstairs?”

“Are we leaving right now?”

Rachel looked at the clock again. “Yes. I’m already late.”

Juleah shuffled down the hall. “I just have to get my book bag. I think in my room.” She was still talking as she stomped up the stairs, but Rachel wasn’t listening.

She passed a hand over her forehead and closed her eyes. She thought it would be easier than this, that it would be fun. But Juleah hadn’t come for breakfast until late, and Rachel had scratched her plan for pancakes. She picked up her keys from the counter and gathered her shoulder bag and grade book. With her foot, she pushed a box of student pottery down the hall.

“Juleah, we need to go,” she said from the bottom of the stairs.

“Hold on. I can’t find my shoe.”

“Didn’t you just have it on?”

“No,” she said. “I was just telling you I forgot to put them on. And it’s not in my room.” The closet door slammed upstairs.

Rachel pressed her thumb against her temple and took a deep breath. She looked down the hall, into the kitchen, then around the corner into the family room. Lying on its side halfway under the couch was a scuffed, dirty sneaker. “It’s down here,” she said tiredly. “Hurry up, then, okay? I’ll be in the car. Look the door on your way out.”

Juleah made snorted from her bedroom.

Rachel pulled the door open harder than necessary and, after bending to lift the box, trudged out to her car. She dumped her shoulder bag in the backseat and checked the trunk for the art projects she'd stuck in the night before, adding the box of bowls. She climbed into the car and rested her forehead against the steering wheel, waiting for Juleah.

Juleah carried the smaller box of ceramic pots down the hall as she followed Rachel. "Are we going to make these?" she asked. The bowls knocked together when she lifted it and set it heavily on the first table inside the classroom.

Rachel winced. She wrapped her hand over the side of the box and pulled it next to the box she'd set down. "Didn't you make a bowl last year?"

Juleah put a hand behind her on either side of her hips, on the table. She jumped to sit on it. "I don't think so."

Rachel rolled a bowl onto its side and checked for a name scratched onto the bottom. "You should have. I do ceramics with my seventh graders."

Her eyebrows knotted together, and she swung her legs. "I don't think so." She breathed out deeply and craned to look out the door. "What am I supposed to do until first bell?" She pushed her book bag straps down her arms and pulled the bag around into her lap. She tugged on the zipper.

Rachel checked the bottom of each pot before she set it in front of a stool. "If you wanted, you can get a few bottles of glaze out from that cupboard over there."

Juleah looked to where Rachel pointed. A whine started up from the back of her throat. "Do I have to?"

Rachel juggled three bowls, almost dropping one. “No,” she said sternly. “You don’t. It was a suggestion. It would be nice of you to help.”

Juleah’s shoulders slumped but she pushed her bag off her lap and slid from the table. She dragged herself toward the cupboard, opened it, and leaned against the unstable door. “Which ones?”

Rachel arranged three bowls on the table in front of her. “The small bottles. They should say gloss or glaze on them.”

Juleah huffed and looked at her. “I can read,” she grumbled. “Which colors?”

“One of each,” Rachel said. A dull ache already began pulsing behind her eyes. Juleah was not a morning person after all. It was a good thing that Rachel had her in class later in the day. “Don’t do it. I can take care of it.”

“I can do it,” she insisted, and she plucked several bottles from the shelf. She pulled them into the crook of her arm.

Rachel looked up when Chuck knocked.

Juleah looked too. She opened her arms over the front table and the bottles tumbled out.

Chuck frowned. “You’re here early,” he said to Juleah.

“Came with Miss Cowell. Can I go to my locker now?” She pulled her bag against her stomach and zipped it closed.

Rachel waved her off. Once Juleah was out the door, she separated the bottles among the tables. “She’s staying with me while her father’s in rehab.” Rachel crossed to the sink and pulled a couple handmade bowls from the drying rack on the counter. She filled two with water and began doling them out among the tables.

Chuck blinked. “She’s staying with you? In your house?”

Rachel nodded. "It was either that or live at home alone for two weeks. I figured that wouldn't be either safe or smart." She picked up a bottle of glaze and shook it.

"She doesn't have any family?"

Rachel uncapped the bottle and sniffed it, then scraped the dried glaze out of the opening. "Not in the Triangle, she doesn't. Don't worry. I spoke to her father. He's fine with it." That wasn't completely true. He had wanted Juleah to go to his brother's, who, Juleah said later, wasn't really his brother at all but instead a friend from high school.

Rachel's pleas had included not wanting Juleah to miss school. Besides, Rachel had more than enough room.

Juleah had pleaded and, to her apparent surprise, had gotten her way.

"I'm not fine with it," Chuck said.

"It's not your issue to deal with."

"Neither is it yours." He scratched the side of his neck. "Don't you live with Delarosa?"

"No," she said, weaving among the tables with filled water bowls. "I live alone. I have a big house, so it's not a problem."

"Yes it is," Chuck said. "She's a student. She shouldn't be living with you."

"She has nowhere else to go."

Chuck shook and rubbed his bald head. "I don't like this."

She crossed her arms over her stomach and stuck her foot on a stool rung. "Why not?"

"Because you're her teacher. This won't look good at all, not for you, or for the school. Parents won't like it. Other students won't like it."

"It's none of their concern."

"They'll make it their concern," he said, his voice thick.

She didn't say anything for a moment. She chewed on the corner of her mouth. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Let her father handle it."

"Her father is in rehab for being a drunk," she burst out. "He can't handle it."

"Neither should you." The bell rang. "We're going to have to talk about this later," he said. He wagged his finger at her once and left.

Rachel stared at the door, confused, until her first period students began filtering in.

Rachel leaned her nose down close to the page in her sketchbook she was working on. She caught her cat sprawled on his side in the one patch of sunlight in the room and decided to sketch him. She could picture a watercolor forming later, but she needed the base down before DaVinci woke and ruined the picture. The pencil scratched along the underside of the cat's spine on the paper as she shaded in his shadow.

She was concentrating so hard, her palm wrapped along the edge of her sketchbook, her lower lip between her teeth, that when the phone rang, she jumped, her wrist flicking the pencil across the page and leaving a heavy-leaded line.

Rachel shoved her sketchbook aside and got up quickly. The hurried movement bothered the cat, who stretched, sniffed at the air condescendingly, and left the room.

She found the phone on the third ring under a dishtowel on the kitchen table. "Hello?"

"Dad doesn't want me riding my bike back because it's dark," Juleah said on the other end, without greeting.

The red numbers on the microwave glowed. It was nearing ten o'clock. "He wants me to come get you?"

“Well, he can’t take me home,” she said, and she spoke unintelligibly away from the phone, presumably to her dad. “Sorry. Can you? I don’t care if I ride, but Dad does.”

Rachel hugged the phone between cheek and shoulder and washed the lead from her palms. “Yeah, sure. I can come. Didn’t visiting hours end two hours ago? You said you’d be home by eight.”

“Nurse Bethie likes me,” she said. “She lets me stay and brings me grape Jell-O.”

Rachel dried her hands and pulled her sandals out from under the table with her toe.

“Alright, I’ll be there. Did you do your homework tonight?”

“Yes.” Juleah huffed. “Dad helped me.”

She squatted and clipped her sandals over the tops of her feet. “I’m just making sure. I’m supposed to be looking after you.”

“Yeah, I know. Can you bring those photos I developed yesterday? I want to give some to Dad, for decorations.”

“Sure. I’m leaving now, okay? Be there in ten minutes.”

“Don’t forget the pictures.”

Rachel said good-bye and pushed the phone across the counter to its cradle. She jogged upstairs and opened the door to her makeshift darkroom. She pulled the chain-light on and leafed through the stack of Juleah’s photos that she – and not Juleah – had developed the day before. She slid a stack between the thick pages of a manila folder and backed out of the room. With the folder tucked under her arm, Rachel hurried out to her car.

Rachel was surprised to find Nick talking in hushed tones with Chuck, their heads bent together over the table in the faculty lounge. They stopped when she walked in.

Chuck balled his brown paper bag around left-over plastic wrap and stood, his chair scraping on the tile. He lobbed it into the trash can.

“Don’t leave on my account,” she said, crossing to the refrigerator. “I was going to eat back in my room.”

“No, sit down,” Nick said, kicking out the chair beside him.

“Don’t you have class right now?” She reached deep into the fridge for her fruit-filled Tupperware.

He leaned his chair back on two legs and jerked his chin at the window. “It’s raining.”

“Mrs. Daughtry’s teaching the kids sex ed,” Chuck said. He rubbed the back of his head.

“You didn’t want to do that?” Rachel peeled open her container and popped a grape into her mouth.

“Didn’t have a choice,” Nick said. “They didn’t trust me not to crack jokes.”

“Or not to use a banana,” Chuck said with a laugh.

Her mouth twitched. “Good point.”

Chuck leaned against the table. “Juleah Miller wasn’t in my class this morning.”

“She’s been spending a lot of time with her father,” Rachel said. She pushed a strawberry aside and plucked up a piece of green apple. “She was already gone when I got up this morning.”

“Shouldn’t she be in school?” Chuck asked.

She shrugged. “Her father doesn’t seem to have a problem with it.”

Nick snorted.

She shot him a look and shook her head. “I’m only providing the house and the food at the moment,” she said, slightly irritated. “I can’t really tell her what she can and can’t do.”

“If she’s living with you, you should,” Nick said. His chair wobbled a moment before he set it down again, loudly. He picked up a strawberry from her bowl. “If the whole point is to make sure she has a guardian right now, shouldn’t you be acting as her mother?”

Nick was taunting her, she knew. “I’m not her mother, Nicholas,” she snapped.

Chuck raised an eyebrow. “Not going well, I take it?”

She finally sat, elbows leaning on the table. “Things are going just fine,” she said through clenched teeth. “Simply different than I expected.”

Nick cocked his head to Chuck. “No, she expected them to become best friends and convince Juleah to stay away from her father, of course.”

Rachel’s cheeks burned.

“Told you not to get involved,” Chuck said, almost condescendingly. He pushed his chair in and tipped an imaginary hat at Rachel. “Good luck,” he said, and he left, closing the door behind him.

Rachel sucked in her cheeks and looked at the table. Sharp lines had been etched against the grain. She pressed her thumb against the rough lines.

“I’m sorry,” Nick said softly after a moment.

She shook her head. “It’s fine. I get it.” She pushed her container of fruit at Nick and stood, gathering her shoulder bag. “I forgot I have a painting to finish. Just put the fruit back in the fridge if you don’t finish it.”

Nick caught her wrist in a circle of fingers.

She jerked her hand away and walked out the door, saying nothing. The wide, locker-lined hallway was practically empty, and Rachel didn’t stop and ask the lone boy to see his hall

pass. When she was within steps of her classroom's closed door, she spotted Juleah bending over the water fountain nearby.

Juleah looked up, surprised yet pleased, it seemed, to see Rachel. "Can you sign this for the secretary?" She shoved a piece of paper at Rachel.

She took it and glanced down. Mr. Miller had already scribbled his name.

"Dad says you should sign it too since I'm staying with you," she said, rushing.

Rachel blinked. "I didn't expect you to come in today."

Her cheeks turned red. "Dad doesn't want me to miss school just 'cause of him. He got really mad I went to see him today."

Rachel handed the note back to her. "Your dad's name is enough. I'm not your legal guardian, so it won't matter."

Juleah shoved the note into her pocket and nodded. "Okay." She stepped away and then turned back to Rachel, hand out, lips opening in an unasked question.

"Yes?"

"Dad said I need to say I'm sorry for leaving this morning and not telling you."

"It's fine," Rachel said, "but next time I would appreciate you letting me know. I don't have a problem with you visiting, but I need to know when, and it shouldn't be during school. You understand?"

She nodded, looking at the floor. "Dad said the same thing."

"Your dad's a smart man," Rachel said, not lying. She smiled warmly and touched Juleah's arm. "Go on. Don't miss any more class, and I'll see you in an hour, yeah?"

Juleah nodded. "Sure. Thanks." She moved her head, her hair falling away from her eyes. She smiled as well, then shuffled, head down and hands in pockets, down the hall.

Rachel watched Juleah's back until she turned into a classroom then nodded once, firmly, and went back to work.

Chapter 9

Rachel held her art show in the gymnasium the Friday Juleah's father got out of rehab.

She paced behind three tables shoved end-to-end, a plastic cup of too-sweet fruit punch in hand. She had wanted to use reusable cups, but she already didn't like doing the dishes as it was, and that would mean loads of dishes. So, she settled for an environmentally unfriendly array of plastic cups. In addition to the punch, store-bought sugar and chocolate chip cookies piled on plates.

She finished her punch with a pursed twist of her lips and tucked the cup along the folded bleachers in case she got thirsty later.

The art show took up only about a third of the gymnasium. Tables for ceramics and accordion screens for the hanging art. She was surprised with the outcome of the show, the number of parents who came eagerly to see their child's artwork.

"Don't look so shocked," Nick said, sliding up next to her. He touched her shoulder. "Parents eat this sort of thing up. You should know that."

She nodded vaguely. A group of students were milling about the door, laughing and pointing at some of the artwork. Every student was permitted to submit something, Rachel had decided, even if the piece wasn't spectacular. "I wish they wouldn't do that," she said.

Nick pushed his thumb around a knot below her shoulder. "Do what?"

"Make fun," she said. She extracted herself from Nick's reach and strode towards the group of giggling students. She cleared her throat. "There's punch and cookies across the room," she said evenly.

One of the students was Mike, once again in his Carolina Panthers jersey. “Only sugar left,” he said. “Gross. Why’s there so much bad art?” He snickered and nudged his friend in the side.

“I don’t see your art here,” Rachel said quickly. “I don’t ask any of you to judge artwork. That’s my job.”

Mike pushed his friend to the side and walked away from Rachel, jerking his head as if to get everyone else to follow him, which they did.

Rachel frowned and slid her back against the wall. She spoke vaguely to each parent who stopped to talk with her. She would mention some classroom connection with their kid and listen, barely, to the responses, her eyes instead mostly trained at the door.

Nick touched her elbow, and she jumped.

“Do you have to keep doing that?”

He buried his nose against her neck and slid his arms around her waist from her side, folding them over her hip.

“This isn’t very professional,” she said. She stepped away from him but allowed his hand to stay at her lower back.

“Neither is ignoring parents,” he pointed out.

“I’m not,” she said. She turned slowly from facing the door and balled her fists at her hips. “I’ve spoken to everyone who’s come up to me.”

“Barely. You’ve been staring at the door all night.”

“Juleah’s not here yet.”

“Maybe she’s not coming.” Nick pushed half a cookie around on the napkin in his palm and broke off another piece. “Maybe there are more important things.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please. After all the work she’s put into this show?”

“What?” He offered her half the piece but she decline with a shake of her head. He popped it into his mouth. “Pinning up a few posters? Setting out three pots?”

Rachel wished her head would hurt. “She did more than that.”

Nick pursed his lips. His shoulders rose. “Rachel, sweetheart—don’t lie to me.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I’m not lying. She did a lot. She—” She stretched for the examples, the excuses. “She came up with the snacks, for one. Plus she has three pieces in the show. And she asked the jazz band to play.”

Lines creased his forehead. “I thought they declined.”

She waved her hand. “Not important. She still approached them about it.”

Nick looked as if he were struggling to say something. He looked sideways to the door and chewed loudly.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Nicholas, just say it.”

His head snapped up. “What do you mean?”

“You’re just dying to say something. Go ahead.”

He raised his eyebrow and jerked his chin towards the door. “Juleah and her dad are here.”

Rachel spun away from him.

Juleah, dwarfed by her burly father, led him immediately to an accordion wall where her still life hung. She shuffled along, her jeans dragging on the floor behind her sneakers. Her hair, as usual, hung loose around her face.

Mr. Miller had combed his hair and thin wisps tried to hide the bald patch at the crown of his head. His limp was more pronounced now, with the addition of a wooden walking stick. His button-down shirt and jeans hung loosely.

“Excuse me,” Rachel said, and she skirted the edge of the table and hurried to Juleah and her dad. “You made it,” she said, arms open. She smiled.

“Dad wanted to go home first.” Juleah wasn’t speaking to the floor for once. “There are lots of people here.”

Rachel smiled more. “It’s going well, yes.” She sidestepped to speak to Mr. Miller. “How are you feeling? Juleah told me this morning in class you were looking forward to your release.”

He nodded and grunted. “I don’t like being holed up and hovered over.”

She walked slowly with them towards Juleah’s art. “Understandable. I’m glad you could come today.”

He cleared his throat. “I don’t like art much, but my girl seems to. This one yours, Jules?” He leaned in close to the still life, his nose twitching. He rapped his knuckle against the wall beside the painting.

She nodded. “It’s not very good.”

“Yes it is,” Rachel said quickly, but Juleah merely shrugged.

“I can tell what it is,” he said quickly. He straightened. “Good enough for me.”

Juleah turned to her father and smiled naturally. “Really?”

He squeezed her shoulder briefly and nodded once. “Course.” He set his walking stick in front of him and brought himself to full height, leaning on the cane slightly. He coughed. “Any more that’s yours?”

“Juleah has a self-portrait sketch over her,” Rachel said quickly, already walking briskly to another wall of artwork. She turned to make sure Juleah and her dad were following.

“Miss Cowell?” Juleah asked.

She nodded.

“I think I left my math book at your house.”

Rachel moved around a small circle of people standing at a table of ceramics. “You know you’re welcome at my house anytime. Just drop by for it.”

“I know.” She nodded and glanced sideways to her dad. “Can I get some punch? Do you want some?”

He shook his head. “Miss Cowell,” he said suddenly, “thanks for watching my girl while I was gone.”

“It was absolutely no problem,” Rachel said sincerely. “She’s a pleasure to have. She was very worried about you though.”

Mr. Miller scratched his unshaven chin. “I’m fine,” he said, his voice still rough. He nodded once at Rachel and limped off after Juleah, who sipped her punch and took him off by the elbow to see her third picture.

“Seems like a nice guy,” Nick said, suddenly behind Rachel.

Her hand went to her chest. “Nick, please!”

He muttered an apology and walked around her.

“Juleah looks pretty excited to see her dad again.”

“She saw him every day the last two weeks,” he said. He lifted himself onto the snacks table. “Do you want to get dinner after this?”

She turned her chin against her shoulder and looked down the length of the gym. “I was going to ask Juleah and her dad.”

Nick rubbed under his nose.

She blinked. “What?”

“Let it go.” He lifted his leg and nudged the side of her knee with his foot. He reached for her arm. “I want it to be just us.”

She sighed. “But Juleah—”

“Is fine with her father. Weren’t you just telling me you were annoyed that all she ever did was talk about him? That she only ever spent time with you late at night because she was always with him at the rehab center? You even said you couldn’t wait until he was out.”

“I know,” Rachel said quietly after a moment. She stared at her feet and rolled on the balls, her skirt swishing around her calves. She turned her head.

Juleah and her dad had been joined by Becky and her mother, even though Becky wasn’t in art this semester. Juleah spoke animatedly with her hands. She looked at her dad as she spoke as if seeking approval.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?”

Nick hooked his foot around her knee and pulled her at him. “Yes,” he said seriously. “I think you’ll be fine too.”

Her mouth twitched. “I’m always fine.”

He raised an eyebrow.

She swatted at his arm.

He put his hands on her hips and swung his legs back and forth under the table. “You’ll make a good mother some day.”

She shook her head and laughed slightly. “If you say so.”

“I do,” he murmured. He slid from the table and, wrapping his arms around her waist, turned her to face the gym. “You did good today.”

“I had help, but yes, it’s going well. Maybe I’ll do this every term.”

“I hope so,” he said, kissing the side of her neck.

Rachel could feel the ring-shaped box in his pocket pressing into her hip. She caught Juleah waving at her from across the room and smiled.