

CHAPTER 1

The green Forrester pulled to a halt in the driveway, its driver door gently opening to allow Paige to step into the warm May morning. The air was filled with the fragrant aroma emanating from her grandmother's garden. A sad smile played across her face as she recalled Gran kneeling among the plants, nurturing them to bloom. With a deep sigh, her eyes swept the front yard, taking in the FOR SALE sign planted near the curb. The sign was intended to ensure passers-by could easily spot it. A small bivouac of butterflies fluttered in her stomach, stirring a sense of melancholy within her as she grappled with the reality that her home for the past twelve years was about to be sold. Another loss in her life.

With a click, the lock on the front door surrendered, and Paige stepped into the barrenness of an empty house. Her footsteps echoed somberly as she navigated the first floor, searching for any item that might have been overlooked. The furniture was gone; some pieces were sold; some were put in storage for her move to Tampa next month.

Yet, what once was her home, filled with life and her grandmother's love, now stood as an empty shell. Hours spent doing homework at the kitchen table and savoring cookies baked by Gran were now mere memories. The fireplace in the den, where Gran had allowed her and her friends to make smores during sleepovers, now stood silent. Paige ran her hand over the rough edges of the mantel, wiping away a tear that began to trail down her cheek.

Gran was a paradox of love and discipline. She had instilled in Paige the importance of maintaining good grades, fulfilling chores, and staying on the right path. No, she had not been easy on Gran. After her mother's death and her father's incarceration, Paige's behavior spiraled

out of control. At fourteen, she reached a breaking point during a late-night encounter at the neighborhood park with a new crowd of friends. They were drinking, smoking pot, and partying when Gran appeared from nowhere pulling Paige by her ear all the way home. It was then Gran delivered her ultimatum: "If you wish to reside here, in this house with me, you will not be associating with those individuals anymore. You will attend school, achieve good grades, and cease this behavior. I love you, but your actions are unacceptable. If you cannot accept this, you can move in with your grandmother and grandfather in Ohio. You have thirty seconds to decide."

Paige was stunned. Gran, known for her kindness, gentleness, and love, had suddenly turned stern. It was a shock akin to being stung by a butterfly. However, with time, Page came to understand the immense difficulty Gran faced as a widow managing a hurt, angry teenager. Despite the pain, Paige was grateful for her grandmother's love, patience, and kindness.

She shook off the fog of memories and mounted the steps to the second floor. Passing her old bedroom and the two guestrooms, she stood in front of the door that led to the attic. Pausing for a moment, she took a deep breath and turned the doorknob, pushing the door, which made a low creaking sound as it opened. Switching on the light, she cautiously ascended the stairs whose boards creaked and moaned with each step. At the top, she took in the scene before her. This room had always made her uneasy. As a child, she was certain that some homeless person was living up here, hiding and sneaking around in the middle of the night. With a slight shiver, she brushed away a cobweb and took inventory of the task ahead. This was the last place to be cleared before the house was sold; a job she was not looking forward to. There were several pieces of furniture covered in white sheets that reminded her of ghosts circling as if deciding what to do with her. Quickly, she pulled off a cover and found a rocking chair that had been put away and forgotten. She vaguely remembered rocking in it as a child when it had been in the

living room. Inspecting it, she found it in good shape and decided that it would go with her to Florida.

The other pieces of furniture were broken or of no interest to her. For an hour, she placed a note on each item, "Storage" or "Dump." Then there were boxes of old files with bank statements, contracts, warranties, bills, all of which would have to be destroyed. A large chest tucked behind a file cabinet caught her attention. It was covered in dust, so Paige brushed it off with one of the sheets to reveal a beautiful cedar chest, obviously well-made. "Beautiful," she whispered as she noticed the quality of the wood. Her curiosity peaked, Paige pushed the stiff latch to open the heavy top of the chest. Slowly, recognition spread across her face; it was her mother's possessions. "Oh," she exclaimed. She had no idea Gran had kept these things. Carefully, she sifted through old clothes, purses, a jewelry box, cards, letters, a Hummel figurine, and other items her mother treasured. At the bottom of the chest was a large red leather photo album. Paige pulled out the book and sat in the old rocking chair. Running her fingers over the cover, she traced the letters S.R., her mother's initials. Inside were pictures of her mother as a young girl, as a cheerleader in high school, homecoming queen in college.

Paige was lost in the photos when she was startled by the familiar creak coming from the stairs. Someone was there. Quietly, she put the photo album down and stepped silently to an old golf club tucked in the corner. Grasping the grip, she coiled her body, ready to strike as she heard the wood groaning from the weight of an intruder. Had she left the front door unlocked? Another creak. Drawing the three-wood back, she stopped.

"Paige?" a voice came from below. "Are you up there?"

A familiar voice echoed through the air, yet she couldn't identify the face behind it. With a slow, deliberate movement, Paige lowered the golf club and cautiously approached the handrail, peering down the steps. Below, a shadow loomed ominously, its form obscured by darkness. Regaining her composure, she raised the club once more and croaked, "Who's there?" Her heart pounded with an intensity that made her fear the person on the steps might hear it.

Mr. X was four years her senior and had grown up just a few houses away from Gran's. As children, he had ignored Paige preferring to hang out with friends his own age. Paige, however, had developed an affection for Mr. X, harboring a crush that remained unrequited.

Mr.X? She stammered, unsure of what to say. But she felt her heart flutter just the tiniest bit.