

Chapter Eight

New York trac was as bad as she remembered but Zoe didn't seem to mind staring out the window with wide wondering eyes. Beside her Daisy practically rested in her lap unconcerned with the changing scenery. Sarah wished she could be as carefree.

Ever since they left Vermont she had been a bundle of nerves. No matter how many times she told herself no one was looking for her and no one knew she was coming she couldn't help but look over her shoulder. It was just like when she rst left Lucas. No matter where she went she felt like she was being followed. That feeling had returned and she tried to push it out of her mind.

Ruth had been ecstatic when she said she would return for the book release. Nearly every day she called wanting to know when Sarah planned to arrive and whether or not she needed to reserve plane tickets. Sarah knew there would be no take-backs so she reluctantly made arrangements.

As expected Kyle had no issue taking care of the shop while she was away. Surprisingly he even offered to take care of the animals if he could stay in her guest room. It seemed his current lease was up and the landlord didn't want to renew it in favor of a young couple whose only reference was that they were heterosexual.

Normally Sarah cherished her space and didn't like it invaded but Kyle was a familiar presence and a good person. She even agreed to let him store his furniture in her shed to help him save on storage fees until he could nd a new place. Before they left she showed him where she hid her emergency key and around the house so he knew where everything was located. She introduced him to their animal menagerie and how to mix their feeds. She added he was welcome to whatever eggs the chickens laid he just had to retrieve them from the coop.

As a city boy himself taking care of farm animals was a novelty and he seemed eager to do it well. He promised no parties while she and Zoe were away. Sarah considered leaving Daisy with him as well but Zoe insisted on taking her puppy.

Packing several weeks worth of clothes Sarah loaded up the Jeep and they headed out for their rst real road trip. Since moving to Brattleboro they had only made a handful of trips including the occasional return to New Orleans but that was by plane.

After a four-hour drive they reached their destination and Sarah's anxiety rose exponentially. The GPS chimed with directions as she navigated New York trac remembering why she always took Ubers and cabs while she lived there.

Pulling up to the hotel she put on large, round sunglasses and tucked her hair in a wide-brimmed hat before taking Zoe and Daisy out. Before they left Zoe had been told it was a business trip and to call her Rosemary if someone asked who her mother was when she wore her large glasses. Zoe was immediately enraptured with the extended game of pretend insisting she have special glasses as well which she now wore as the bellhop unloaded their luggage onto a cart and the valet parked their vehicle in the hotel's secured parking area. When her keys were returned she followed the bellhop inside to the front desk.

"Reservations?" the concierge asked.

"Briarwood Publishing, Thomas," Sarah said with practice ease. This part she was used to.

"Briarwood...Thomas..." the clerk suddenly froze staring at her wide-eyed. "...Rosemary Thomas?"

"That's right," Zoe happily chimed earning her own surprised look. Not to be outdone Daisy barked.

The clerk looked from them back to Sarah.

"I trust all arrangements are made?"

"Y-yes, Miss Thomas. Absolutely. You have a two-bedroom suite for you and..."

"I'm Daisy!" Zoe happily announced winking at her mother from behind the over-sized sunglasses. "And this is my puppy...Zoe!"

The corgi barked again.

"Welcome to the Conrad."

Sarah and Zoe followed the bellhop to the elevator riding up several oors to the suite Ruth arranged for their use while they were in town. The entire bill was paid for by the publishing company, keeping Sarah's name off the records should anyone come looking for her not that either expected anyone to. The rooms were gorgeous even coming with a kitchenette, wet bar and snack cabinet that would be checked and relled daily if needed. Ruth really was sparing no expense wanting Sarah and Zoe to enjoy their rst time in the city together.

Unperturbed by the height Zoe rushed to the large windows to look out across the cityscape as her mother gave the bellhop a generous tip and saw him out. Sarah smiled at her daughter's exuberance and fearlessness as she sent a text to Ruth letting her know they were checked in. Collapsing on the sofa Sarah let out a sigh trying to release the tension that had been growing since they left Vermont.

"Mommy, can we go to Central Park?" Zoe asked.

"Sure, munchkin," Sarah agreed. "We'll even go to the zoo."

"Yay! Can we see the Statue of Liberty too?"

Sarah chuckled, "You bet. We'll act like real tourists and see all the fun places. We can go to Coney Island and the Ice Cream Museum too."

Zoe clapped her hands. One of her friends had been boasting about visiting their grandmother in North Carolina and all the fun places they'd be going. Zoe couldn't wait to tell them about all the fun places she visited with her mother.

Sarah's phone chimed, "Looks like your auntie wants to take us out to lunch. She'll be here in about one hour."

"Will it be real fancy?"

"I'm sure she'll pick a good place for us to eat."

They unpacked, took Daisy for a walk and checked out the room's features while they waited losing track of time. Sarah was nally beginning to relax when a knock on her door made her jump. Looking through the peephole she was greeted with Ruth's somewhat distorted face. Chuckling Sarah let her friend in and was immediately absorbed in an eager hug.

"Sarah! You're here! I can't believe it!"

"Can't believe it? You made the arrangements," Sarah said.

"That doesn't mean I didn't worry you'd chicken out at the last moment."

"Keep it up and I just might," Sarah warned.

"Oh no you don't. You promised and you can't break a promise, right Zoe?"

"Right," Zoe chimed.

"Hello, sweetie, how are you?" Ruth cooed stooping to hug a willing Zoe.

"Hello Auntie Ruth!"

"You're just too sweet!" Ruth laughed. "How do you like your rst trip to the Big City?"

"It's so big! But I haven't seen any apples."

"Apples?"

"On the ride down I told her New York is also called the Big Apple," Sarah explained.

"Oh. Ah! Ha ha. Yes well...I'm not sure how it got that name actually," Ruth chuckled. "Do you like your rooms?"

"They're great!"

"Well, we should go. I have reservations at Good Eats."

"What's that?"

"A really nice restaurant. You'll love it."

"Do they make good food?"

"Yes. I promise."

"Can Daisy come?"

"No sweetie. Daisy is going to have to stay here," Sarah said.

"Ah."

"She'll be ne. Tomorrow we'll take her for a walk and go sight-seeing. Okay?"

"...Okay. Daisy, you be good."

The corgi whined as they headed for the door making it clear they were leaving her behind. Turning in circles Daisy watched them go before lying down and watching the door, a position she would maintain until their return.

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The restaurant was busy but they were shown a table quickly by the elderly hostess who gushed over Zoe. She giggled immediately liking the woman who introduced herself as Gretchen and loved to be nervous about going to a nice restaurant. The atmosphere was friendly and lively not unlike the diner they sometimes went to back home. The menu was also familiar. Zoe was immediately content as their food came out quickly and she happily tucked into her chicken strips and fries.

Ruth chuckled at her niece's joy sneaking glances at Sarah. There was no doubting Sarah's anxiety being back in the city and Ruth's next announcement was only going to make it worse but she hoped to ease her into it.

"So how are you liking New York so far?" Ruth asked looking at Zoe again.

"It's pretty!" Zoe said between mouthfuls. "Mommy's taking me to Central Park and the Statue of Liberty!"

"That sounds like fun," Ruth laughed. "And you'll be coming to the publisher's fair too right?"

"What's that?"

"Well, it's a little get together with us publisher's announce our upcoming books and get the buzz rolling. We'll be making a special announcement so I hope you both can come."

"Will you come to Central Park with us?" Zoe asked.

"No...I have to work."

"But we'll see you at the fair, right?"

"Right."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Zoe nodded, satished much to the amusement of her mother and aunt. They shared a chuckle.

"There's something else..."

Sarah felt her stomach ip as she warily eyed her best friend.

"There's a party tonight. I want you to come with me."

"Ruth..."

"It's small but it's the perfect place to reintroduce you."

Sarah shook her head. She hated parties. Every gala she attended with Lucas was just another opportunity for public ridicule and pity. Was it any wonder she had become something of an agoraphobe since leaving him?

"No seriously, just hear me out," Ruth said. "If we want to eventually reveal you as Rosemary rst we have to reintroduce you...just you. All people remember about you is how you were when you were with...you know who. That's the person they think you are and they'll never believe you're Rosemary with that image. It's time they got to meet the real you...not that shadow."

Sarah bit her lip. Ruth wasn't wrong. Throughout her marriage she tried to make Lucas happy. He wanted her to disappear so she slowly tried to disappear. She really did become his shadow and a shell of her former self. More than that she was a far cry from the fearless Rosemary with a devil may care attitude worthy of a protagonist. No one would ever connect the two of them so for this stunt to be successful people had to believe the truth Sarah so carefully hid.

She glanced at Ruth with something of a resigned expression. Ruth smirked knowing she had already achieved an important victory. Finally Sarah asked, "What about Zoe? I can't leave her in the hotel room alone."

"I already asked Tailor to watch her."

"Grandpa Tailor?" Zoe asked.

"Yep. He's going to come over and watch you while me and your mommy go to a party."

"I can't go?"

"Sorry, sweetie. This party is only for grown-ups."

Zoe pouted a moment as she munched her fries but perked up at the thought of staying with Grandpa Tailor who she loved. He told the funniest stories and made silly faces.

"I don't have anything good enough to wear to a formal party."

"Don't worry. We can go to Saks after this for a little shopping spree and naturally Briarwood will pay."

Sarah rolled her eyes. Of course Ruth already had a house. She still wasn't thrilled with the idea but Ruth certainly wouldn't let her back down now.

"That sounds fun, doesn't it Zoe?" Ruth asked. "We can help your mommy pick out a special dress."

"Yeah! Mommy will look so pretty!"

"Yes, she will. She's going to knock the socks off everyone!" Ruth winked at her.

Sarah shook her head but smiled. Sometimes Ruth was incorrigible and she realized how much she missed her friend. They chatted easily through the meal catching each other up on their lives. Ruth looked incredulous when she learned about their growing menagerie.

After lunch they headed to the department store where Zoe quickly took charge. She was determined her mother should be the prettiest person at the party even if she couldn't go with her. Sarah could only laugh as the three-year-old shot down every dress Ruth picked out.

"No that's too dark..."

"Too shiny..."

"Not shiny enough..."

"Too red..."

"Too owery..."

"Too pink..."

When she originally planned this trip Ruth thought it would be easy since Sarah looked beautiful in anything but quickly realized her niece had strong opinions about what best suited her mother. Zoe went from one rack to another giving each dress a cursory glance but saw nothing that met her criteria. Ruth worried they might not nd anything in time as the party was only a few hours away.

Suddenly Zoe let out a squeal, "This one mommy! This one!"

Sarah carefully removed the dress from the rack holding it up against herself, "You like this one?"

"Yes!" Zoe clapped her hands.

"Ooo, that one is pretty," Ruth agreed. "You have to try it on."

"All right," Sarah sighed heading to the tting room with some trepidation. This gown was far bolder than she had ever chosen for herself but she did like the color.

Stepping out of the changing room she modeled it in front of Ruth and Zoe who cheered so enthusiastically she blushed.

"That's the one," Ruth declared. "It's perfect!"

"Do you like this one, Zoe?"

"Yes! You look really pretty, mommy."

"All right. I'll get this one," Sarah laughed unable to deny her daughter's joy in anything. She could almost forgive Ruth for this surprise. Sarah just hoped it wouldn't blow up in their faces.