

One

Austin, Texas

At the age of thirty-seven, Deb knew the face of misfortune better than her own. As a teenager she had danced with it, shared its bed, and carried its child, then ran away to Texas. But not even big old Texas could shield her from its reaches. A lesser person might have grown hard-hearted and rigid under the circumstances, expecting tragedy at every turn. But not Deb. Deb was determined to live life on her own terms.

Behind the wheel of her blue Honda Odyssey, she cranked up the A/C for the drive home from Central Market. An oversized sheet cake emblazoned with “Congratulations, Grad!” balanced precariously on the passenger seat, and she didn’t want the Texas heat to melt the writing. She’d attempted to secure the behemoth with the safety belt but still worried as she wound along Lamar Boulevard back to her house on Austin’s south side. Seeing the size of the cake now, she thought perhaps she had overordered. Paula had invited her entire graduating class, but surely they wouldn’t all show.

She heard the siren before she saw the ambulance whip past her, causing Deb to quickly pull over. The rush of air shook the van. She took a deep breath. It was the summer solstice, a day that always made her think of sirens—deafening noise, streaking lights, carrying tragedy with them. Until two years ago she had loved the paradox of the solstice. The longest day of the year setting off the steady march to deep winter. The stuff of Greek legends. But not anymore. She checked on the cake then reentered the flow of traffic.

Another red light and Deb braked carefully. Her phone buzzed but she chose to ignore it. Paula, most likely. The drive was taking longer than she'd expected, and after her husband's life-changing accident, being even a few minutes late prompted angst in both her children. The light turned green and she was off again. A driver in a white pickup cut her off just as she was about to change lanes, and she swerved to avoid a collision. "Asshole!" She looked over to where Luís should have been, shaking his fist in faux rage, knowing exactly how to make her relax, and a laugh caught in her throat. But he wasn't there. She absorbed the familiar pang of loss and turned her attention back to the road.

Deb's heart twisted at the idea of having a party on the solstice. It was, after all, the anniversary of her husband's death. But she trusted her beloved Luís would understand. He'd always been more practical, less

superstitious than Deb. And to be fair, she'd tried to schedule it for another day—really, *any other day*—but she worked full-time, Paula was leaving for a postgraduation summer abroad next week, young Marco had already started summer camp, and no other weekend was available. In the end she decided it was meant to be. New memories and all that.

At last she pulled up in front of the one-story rambler where she lived, and sat a moment to collect her thoughts. Paula was off to Prague in a few days. After that, college in Chicago. Deb's heart twisted again as she thought about it. She would miss her daughter, yes, but she was also looking forward to starting a new chapter in her life. Marco at eight years old was becoming more self-sufficient, and Deb was making mental plans for taking back her life. Maybe an art class or two? Get back in shape? She'd been a single teen mom, pregnant with Paula when she arrived from Silver Spring eighteen years ago, and that had meant putting off living her own life. College deferred. Life deferred. Until Luís came along. Deb reveled in his Mexican heritage, so different yet somehow akin to her German-Irish upbringing. Both featured big families and larger-than-life personalities, an emphasis on tradition and respect for your elders. They did college together, married, brought a son into the world. Luís was gone now, but the really deep sadness of the past two years was lifting. She would always love her

husband, yet she also knew she had a life to live—she should live it.

Her cell buzzed again, moving Deb to action. She got out of the van and opened the passenger door, unbuckled the cake, then struggled to lift it out of the seat. Yes, definitely too big. The adrenaline from driving had worn her out and she would've liked to have her cane to lean on, but carrying the cake and the cane at the same time would've been impossible. She took a deep breath, hefted up the cake, and locked the car, then walked to the front door and rang the bell. Balancing the heavy cake in her hands, she wasn't about to try her key. She hoped she wouldn't have to wait long.

Soon enough the door opened to reveal Marco, brown haired and brown eyed—a carbon copy of his father—wearing a light blue soccer jersey, green athletic shorts, and black socks pulled up to his knees. Deb walked inside. “Sweetie, I thought I asked you to get dressed.” She carefully set the cake on the dining table. “The guests will be here soon.”

Marco was a boy with an abundance of anxious energy. While he talked he bounced in place. “The phone’s been ringing.”

“Here too? I heard my cell but thought it was Paula checking up on me.”

Paula appeared from the back bedroom dressed in a navy minidress. She was combing her long blond hair,

which accentuated her naturally golden skin tone. “It wasn’t me. Did you get the cake?”

“Yes, I got it. It’s on the dining table. Go see.”

While Paula inspected the cake, Deb pulled her phone out from her purse. Three missed calls. She didn’t recognize the number but they had left a message. Maryland area code. Her mother? Thoughts of sirens returned. The landline rang then, startling her, and she hurried to answer it.

“Mom?” The receiver trembled in her hand as she spoke. “What’s wrong?”