

ASPEN HADLEY



HALSTEAD

HOUSE

WHERE LOST
HEARTS
FIND HOME

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CHAPTER 1



IT WAS THE CANDLES THAT DID IT. ALL TWENTY-FIVE OF THEM, GLOWING ridiculously, wax dripping, marring the perfect white frosting. The light they cast flickered on the faces of the three unfortunate people that Mother had strong-armed into coming to my sham of a birthday celebration. Could it really be considered a party when those three guests—a humiliatingly low number—had stood stiffly in their pressed pant suits, clutching the purses they hadn't bothered to set down when they'd entered my office?

That's right—my office, a tiny twelve-by-twelve square. Mother hadn't even managed to snare enough people to force a move to the staff conference room down the hall. To make matters worse, she had insisted on switching off the florescent overhead light, and I'd watched as the flames of the candles danced across three plastic smiles. They'd sung in stilted voices, and can I just say that if you've never heard the happy birthday song sung under duress, you're not missing out on anything? It's not pretty. Their eyes told the real story. They'd wanted to be gone, and I'd neither blamed them nor taken it personally.

Twenty-five candles. Twenty-five was old enough, finally, wasn't it? After all, there was no such thing as the magical age at which a person was suddenly *allowed* to have a mid-life crisis. Sometimes a person just had to follow their gut, assuming I still had one after so many years of being a puppet. Mary had once told me that if you never got into an argument with someone, you had the personality of a sheep. So, yeah, I'd known I was a sheep for a very long time. At least on the outside.

Standing there with my own plastic smile, wearing my own pressed paint suit while Mother proudly held that horrifying cake with twenty-five glowing

candles on it—yes, twenty-five, because Lillian Burke wasn't one to break with tradition regardless of the fire hazard—it had felt like a lightning bolt lanced straight down through my heart. I'd taken a deep breath, trying to restore calm and order even though I'd known that something big had shifted inside of me at that moment. It had sloughed off in disappointment, sure, but even sloughing required a shift.

Grace, those dancing flames had said to me, *you want more than this*.

* * *

I made my way through Boston Logan International Airport, the squeaking wheels of my rolling carry-on luggage, along with the staccato taps of my heels, drawing eyes to me as I made my way to the gate. The attention made me squirm, although years of practice kept my head high and my face calm even as I felt the familiar dreaded flush of embarrassment warm my neck and up into my hairline. It was a cruel trick of nature that I had light, almost china doll coloring along with that tendency to blush. Some girls were tall, some were short, and some, like, me, turned the color of a tomato at the worst possible times. I was grateful when the carpeting near the chairs muffled my movements and the curious eyes sought out other things to watch.

I found an empty seat near a window where the early sunlight was sparkling off the floor, and tucked my cheapo luggage up against my leg. It was plastic, almost an exact match to the chair where I sat. I ran a light hand over it, remembering how I'd actually had to wipe it down with a wet rag the night before to get the dust of storage off. When Mother had given me the luggage as a high school graduation gift almost seven years ago, I had foolishly thought it meant I'd finally see more than the sights of towns within a two-hour drive of Providence, Rhode Island. Instead it had been living under my bed along with the boogeyman, who made a terrible housekeeper.

I tapped the boarding pass I held in my hand against my knee. My palms were sweaty with determination, and I'd officially wrinkled the poor piece of paper nearly beyond recognition. An image flashed in my mind of the expression on the security guard's face when I'd handed him the slightly damp paper pass rather than holding up my phone to scan. He'd definitely expected

something different from someone my age. I'd have to figure out electronic boarding passes for my flight home . . . whenever that would be.

My flight to San Antonio, Texas, was going to take most of the day. With two layovers, I wouldn't be arriving until almost ten o'clock at night. I'd brought two books and had loaded my phone with music, but I still worried about all the thinking time I'd have ahead of me. Thinking made me fidget and caused that uncomfortable thing in the center of my chest to build pressure. Thinking led nowhere I wanted to go.

To say my mother had been angry last night when I'd told her my plans would be like saying the Avengers were mildly annoyed with Thanos. She didn't understand, couldn't. Why would I fly across the country to visit a place that was nothing more than a childhood fairy tale? Why would I take a three-month sabbatical from my job with the Rhode Island State Historical Society in order to chase a dream? How could a dream take three months? A weekend, or possibly a week, she could understand and forgive, but three entire months? Across the country? Away from her? It was unimaginable.

Actually, truth be told, what was unimaginable was that I'd gone through with it. I'd listened to the candles. I, Grace Natalie Burke, sitting alone in an airport at eight o'clock in the morning, holding a boarding pass, with nothing more than a purse, a carry-on suitcase, a quickly fading dose of back bone, and zero plans for a return flight—*that* was the real shocker.

Mother had been wrong about a lot of things in my life, but this one was a biggie. I wasn't chasing a fairy tale. I was chasing something that felt truer to me than my sensible condo, my marvelous retirement plan, or my secure job. I was heeding the call of soft waves, warm breezes, verandas, and a fern-filled conservatory. I was finally, finally, following Mary, my safe haven and only true friend, despite our eighty-year age difference.

Mary, who had always put me first, and reached past my learned reserve to my true heart. She was the first person to fill my mind with magic and to be given a glimpse of the slightly sarcastic nature I kept well hidden. I had allowed myself to truly love her without fear or hesitation, understanding even as a child that blood wasn't the only thing that forged soul deep bonds.

"I'm doing it, Mary," I whispered to myself. "I'm going to Halstead House." The house of fairy tales, her childhood home. It had been calling to me deep

down in my bones for as long as I could remember.

* * *

I'll tell you what. Ten p.m. in San Antonio, Texas, in the month of March is worlds away from the same time of day in Providence, Rhode Island. The twenty-degree temperature difference was one thing, but the humidity surprised me most. Texas felt humid in a heavy and warm way, while home felt chilly and crisp. I casually wondered how much more humid Lavender Island, my destination among the gulf islands, was going to be.

While I was very much looking forward to getting my first glimpse of Texas, I was too tired, and it was too dark, to do much about the scenery around me as I pulled my little rental car out of the airport and into the city streets. Slightly over fourteen hours after hitting the freedom highway, I was feeling the pull of a bed to stretch out in. The adrenaline that had sustained me was waning, and the barrage of doubting thoughts I'd had to fight off all day had worn me further.

I pulled off at the first exit that had the glowing light of a motel sign. Mother's ever-present, disappointed voice rang in my ear. I should have carefully mapped out more than just a flight plan and music playlist. I had no idea what type of lodging lay ahead. A proper lady was always prepared and in control. I could feel my heart beating in my throat as I signaled into the parking lot of the small motel. I'd been taught well all the horror stories of ill-prepared and naive young women, so I half-expected a drugged-up mugger to jump straight out of the bushes and attack at the first sight of me.

I put the car in park but left the engine running as I looked over the building before me. My lifelong training to seek high standards was butting up against the crumbly red brick and flickering lights that offered rest. As I worked to silence Mother's voice, I was surprised to realize that it wasn't I who actually cared about perfect accommodations. As long as it was clean and available, I would make do.

Decision made, I turned off the engine but didn't immediately open my door. Clean was one thing, safety was another. I wove the keys in between my fingers so that they stuck up like weapons. I'd seen this on TV one time, and

knew to jab for the eyes. A squirmy sensation gripped my stomach as I imagined an eyeball exploding, so I did a little breathing to relax and let the silence surround me sink in.

How sad that something as small as checking in to a motel room was monumental and made me feel unsafe. In truth, I had never even pulled into the parking lot of a motel before. I'd certainly never reserved a room for myself. On the extremely rare occasions I did travel, Mother had always accompanied me and insisted on making all the arrangements. We'd always shared a room.

At the thought of how alone I was at the moment, a surge of something resembling nervous glee zipped through my body. I was truly, truly independent. I was miles and miles from my comfy little life. I was miles and miles from the policies and procedures of Mrs. Lillian Burke. And even better, I was miles and miles closer to seeing my dream become a reality. All this sudden freedom felt overwhelming, like stepping into the bright sunlight after sitting in a darkened theater.

Hands shaking slightly, I reached for my purse with my key-free hand and pushed the car door open. I couldn't take my eyes off the neon blinking 'open' sign. The walk into the motel office was accompanied by the clacking of my heels on the asphalt. Even in my escape, I was dressed in a business suit.

The process of getting a room was so simple that I actually felt embarrassed it had taken me twenty-five years to accomplish it. After being handed the key, while pretending to ignore the desk clerk staring at my Wolverine hand, I gathered my things from my car and rolled my suitcase across the bumpy sidewalk into the first-floor room. A room that was all mine.

The door slammed behind me as the cheap florescent lights flickered before coming on full strength, bathing the already depressing room in a blue-green hue. The curtains were pulled shut, making the room appear even shabbier in the shadows.

I loved it.

I loved everything about it, from the old TV, to the yellowed lamp shade, to the chips of missing paint. Even the thought of what kind of shady business had occurred in this rundown room couldn't bring me down.

I set my suitcases on the second bed, worked the keys out of my fingers, and

took a few deep breaths as a smile tickled at the corners of my mouth. I carefully took off my skirt suit and hung it in the closet before taking out my toiletry items and a nightgown. Entering the bathroom, I flipped on the light to find it was even more dreary than the sleeping space had been. A small laugh burst out as I looked around.

As I washed my face and brushed my teeth, I took a moment to look at myself in the mirror. With so many new emotions battling within after just this one day, I half expected to see it all reflected in my face, but no. Still the same me: straight, shoulder-length, light blonde hair pulled back into a slick chignon, round face, and gray eyes that always looked serene. My skin was as pale as milk, my cheeks full, and my lips slightly pink. Nothing about the way I looked told the story of what went on inside.

It had always been that way. I had the coloring of a faded china doll combined with the big innocent eyes of a toddler. My smile, on the occasions that I allowed it to fully bloom, was large and seemed to surprise people, as though the doll had mysteriously transformed into a stranger. Mother had always preferred that I keep my smiles demure and close-lipped. In point of truth, it had served me well to look so faded and harmless as I grew up under an iron thumb. Didn't mean I'd never flashed it at her back, though.

Once I heard a story about a wolf in sheep's clothing. It was supposed to be some moralistic tale about avoiding people pretending to be one thing while actually being another. Wolves were supposed to be bad, out there mingling with the innocent sheep who didn't know what was about to hit them. Yet, the image had been stuck in my head for a long time, and it gave me comfort to think that maybe I too was a wolf in sheep's clothing—that there was more to me than what I showed people. That somewhere inside this innocent-looking shell, I was swift and strong, ready to stand my ground and take what I wanted.

I had been named after two of Mother's favorite actresses—Grace Kelly and Natalie Wood—but sadly I hadn't been born with any of their apparently flawless traits. Mother had done her best to mold me into the perfect daughter, and I had learned to act like one.

She had even placed a picture of Natalie Wood on one side of my mirror and Grace Kelly on the other when I was a young girl. I had often wondered

what went on behind their smiles. As a teenager I had looked into the details of their lives, and it seemed to me that there wasn't much in their real lives worth imitating. I was smart enough to never mention that to Mother, however. Even wolves have a self-preservation instinct.

I changed into my silky nightgown and left the bathroom to crawl under the scratchy covers before leaning against the headboard and opening a file folder I had brought along. When Mary passed, I had inherited a small nest egg—which I'd used as the down payment on my condo—and her personal pictures of her beloved Halstead House. With those two gifts she had given me both my first real taste of freedom, and allowed me to keep a piece of her nearby.

Each time I pulled out the pictures I could still feel the flush of pleasure I'd hidden at the reading of Mary's will when the lawyer had handed me the folder and the prizes that lay within. I had demurely thanked him for the money, but my eyes had glowed brightly over the priceless pictures. Mother had started to make a comment about a silly old woman's pictures, but Mary's son Richard had put a staying hand on her shoulder and smiled at me.

Under the soft glow of the worn lamp I shook off those memories and let my eyes drink in the photographs. Worn snapshots of the sand-colored stone and stucco front, the great staircase with its enormous stained-glass window, the library full of warm cherry wood shelving, the conservatory blooming in ferns. Even though I didn't need to, I read the descriptions on the back, my heart pricking slightly at the familiar handwriting as I gently ran my fingertips over the fraying edges of the well-loved prints.

When I'd had my fill, I deposited the folder on the bedside table and felt duty-bound to turn on my phone and check for missed calls. Tension I hadn't realized I'd been holding drained when the screen remained blank. No messages from Mother. I was selfishly happy to have more time before she called to see how my 'ill-advised rebellion' was going.

I turned off the lamp and settled down into bed. Despite my deep exhaustion, sleep didn't come easily. When it did eventually come, it rode on the warm humid breezes that Mary had woven in to her tales.

* * *

My phone began to ring, Mother's number flashing across the screen, just as I made it to the outskirts of San Antonio the next day. Until that moment, I hadn't realized that it was possible for a phone to ring with an attitude. Mentally crossing my fingers that she'd have had time to accept my choice, I muted the velvety sounds of Fleetwood Mac and hit the hands-free phone button on the steering wheel.

"Hello?" I said as cheerfully as possible.

"Well, at least now I don't have to worry that you're dead somewhere on the side of a highway." Mother's husky voice blared through the speakers of the car. It didn't matter how many times I'd told her she didn't need to yell; she was a loud phone talker, and I hurried to turn down the volume.

Mother's voice had always had the hoarse sounds of someone being pulled from a deep sleep. As a child, I had learned to listen past the scratchiness for the tones underneath, clues as to her mood. This time I didn't have to listen too hard. She had accepted nothing.

"I'm sorry. My flight got in late and I didn't want to wake you," I replied calmly.

"Where are you?"

"I'm just leaving San Antonio, heading toward the Gulf." I tried to inject some lightheartedness into the comment, like I did this sort of thing all the time, but my hands began to shake at the reality of where I was.

"You're still determined to see that place?" Mother's disappointment was so palpable that it actually felt like she was sitting in the passenger seat.

I bit my lips together to keep from placating her. I thought of birthday candles glowing on hollow faces. I pictured Mary, her gnarled hands so soft as they held mine. Finally, I thought of a small girl who had never dared to speak up for herself, and the yellow-eyed wolf who'd been biding her time.

I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. "I am."

Mother made a noise of annoyance and shifted gears. "Where did you stay last night?"

"In a little motel not too far from the airport," I replied.

"A motel?" She paused, but I didn't reply. "I worry about you, Grace. You've never traveled alone. You're young and know so little of the world."

Forget the wolf. I was wrong. Beads of sweat rose up on my forehead, my

palms sticky as they clung to the steering wheel. She was right. What was I thinking? I had no preparation for this type of thing. I hadn't even gone away to college. I'd lived at home until just a few years ago. Suddenly my eyes refocused as a little red sports car cut in front of me and I had to slam on my brakes. Traffic! I couldn't afford to zone out, just as I couldn't go back. I clung to the idea like a lifeline.

"Actually, Mother, I really need to go. I'm driving through a city I'm not familiar with and I need to focus. I'm safe and well, and I'll be in touch."

She sighed. "Fine. Promise you'll call the minute you arrive. Otherwise I'll start calling the state troopers. I can't bear the thought of you suffering while the life bleeds out of you at the hands of a carjacker."

"Mother, I'll be fine. I promise to keep in touch."

"You're all I have, Grace. I can't help but worry about you."

This time it was my turn to sigh, but I did it silently. "I know. I'll be careful."

We said our goodbyes and I clicked the 'end call' button. I pushed out a deep breath as Mother's voice disappeared. I had officially planted myself on a path of no return. Still sweating and shaking, although with slightly steadier hands, I restarted the song I'd been listening to. I felt my shoulders begin to relax as I let the music fill the silence. Music had always served this purpose for me.

The miles passed as I did my best to deliver a pep talk to myself. "You are twenty-five years old, Grace. Twenty-five-year-old professional women travel alone every single day. You don't need your mother's permission, or her company." I told myself this multiple times. The words didn't fully penetrate through the worried ache, but they scratched the surface enough to keep me moving forward. This freedom thing was going to take some time.

At last I came to the bridge connecting the islands to the continent. My eyes devoured my first view of the Gulf of Mexico. I couldn't seem to get close enough, so I rolled down the windows and allowed the salty breeze to enter the car. I didn't want to just look at everything, I wanted to touch it. My heart began to beat in a slow, heavy rhythm as I noticed that the blue-gray color of the water matched my eyes. I'd often thought them a boring color, not really blue, just faded, but they were the same color as the Gulf waters that had been

calling to me through the years. The realization brought with it an odd sort of excitement. Maybe, just maybe, here, in this salty, gray, humid part of the world I would find what I'd been searching for.

After another hour of GPS navigating small islands, along with a ferry ride that had caused me to question my resolve, I pulled into the parking lot of the Sand Dollar Motel on Lavender Island. The vacancy sign was flipped open, and I smiled to myself as I confidently entered the motel to book a room for a week. I wasn't sure what exactly my plans were, but I knew I'd need to find something a little more permanent if I decided to stay for the entire three months of my sabbatical.

The Sand Dollar wasn't nearly as depressing as the previous night's room had been. Of course, I allowed, that might be because this motel was given a huge boost by being located right across the street from the ocean. Done in whites and blues, the room was small but refreshingly beachy. I opened the curtains and smiled at the sight of the people walking past my window, casting shadows on the sand, set against the backdrop of waves. I was darn near waxing poetic over the entire scene. I needed to get closer.

I propped open the window and breathed it all in.

For a woman who lived life in quiet lulls, what greeted me felt explosive. The constant sound of gulls calling to each to each other, of waves gently reaching land, the happy chatter of tourists, skateboards clattering over pavement, and the shrill whistle of a lifeguard in his shack were mesmerizing. The sounds were in harmony with the sights: kites caught on the breeze and colorful beach umbrellas swaying in place. The humidity was indescribable. It was as though I could feel the heavier air entering my lungs and sticking to my skin. It was heaven.

It wasn't heaven for the temperature of my room, though, so I closed the window and let the AC do its job of keeping things cool. I efficiently unpacked my bags and hung my clothing before flopping down on the bed. In this state of happiness, I decided not to listen to Mother's warnings at all. She'd been convinced that I was walking into the biggest disappointment of my life. However, I told myself that of course, Halstead House would be as beautiful as I'd always imagined. Of course, the island would live up to my expectations. Of course, everything would be fine.

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