

## Chapter One

Bloodstains remained on the hardwood floor despite the endless bottles of bleach and hours of scrubbing. Someone—maybe her mother—had bought a shag rug to cover it. She nudged the corner with her toe.

The house reverberated with emptiness despite the people gathered downstairs, talking about her life as if it were an impersonal news story. And the questions, the endless questions...as if she had any answers. Ten days ago her life had been whole, maybe not perfect but definitely whole. Family trip to Hawaii: snorkeling with sea turtles, Mai Tais in the moonlight, beach walks with the family...and she had been clueless the entire time.

Sure there had been trouble, but that was why they had gone on the trip. De-stress, reconnect, all the buzzwords she had used in desperation of holding the family together.

Lesson learned: buzzwords sucked.

Fingertips traced the top of the dresser, mind lost in all that had been and would never be. Teeth bit into her lip. Body shook with restrained emotion. Every ounce of strength had propelled her through the day, had held her up while she spoke at her husband's funeral, had dragged one foot in front of the other as she guided her children down the church aisle.

And it wasn't over; this was the threshold.

There hadn't been a moment of peace since Marshall had pulled the trigger and blown his face off right in front of her. Chunks of his skull had embedded themselves in her hair, blood had roped across the bed like insane silly string and his body had crumbled where she now stood dressed in a black funeral dress.

She could still hear it...the gun going off, the kids screaming, "daddy, daddy" from the doorway...could still feel the disbelief gripping her mind, could still feel his lifeless body beneath her hands as she had knelt over him and begged him to stay alive.

"People are asking about you," her mother said from the doorway. "You need to—"

"I know, I know, I know..." she rubbed her hands over her hair.

"Riana? Are you okay?" Her mother took a step inside the room.

Okay? Hell no. Her husband had killed himself five days ago. Of course she wasn't okay. She doubted she even knew what that word meant anymore.

"I'll be down in a minute," she said.

“We’re all taking this hard, you know.” There it was, the accusation that maybe—just maybe—she should feel guilty for grieving her husband.

“I know.”

“There are a lot of people here. You need—”

“I need everyone to stop telling me what I need and let me take care of myself and my kids.” An overwhelming desire to slam her hand into the mirror quaked through her.

“Just go. I said I’d be down in a minute.”

She wanted to throw up, curl into a ball on the bathroom floor and escape into numbness. But that wasn’t allowed, not here with these people. That would be seen as weak, as less than whatever the hell it was they thought she should be. As far as she could tell, there wasn’t a manual on how to survive this, let alone how to act on a minute-to-minute basis.

“You don’t need to be bitchy. This is a tough day for everyone. We all loved Marshall.”

“Believe me, I wouldn’t want to make it harder on you or anyone else, that’s for damn sure.” Back to her mother, she stared at Marshall’s truck in the driveway.

If only she could have one more conversation, one more chance to understand, one more...anything. One more kiss. One more hug. One more knock-down-scream-the-walls-down argument.

“People are here to see you, Riana. You have a responsibility as the widow.”

Widow. Silently, she repeated the word, tried it out in her mind...it didn't fit.

Widow. She cringed at the word. Too young. Only thirty-seven. Widow. The sound of it twisted the knife deeper into her heart.

Blowing out a long breath, she squeezed her eyes closed and summoned more strength to keep standing. She heard her mother stir behind her, approach without touching and then leave.

Hands shaking, she grabbed one of his sweaters he had left hanging on the chair and held it against her chest. Even now she expected to hear his voice any moment, see him walking from the shower wondering what all the chaos was about, see his quick smile and feel his hands move over her arms.

But none of those things would happen ever again.

She pulled the sweater over the dress and walked downstairs. One foot in front of the other. Forward momentum.

In-laws, friends, relatives, and various acquaintances filled the house. Raised voices from the kids outside confirmed their whereabouts. She paused at the picture window on the landing to look at her two children, only 7 and 8, who played in their church clothes as if this were only a big party instead of a memorial for their father. And she prayed and prayed and prayed that they would survive this trauma without too many scars.

“I don’t know what to say, Riana. I...if there is anything we can do for you...anything...” A hand closed over her shoulder.

“Thank you.” She looked into the eyes of Marshall’s friend Ron. “I appreciate it.”

He rocked back on his heels as if he wanted to say more but lacked the courage. She stared him down; waiting for a confession that he had known what Marshall was capable of, that he knew the why. Tears filled Ron’s eyes. With a shake of his head, he backed down a few steps before retreating completely.

Coward, she thought. Looking around the room she wondered who amidst this group knew the why. She didn’t. She had no idea. Well, maybe she suspected, but she didn’t know the facts. She didn’t know the real reason why.

As if dragging her legs through mud, she walked to the corner with a good view of the yard.

“Big group.” Jenna, an old friend from high school, leaned against the wall next to her. “Want a glass of wine?”

“Desperately.”

“Thought so.” Jenna handed her a full glass of white wine. “Do you even know half of these people? It’s like the whole town has shown up.”

“I know.” Both palms cupped the wine glass. “Terri Reynolds even asked me if I was getting life insurance because of the suicide. I have maybe had two conversations

with the woman in my entire life.” Her laugh sounded as brittle as she felt. “And look at Marshall’s family from San Diego. In the ten years we’ve lived in this house, they have never bothered to visit. Now here they are, acting like hosts. His uncle even asked me for a tour of the place.”

“A tour?” Jenna snorted. “I caught your cousin what’s-her-name coming out of your bedroom earlier. She snapped at me to leave her alone.”

“My room? No one is supposed to be in there.”

“I told her that. I think she is trying to communicate with his spirit or something.”

“Whack job,” she muttered before taking a long sip of the wine. “She met him once last Christmas and then again this Easter. Total. She didn’t know him.” Her entire vibrated with the realization that most of the people here were mere acquaintances, that none of them really knew the family at all. Marshall had been her best friend. Not only had they married and raised a family together, they had also worked together. Other people hadn’t been a priority.

Jenna laid her hand on hers. “It’s okay, Riana. I shouldn’t have mentioned Piper. She’s—“

“We’re all subject for gossip now, aren’t we?”

The wine glass crashed to the floor.

She squatted down to pick up the shards while blinking back the tears that wanted to flow. Helping hands echoed her motions on the hardwood floor, murmured words of encouragement fluttered into her consciousness.

“Mom, can we go to the rec room?” Her daughter Vanessa’s shoes crunched on the one remaining piece of glass. Blond, blue-eyed, tanned and flawless, Vanessa grinned. “I want to show Sara the air hockey table dad set up.”

She doesn’t get it, the thought whispered through her mind. Leaving the mess to Jenna, she squeezed Vanessa’s shoulders.

“Sure. You go.”

“Shouldn’t the kids be changing clothes?” The cousin in question stepped to her side. “I can help them, watch them, make sure—”

“They’re fine. Let them play.” She looked at Piper. “I heard you were in my room.”

“This is all so difficult for me.” Piper’s eyes liquefied in an instant. “It’s bringing up so much from grandpa’s death, my dad’s death, my brother...you know. I have had so much grief in my life. I just—”

“My bedroom is off-limits.”

“I wanted to be close to Marshall.” She tossed a strand of bleach blonde hair from her face and blinked at the tears.

You want to be immersed in the drama, she wanted to say but didn’t.

“Be close to him somewhere else,” she said through clenched teeth.

“And don’t worry about what people are saying.” Piper squeezed her upper arm.

“You’ll be fine.”

“What are people saying?” she asked Jenna after Piper walked away.

“Do you really care?”

“Riana,” a woman she recognized as one of Marshall’s patients wrapped her arms around her, “I am so sorry. What are you going to do?”

Do? Stand here. Survive today. Survive tomorrow.

“I couldn’t believe it when I heard.” The woman held on, her voice slurred with either alcohol or tears. “You’ll have to close the practice. What a tragedy for everyone. How could he be so selfish?”

“Why would she close the practice?” Jenna asked.

She broke free of the woman’s clutches, her mind struggling to remember her name and concentrate on her words.

“Obviously that’s the only choice.” The woman’s voice lowered to a whisper. “It doesn’t invoke confidence when the most reputable psychiatrist in town kills himself. I doubt—”

“I need some air, excuse me.”

She half-stumbled, half-ran to the deck. Hands clenched the railing, face lifted toward the sun, lungs struggled for breath. Close the practice. She hadn’t even

considered such a thing. They were both psychiatrists. What was her fate now? Lose the husband, lose the career...what next?

“Who cares? I care.”

“What?” She blinked, startled by the comment.

Marshall’s biological father stood behind her, face twisted into a sneer. Winston Warren hadn’t spoken to his son in over three years, yet here he stood acting like a victim for all to see.

“Never say I didn’t care,” he muttered.

“I didn’t say it.”

“Bitch.” With that, he walked back into the house.

“Riana,” someone called her name but she ignored it.

She walked down the deck stairs, onto the grass and toward the stream. Fallen leaves crunched beneath her feet. Aspen and pine trees stretched toward a flawless blue sky. Air smelled like late autumn, crisp and rich.

Numb, she sank onto a rock, squeezed her eyes closed, wrapped the sweater tight around her, inhaled the sweet mountain air, and listened to the garbled whispers of the river.

“Damn you, Marshall,” she whispered, mouth wet with tears. “Why did you leave us?”

“Riana...”

She jumped at the sound of her name said so hesitantly. Pulling the sweater over her hands, she glanced at the man she hadn't noticed before sitting down. Brody Dalton watched her from the shadows, face unreadable.

"I didn't see you there," she whispered.

"I can go..." He motioned toward his house on the other side of the river.

"I noticed you playing with the kids earlier. Thank you for distracting them."

She brushed tears away with a sweater-covered hand.

"I don't know what to say, Riana." He pushed away from the tree and walked toward her.

She watched the water rushing over rocks beneath her. From the corner of her eye, she noticed him hesitate beside the boulder where she sat, heard him sigh, watched his feet move as if unsure whether to stay or go.

"C'mon, Brody, don't tell me that I make you uncomfortable now, too," she said.

"Want me to lie to you?" He shoved his hands through his hair.

"Yes, please." She wrapped her arms across her chest. "Lie to me."

He twisted a twig between his fingers before tossing it into the river at their feet.

"I hate this," she whispered, "all of these people struggling to find the right words, the tension, the gossip, the questions...I really hate it."

"Remember when we were teenagers and we took Ms. Simmons snowmobile out for a joy ride and—"

“—Crashed it up on Montezuma—”

“—we had to walk back for miles and everyone speculated about what we were really doing up there—”

“—we let them wonder and question and fed the innuendo because we were sixteen and enjoyed being the center of a mystery—”

“—and we understood that we didn’t owe anyone an explanation because we knew the truth and didn’t give a damn about what they thought.” He squeezed her shoulder until she looked up at him. “You don’t owe anyone anything, Riana.”

“This is a bit bigger than a long walk from Montezuma.” Tears blurred her vision.

“You are Riana Wolfe-Warren, a psychologist, a mother of two, a force to be reckoned with and Marshall’s suicide doesn’t change any of that.” He brushed a tear away with his thumb. “My opinion stands; no one here needs an explanation from you about one damn thing.”

“You’re an idealist.”

“Hardly.” With an absent-minded smile, he rubbed his left knee.

She winced at her words. She and Brody had gone down different paths after high school. She had chosen college, marriage and a career. He had chosen adventure travel and a long stint on the US Ski Team. His path had come to a crossroads a year ago

after a ski accident shattered his left leg, leaving him with a permanent limp, a fistful of gold medals and a room in his parents' house across the river from hers.

"I haven't been too friendly since you've come home..." She fingered her wedding ring.

"Riana." Piper waved as she jogged across the yard. "You need to come inside. Winston is demanding half of the ashes."

Half of...what? Like hell.

She strode past Piper, strode past guests on the deck, strode past the gossips, and strode past her mother until she came face-to-face with Winston.

"He was my son." He practically spat in her face. "My son. You ruined him."

"Get out of my house."

"Not without my share of his ashes."

Sam, her youngest, wrapped his fingers around her wrist and pressed against her side.

"We are scattering his ashes over Hoosier Pass tomorrow." Voice trembled, barely above a whisper. Agony twisted her heart like a dishrag. "That's what he always talked about, that's what we're going to do."

"I am not leaving without half."

"What do you expect me to do? Reach inside the urn and pour out a share for you? Where the hell were you for the past three years? Where the hell were you for his

entire life, for that matter? Where? Drinking down in Durango? Who do you think you are coming into my house and demanding anything from me?" Without caring who heard or who saw or who judged, she poked him in the chest. "Get out."

"Not without my son."

"You wanted nothing to do with your son or with any of us. You showed up here today for his funeral, after I had made all the arrangements, after all had been said and done and now you make a claim? You get nothing. Nothing. Take your guilt and get the hell out."

"Riana." Jenna's hand fell her shoulder. "Calm down."

"I will not calm down." If one more person told her how to feel...She shook off the hand.

"I think you need to leave." Brody stepped between her and Winston. "Riana asked you to go, so now you need to go."

"This is my son's house," Winston said. "This bitch—"

"This bitch has had enough for one day," she said as she picked her son up and held him against her. "Just get him out of here."

She walked past Winston, past her mother, past Marshall's mother, past the cousins, past the employees, past the gossips and up the stairs. Slamming the door to her bedroom, she sank onto the comforter with Sam tucked against her.

"I think everyone will leave now, Mommy."

Fingers toying with his hair, she grinned thru the tears. “Yeah, I probably scared them away.”

Vanessa opened the door and softly shut it behind her. With a glance at the rug, she crawled onto the bed.

“Grandpa Warren is really mad,” her daughter whispered. “Is he mad at daddy?”

“Come here.” She held her arm out and tucked her daughter next to her other side. Adjusting herself on the pillows, she held her children close. “Let’s not worry about anyone else right now.”

“Just us three,” Sam said, his fingers curling into the sweater.

“That’s right. Just us three.”

She chewed her lip, gaze also going to where Marshall had stood at the foot of the bed, and swallowed the tears. She would be damned if she would succumb to fear and abandon her room. Everyone seemed to have an opinion and right now she wanted them all to shut up. Enough change, enough upheaval...to hell with Marshall if his death forced her from this room or this house they had designed. To hell with them all.

“I like this new comforter,” Vanessa said. “I don’t like that brown rug. It’s ugly.”

“Shh...” Her fingers toyed with the kids’ hair as she stared at the ceiling. “Let’s just lay here for awhile. Just us three.”

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