

Running on Empty

Chapter One

Santa Rosa, California

Anne McCormack surveyed the living room, casting her eyes from one gilt-framed oil painting to another, taking in the antique red tasseled lampshades, red flocked wallpaper, red floral overstuffed sofa, and the oriental rug woven with every imaginable shade of red. All that exuberant red reminded her of a magazine layout she'd seen featuring the late *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland's famous New York apartment. Tastefully garish.

The house was one of many Victorian homes lining McDonald Avenue, Santa Rosa's historic "Victorian row." The tree-lined boulevard was the filming location of several Hollywood classics, including the 1943 *Shadow of a Doubt* by Alfred Hitchcock, Disney's 1960 *Pollyanna*, and the nineties camp horror film *Scream*. The Victorian in which Anne was standing was owned by her newest clients, the family of the recently deceased, very wealthy Lily Danielson, who had left behind more treasures and personal effects than her heirs could handle.

Those belongings were why Anne, owner of McCormack Estate Services, was here after eight o'clock on a Sunday night with her teenage assistant, Chloe Grindel. Anne's job was to dispose of everything in the house, one way or another: to assess, catalog, toss out, put up for auction, sell, save for the family, or donate to charities. The executor, the family's lawyer, wanted it all handled ASAP before any more troublesome family fights could break out. *Fine*, Anne thought, the sooner the job was done, the sooner she'd deposit a commission check on the proceeds of any sales.

They were still at the sorting and boxing up stage.

Seven banker's boxes were stacked precariously in the middle of the room, the top ones on the verge of toppling over onto Chloe, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor. Next to her on the rug was an old diary she'd found in the bookcase. Chloe was packing up books—except for the first editions, which would be offered to dealers—and sighing theatrically.

“How are you doing over there?” Anne asked.

“Slow, very slow. I'm not fast like you are,” Chloe said, standing up to stretch, raising her arms to the heavens. “But then, you've been doing this for decades...”

“A slight exaggeration,” Anne said. In fact, she was fairly new to family estate services. She'd spent most of her twenties as an FBI agent in Sacramento's Violent Crimes division. After six years, she left the Bureau voluntarily, under no cloud (*You did not get fired*, her Uncle Jack, a retired cop would insist). Under no cloud, that is, except the one she conjured up and obsessed over (*But it did get ugly after they discovered I was using their high-security database software to track my ex-husband*, she'd counter).

On the same day she was confronted by her supervisor, she dropped her resignation letter on his desk and walked out the door, vowing that her next career would be a complete 180 from

law enforcement. She would follow her passions—researching art and its provenance—and someday be her own boss, health benefits or not. Turns out, those passions were the exact skills required for family estate sales services. And since it was a far cry from crime-fighting, she figured why not do it professionally? For two years she worked as an assistant to estate services guru Marty Holmes, who became her mentor in the business. His mantra: “Estate sales are *not* garage sales!” The estate sales business, he’d insist, is about helping families dispose of the treasures left behind after a loved one’s death, and then getting a big fat commission from the sales of said treasures. Period.

After learning the trade, Anne struck out on her own three years ago. If she’d ever imagined that being a business owner meant naming her own hours and taking long vacations, she was quickly proven wrong. The reality was that when business was good—and it finally was—she ended up working relentlessly long hours. Like tonight.

“After finishing that box, let’s call it a night,” she said. Chloe had school in the morning.

“Not yet,” Chloe pleaded. The girl was always angling for longer hours, arguing, “You won’t find cheaper or better child labor than me.” And Anne almost always relented. She knew that nearly every dollar Chloe earned was being squirreled away into her college fund. Besides, she liked Chloe’s company. Chloe was the favorite grandchild of one of Anne’s first clients, Claire Murray, whose death two years before had hit the teenager hard. Anne had grown fond of Claire and missed her too, and while she and Chloe worked, they would often swap Claire stories.

But recently, all Chloe wanted to talk about—when not complaining about her mother’s strict hours or the unfair soccer coach—was the “Battalion Chief” competition at her high school. Not much had changed about the yearly contest since Anne had participated: The student

who searched private homes and collected the most “fire hazard” violation tickets was the winner. Back then, the winning prize was simply being named “Honorary Battalion Chief.” But this year, the stakes were high—a \$25,000 college scholarship to the winner in each class, donated by a group of wealthy vintners who wanted to encourage fire safety in the wildfire-ravaged Sonoma County.

“I can put it toward any college I want. When I add that to what I’m making working for you, and what my parents can chip in, I might get to go to UC Berkeley, Harvard, or California College of the Arts, who knows!”

One of their phones pinged.

“Sky’s the limit,” Anne agreed, looking down at her phone. Nothing. She hadn’t heard from Scott, her boyfriend of three months, since their fight two days before. Nodding toward Chloe’s phone on the coffee table, she said, “Bet your mom wants you to come home.”

Chloe sauntered over to pick up her phone. Leaning against a wall, she stared intently at the screen—reading the text message, answering it, and reading the response.

“Oh, no,” Chloe blurted out. She slowly slid down the wall, crumbling to the hardwood floor. “There goes everything,” she said in a low, ominous tone. “Everything I’ve ever worked for.” She set her phone down beside her and hugged her knees to her chest.

Anne bit her lip to keep from smiling. How much work could Chloe have done in her short life? How much did she have to lose? Chloe was a month shy of being sixteen years old, not some frail senior citizen whose life savings were ruthlessly embezzled or whose house was destroyed in a fire without any insurance to cover rebuilding it. But as Anne watched tears well in Chloe’s eyes, she knew there was nothing even slightly amusing about whatever was going on. Chloe was heartbroken.

Anne crouched down in front of her. “What do you mean by ‘lost everything?’ What happened?” she asked in a gentle voice.

Chloe uncovered her eyes, let out a sigh, and pointed to her phone. “That girl. Pam O’Brien. Tomorrow is the last day to hand in our tickets to see who wins the scholarship. She asked me how many I had....”

“And?” Anne prompted.

“I told her I had forty-five, which is way more than anyone else in the class. The nearest kid to me is Justin Frey, and he only has thirty-two. Then Pam texted back, ‘Too bad, cause I have fifty.’ That’s five more than me,” Chloe’s voice broke. “I never even knew she was *close!*”

Fire hazard violations were hard to come by, as Anne well knew. She remembered having to screw up the courage to knock on the door of a neighbor or acquaintance, then taking a deep breath and asking permission to go poking through their house looking for fire hazards like loose wiring, stacks of newspapers, overloaded electrical outlets, aging space heaters. Most people were good-humored about it, accepted their copies of the tickets, and promised to do better. But others tried to talk her out of the tickets, thinking the violations would be reported to city officials and they’d be fined. That never happened, of course; the fallout would have ended the contest years ago.

“And she tells you this at 8:30 at night...”

“Too late...”

Anne stood up abruptly. “Where’s your book of tickets? In your backpack?”

“Yeah. For all the good it does me,” Chloe said, giving the bag a shove as if it were to blame for her crushed dreams, the late hour, Pam O’Brien’s taunts. Everything.

Anne reached out her hands to the sobbing girl and pulled her to her feet. She grabbed

their jackets off the couch and tossed Chloe's to her.

“Get in the car,” Anne said.