

PROLOGUE

Eight Months Ago—Grace

My eyes shot open when I heard the yelping. Barney was going to wake the baby. I dove toward the old dog, grabbed his snout, and held it closed with both hands. “Shh,” I pleaded.

I lowered one hand and rubbed Barney’s back, trying to calm him. He let out a whine, and like clockwork, Liam started to cry. I closed my eyes, sucked in a deep breath, and braced myself for another late-night nursing session. My body felt heavy with milk and stress and exhaustion.

Carefully, I scooped up the howling baby, carried him over to the rocking chair, and lifted my T-shirt to feed him. Liam quieted down and nestled against me. I sniffed his hair and stroked his cheek as we rocked back and forth. Part of me wanted to stay like this all night. But a bigger part of me longed to be under the covers, passed out in a warm oblivion.

I heard the shower turn on down the hall. Ted must be back from serving his warrant. A few months ago, he’d gotten smart with a lieutenant, who then started feeding him late-night assignments. These frequent absences were brutal now that I was back from maternity leave and needed sleep to function at work.

Barney whined again and clawed at the bedroom door. Clutching Liam, I rose to let the dog out of the room.

I looked down at the baby, who was asleep and making little catlike snores. With slow, deliberate steps, I made my way toward the crib and lowered him until his back rested against the fabric. But the change in angle caused his eyes to open and his lungs to inflate. Then came the

cry—and Barney ran back to the bedroom, joining Liam in a horrible wailing duet. I reached out toward the dog and felt wet fur. *Damn it*—Barney must have peed in the house. Hot tears ran down my cheeks. What I wouldn't give for *one night's sleep*.

The door opened and Ted walked in with a towel around his waist. "I need help," I snapped.

"What?" asked Ted, surprised by my tone.

My eyes were closed, and I was crying. But Ted couldn't see that in the dark. He just sensed the anger in my voice. I knew it wasn't his fault that the baby wouldn't sleep, that the dog couldn't hold it, and that his boss was a jerk. But I'd reached my limit, and Ted was the only living being in earshot who understood human language.

"Barney peed in the house. Take Liam so I can let the dog out before he does it again. Just try to get him back to sleep." I placed the screaming, wriggling infant in Ted's arms before either of them could protest.

Flipping on the hall light, I made my way to the kitchen. Barney scampered ahead of me, spinning in circles. I threw on Ted's faded hoodie. It reeked of old sweat, but I was too tired to care. I hooked Barney's leash to his collar, and bracing myself for the cold, I unlocked the back door and stepped outside.

The Santa Anas blew hard, and I shivered as cold air soaked through the hoodie's weave. I could hear the Jeffrey pines rustle in the wind. Thrusting my hands into the central pocket, I rubbed them together for warmth.

A smoky odor hung in the air—maybe the residue of a neighbor's barbecue dinner. But the wind should have blown away the scent by now.

Barney tugged at his leash. I let him drag me toward the street. Now that we were outside, he wouldn't be satisfied without a walk, and it might clear my head as well.

The sky was lighter than I'd expected. Idlewood doesn't have streetlights. It's a conscious decision to preserve the log-cabins-in-the-woods feel of the place. Darkness adds to the storybook charm, and it can be hard to find your way on moonless nights. But the sky had an orange-gray glow that reminded me of LA smog. Maybe it was later than I thought, almost morning.

Barney tugged on his leash, half-dragging me up the road toward the intersection. He seemed agitated, and I wondered what had gotten into him. As we passed the Hernandez's place, our footsteps activated the motion sensor, and the automatic light above their garage snapped on with an electric hum.

I noticed something floating in the air. Tiny particles, like gray snow or dryer lint. The flecks danced in the air, and Barney snapped at one as it fluttered toward his jaws. The smell of smoke was growing stronger.

Oh my god.

Clutching Barney's leash, I ran the rest of the way to the cross street, which cut straight to the mountain. High in the pines, I saw an orange glow—luminous against the dark sky. My vision tunneled, and all I could see was the fire on the hillside. The light was near Abby's cabin. But I couldn't tell how near.

I grabbed my phone and scanned my recent calls, but it had been weeks since I'd spoken to my sister, and her name didn't pop up. I pulled up my contact list and clicked on her name. After four rings, a cheerful recording prompted me to leave a message. *Maybe she's already fled.*

No, Abby would've called if she were awake. She might hate me, but she'd warn me about a wildfire.

I called back, praying that her cell wasn't on silent. *Come on Abby, answer the phone.* When I heard the prerecorded message again, I started to panic. I left a voicemail: "Abby, it's Grace. There's a fire by your cabin—you need to leave now!"

The orange glow was getting bigger as the Santa Anas blew the flames toward Idlewood. It was how I'd always imagined an erupting volcano would look, with lava flowing down its sides. I called Abby a third time, cursing under my breath. Across the street, a door opened, and an old man stepped outside, holding a little white dog. "There's a fire!" he shouted.

I looked at him and then back at the mountain, ringing phone pressed against my ear. *Dammit, Abby, pick up!* "My son works at the fire station," said the man. "They're about to put out an alert. We have to evacuate. The whole town could burn."

"My sister's cabin is on the hillside, and she's not answering," I shouted. "Can you call your son and tell him someone's up there?"

I heard a chime and looked down at my phone. It was a text from the fire department, ordering us to leave Idlewood. But my feet stayed planted. My sister was on that mountain, with nothing but a narrow dirt road leading down to safety. If the fire overtook the path, she'd be trapped.

"Jeffrey, it's Pop," I heard the old man say. "There's a lady here whose sister has a cabin near the fire."

Hearing those words unleashed a fresh wave of panic. Abby's cheerful answering machine message sounded for a fifth time in my ear. "Abby, get out of there!" I screamed into the phone.

“We have to go,” said the neighbor. “This thing could spread faster than they can contain it.”

My phone chimed and I looked down at the screen, hoping to see Abby’s name, but it was a voicemail from Ted. Before I could call him back, a text flashed across my screen:

FIRE—COME HOME NOW

I looked back and forth from my screen to the mountain. My sister was up there. But my husband and son were at the house. I couldn’t wait any longer. I tugged at Barney’s leash and ran home.