

PROLOGUE

Mercy Hospital, Pittsburgh, 1983

I didn't lose everything. I am still Deana, and I still know what was true. We ate. A flask passed between us. A good presence was there that I took as blessing. The locusts' songs. I don't know if he heard them, but I did and said nothing. I believed they did not matter. Winter would not matter.

(All true. The sky had been an inverted black stoneware bowl with a white chip moon. They'd laid in a field on the stadium blanket kept in the trunk of his car, white-splotched with the crust of liquid stars that had fallen through May, June, July, August.)

My ragged breath through his name as I cried *Tony*, like yes or love or mine. I heard myself.

And the yes there was no need to speak, the yes I chose to speak, a promise.

(Over his shoulder, above her, the brim of eternity. Their bodies, silver chalices, were full in the small light.)

Tomorrow, tomorrow, we each said. I heard him.

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Pittsburgh, 2013

“It usually works best if you tell me what you want.”

Monica leaned over her desk and smiled at the new client, trying to put her at ease. She was in the habit of staying behind it, a personal safety thing with her, particularly with men, but that was hardly an issue with Deana Wilkes, a woman at least twenty years older and so disabled as to make her lurch with a metal crutch, the forearm kind that Monica associated with polio victims. She considered moving them both to the conference table, but her laptop sat open there, and the briefs she'd been reading before court were hastily raked together like a messy pile of leaves. Deana had been early for the appointment. Besides, it would be awkward now.

“May I ask a personal question first?”

Monica tilted her chin. She didn't like it when a client started down that path. “That depends on how personal it is,” she said, keeping her tone airy.

“Do you have children?”

Slight nod, no invitation in it. “A daughter.” Then her eyebrows went up, just enough.

“Okay. Sorry.” A long hesitation then that Monica waited out. “I've never talked about this to anyone. I don't know how. I wish I could take it all

back,” Deana said. “I’d rewind to the first yes I ever said to Tony Hamilton. Before anything was inevitable.” Deana’s gaze went to her hands, clenching one another in her lap, and Monica looked at them too. They were veined, knuckles prominent.

Finally, Deana looked up as if expecting a question. Monica didn’t ask any, but nodded, and as Monica had learned was likely to happen, the client went on. Some people ended up talking to their lawyer with about the same level of reserve as they did their psychologist, if they had one. And if they didn’t, the lawyer ended up serving the purpose, in Monica’s experience. That it wasn’t necessarily a good thing was also her experience; once they’d told her, what they really wanted was a fix for their minds and hearts. No lawyer could do that.

But the times she hadn’t heard the whole story had come back to bite her, and it took time and patience upfront. She needed clients badly; she had time, way too much of it. But patience, patience for these tangled human dramas like vines that put out shoots taking root here, there, and seemed to have no clear beginning, and even no end? She was working on that kind of patience.

She’d thought she was going to be a corporate attorney, but that door had been hard-slammed behind her. Now she’d opened a door of her own. Alone. General practice was a rough go. She picked up domestic relations cases, guardian ad litem work for the court, small suits here and there. It was enough, barely, but she was in control, which was what mattered.

“He was my boss,” Deana said. Her hair was mainly a pale dingy gray, wavy, blunt cut with nothing to soften it. No makeup to ease the sooty smudges beneath her eyes or perhaps darken what likely had once

been good eyebrows, now too faded to bring attention up to nice hazel eyes and away from the deep parentheses around her mouth. A short nose with a bit of a bulb at the end.

Deana continued speaking as Monica catalogued these details. “Tony had an office with a window, and a big wood desk, something like yours, in fact, and a phone with a whole row of buttons. I had a cubicle, a typewriter, and an intercom. We worked at an insurance company, which turned out to be ironic. His eyes and brows and hair were dark brown, but his skin was fair, and his nose was thin and elegant.” She drew her own nose out lightly with a thumb and forefinger to illustrate greater length than hers.

“Handsome. Not like a movie star, because his teeth weren’t so straight.” Deana smiled then and Monica noticed that Deana’s teeth were even and fairly white. “Anyway, he was thirty-five, nice, fairly handsome. Maybe I flirted. I did flirt, my fault—but then things were different in nineteen eighty-three. You wouldn’t know this, but thirty years ago we all flirted back and forth at work, but it was jokey and harmless, never likely to make it from anyone’s desk even to the water-cooler. Oh, there were a couple of high-ups.” She stopped, seeming to study the gold titles imprinted on the spines of Pennsylvania law tomes jammed in the bookcase next to the window, then finally went on with a shoulder shrug. “A couple big bosses made their secretaries’ lives a living hell, pawing them.”

Monica thought she hadn’t moved and kept her face neutral, realized she must not have when Deana went on because she said, “Oh, they were different,” in an almost apologetic tone. “I’m talking about the regular men. With them it was all just fun and none of

us worried. Not about that, I mean. We worried some about losing our jobs because of the recession. Some of the small regional sales offices had been closed, but it hadn't really hit us at headquarters yet. I was flattered when Tony found reasons to stop by my cubicle. He was one of the good ones and I figured it didn't hurt that my boss liked me. I mean, he was my boss and all." Deana stopped again and looked at her hands, clasped in her lap.

Yes, Monica thought. Damn. I know about wanting the boss to like you. No, needing the boss to like you. Thinking he's okay. Aloud she said, "I understand. Is this about what you need legal help with?"

"Yes, in a way. See, I never knew if it was an accident the night he was in the elevator at the same time I was leaving the office. I wanted it not to be, so see? I can't pretend innocence. I'd been raised to be something of a prude, and maybe I resented missing out on what everyone else was enjoying. I blame myself." She stopped talking abruptly, then, and looked to the side. "This is a nice office."

"Thank you. It's my favorite color, that pale peach on the walls. I painted it myself." There, Monica thought. That gives her a second to gather herself. Maybe she'll get where I know she's going.

"It's a nice friendly color. Goes well with the wood, too."

Monica suppressed a sigh, and tried again, keeping her voice gentle. "I'm glad you like it. So—did he...did something happen in the elevator?"

"Not then. When we got out, he looked at his watch and said, 'Are you busy? There are some openings coming up that would be a promotion, protect

you from the layoffs likely in the fall. Would you like to grab a drink and talk about it?’ That’s the yes I’d rewind, no matter what I wanted.

There was no bribe to it, though. I didn’t take it that way. He might as well have said, ‘Gosh it’s been a long day. Feel like getting a drink?’ I liked him, and I knew he thought I *was* pretty. Back then, I could tell those things. Well, back then I was pretty. Only twenty-nine, none of this sooty gray hair, which I’ve about decided to color. It was dark blonde, long,” as she spoke, she gestured to show where her hair had fallen to her upper arms, “and I didn’t iron it straight like other girls with curly hair did. I didn’t look twenty-nine either; not with my hair swinging loose, and the freckles I hated. The only good thing about getting older is how they’ve faded. They’ll probably come back soon as age spots. Are you even forty yet?”

“Not yet. Not quite, I should say.”

“How old is your daughter? Is that her picture?”

“Yes. Thirteen months.” Monica smiled at a silver-framed picture of a baby in the arms of a woman who at first glance appeared smitten. A second glance, though, would add bedraggled. That woman wore glasses, and untucked hair straggled over one lens.

“That’s not you—”

Monica laughed. “No. Could we get back to—”

“What’s her name? Your baby.”

“Celeste.”

“That’s so pretty. Like stars or...heavenly?... celestial, right? Thirteen months. She a handful?”

Monica looked at the picture, unable not to grin while she answered. “She is for sure. She was ten months when that was taken. It’s all over when they’re

walking.” She had to get this back to the client, do it now and keep it there and extract what Deana wanted. Still smiling Monica shook her head and looked back at Deana. “But let’s not run up your bill unnecessarily. You’re here about you,” she said. “What is it you need legal help with?”

“Um...I was telling you, back then I was slender with a good chest, like my mother, and knew how to make myself up. I’d started to wear miniskirts. Couldn’t wear ’em now, that’s for sure, not with the scars. Didn’t have this bad leg. Didn’t need a crutch. Anyway, Tony and I walked to a bar, The King of Clubs it was called, about two blocks from the office building. It’s gone now. It was a beautiful April evening, and the air felt, you know?—really soft, and there was a sunset—and, anyway, I wished we could stay outside, but I didn’t know him well enough to say that. When we went through the door, my eyes didn’t want to adjust.

“It was dark and smoky from businessmen already there. Tony put his hand on my waist to guide me to a booth. It was the first time he’d touched me and the rest of the evening I could feel his hand there. But... I’d said I couldn’t see. When we sat down, Tony took off his jacket, loosened his tie, and ordered a Manhattan. I had a whiskey sour. The candle wasn’t lit, and Tony used his lighter on it. You know, everyone smoked then. That night Tony drank two Manhattans.”

Deana shook her head. “No, actually, he had three,” she said, correcting herself. “I had two whiskey sours. I was hungry, and I ate the orange slices and the cherries. When Tony saw me do that, he ordered us club sandwiches without even asking. He was thoughtful like that. Anyway, I think it was just an ice breaker, but Tony talked about the openings there might be at the

office for a couple of minutes and then—Rick Springfield was singing Love Somebody and later I thought that had been an omen— the conversation veered off.”

“To what?” Monica said, although she was sure she already knew the essence of the details to come. They made her sick. She wondered if the smart thing to do would be to spare herself, refuse the case, but if she could bear up, maybe another woman could find her own strength. And who was she kidding? She was in no position to turn away business.

“What did it veer off to?” she repeated when Deana hesitated, then to be ethical, she added, “I want to make sure you know that I bill by the hour, and I don’t want you to run up the charge unnecessarily. I probably don’t need all these details. You can cut to the chase, and if I need to know more I’ll ask.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve never told anyone this, and I...need to. It’s hard for me. I’ll pay overtime or whatever. The conversation veered of...right...to what men and women talk about when they’re flirting for real and pretending they’re not. Silly stuff, like were you good at algebra or English in high school. It was all in our eyes, in how I flipped my hair back, and how he was being funny and wanting me to have a good time. Haven’t you ever had a man do that, and you knew?”

Monica hesitated, and then said, almost too quietly, “It wasn’t your fault.”

“But I—”

“Women always blame ourselves... themselves.”

“Does this all sound worn-out, make you tired, like you think you know what’s going to happen?”

“Yes.”

“You do. And you don’t. Not at all. I promise—
you just don’t.”