

# House of Thistles

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Authors are sometimes viewed as weird, anti-social people who hide in the corner and write books, after all the craft is a solitary one. However, my kids demanding that I feed them occasionally and the TV and the screamo music blasting from my daughter's phone dispels that theory rather quickly. In my case, it's not just the kids, the dog, and the loving but interrupting husband that has turned my career as a writer as anything but a solitary venture, it's also the wonderful writers in the WeBook Literary Guild.

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This book is about past tragedies and how they can affect one's future. It's about the damaging effects of secrets and the healing power of love, something Harry has shown me. Ultimately, this novel is about sisters. Sharna, we have made paths in our lives that have diverged from each other. We are opposites in many ways, not the least in our personalities, but the bonds of sisterhood and growing up together, being each other's first confidants, will never be broken. One thing we do have in common is our shared love of tragic stories of broken people. There are two broken sisters in this book. Thank God we are not them, but you, our relationship, provided the basis for this story. And this story was written as much for you as it was for me.



# CHAPTER 1

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It wasn't a tradition I enjoyed, but my sister insisted on keeping up the rituals of family gatherings. So I drove to her house for our brother's birthday lunch. Her driveway wasn't paved, but dirt packed down in grooves from the tires. Live oaks lined both sides, casting shadows across a yard that tried in places to stay green through the patches of sunlight. I turned to Harley as the car idled.

I was reminded of something a lab technician I once worked with said to me years ago. She had two beautiful biracial children, the perfect pairing of a son and a daughter. My coworker had strawberry-blonde hair with a light smattering of freckles against her pale skin, and her husband was an African-American and one of the best nephrologists I had the pleasure of knowing. But the woman said something strange to me not long after I took in a scared seven-year-old little girl—a gift to me from a childhood friend. She told me that when she looked at her children, she didn't see the color of their skin. She only saw them. I had wondered if that was how I would see my daughter, Harley, as she grew from a child who peeked around corners at me to one who would eventually accept me as her mom.

Eight years later, I still couldn't see how any mother could not notice how her daughter's pink highlights framed the smooth, milk-chocolate skin, or the gentle slope of her nose, or how her eyes can be a dull green one day, gray another, yet on most days, a bright, shining emerald. They were such an unusual color for any race, but even if her eyes were a dark

brown, I knew I would see the reflective changes in them according to her mood or the clothes she wore.

Her brow creased as she stared back at me. "What are you looking at?"  
"They're dark green today."

She glanced out the window. "Must be the shadows."

The vinegary scent of window cleaner, combined with the penetrating odor of the cat box, greeted me when I walked through Maxine's door, as did three of the toxic fur balls. The gray cat rubbed its head against my leg while the other two meowed. I picked up the affectionate one while holding on to my brother's present and walked through the entryway into the living room. Harley closed the door behind us; although, I suspected she was ready to dash back out.

Despite the smell, Maxine's house was spotless. Even the built-in bookshelf recessed in the brickwork surrounding the fireplace had been dusted and polished. She and I were opposites in every way.

"Allie, you're here." My sister jiggled as she ran up to me. I dropped the cat to keep her from getting squashed. Maxine leaned over her belly to give me a hug. "Lunch is almost ready. Sorry I'm running late. My therapy session ran over today."

Terrific. Dinner theatre. I wondered what's on the marquee today. Maybe *Streetcar Named Desire*. If there was one thing I knew about my sister, it was that her counseling sessions were less therapy than acting class.

"Don't worry about it. I have some work I need to complete for this weekend, but I'm not pressed for time," I said.

"I understand. I put in sixty hours last week. This week it was forty-eight. I need a vacation. I've been working such a crazy schedule lately." Maxine worked the night shift on the pediatric unit at one of the hospitals. She often put in overtime, and she always complained about it.

"Harley! How's my baby?" Maxine opened her arms wide.

"Hi, Aunt Maxie." Harley allowed Maxine to hug her. "Guess what? I'm in a band."

Maxine shot me a suspicious look. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

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“Relax. She’s fifteen. Let her dream.” I set the gift down and invited Maxine to sit with me on her couch.

“What about her art?” The sofa sank as Maxine moved closer to me.

“Her art is brilliant, and she’s working hard in biology. In fact, two weeks ago her science teacher requested that she draw something for one of the units they’ve studied recently, and Harley drew a beautiful picture of the inside of a pregnant woman. Every detail was perfect.” I looked up at my daughter, enjoying the excitement that lit up her face. “Not many people have her skills at fifteen. She’s going to be a sought-after medical illustrator someday.”

Maxine and I spent the next several minutes catching up since the last time we’d seen each other while Harley opened up her sketch pad. She studied one of the cats as she drew, and even though she angled the pad away from me, I suspected that the part of the cat she drew wasn’t covered with skin or fur.

My sister and I were only separated by thirty minutes in distance, but the miles of separation in who we were and in our relationship were much greater. She whined about the people she worked with while I listened, made sarcastic remarks in my mind, and mentally drifted off to the most recent book I’d read.

“We’re having one more person for lunch.” Maxine changed the subject. “Gary moved in two weeks ago in exchange for yard work.”

“You took in another stray?”

“Gary’s not a stray. He’s family.”

Gary. The name pricked at my memory as I mentally moved through my childhood, searching the faces of foster children. “Which one was Gary?”

“You don’t remember me?”

At the sound of his voice, a sense of discomfort and confusion washed over me.

A tall, lanky man stood in the hallway. He had thin, brown hair and a lopsided smile that flashed his crooked teeth. He never seemed to mind his teeth.

I swallowed, pushing down the instinct to leave and take Maxine with me. “I do now. How’ve you been?”

“Life’s been good to me, and now I’m here with the Baxter family.”

He bummed a room for yard work. Life had been cruel to him.

“How’s my favorite foster sister?” He pulled me in for a tight squeeze. I stiffened as soon as his hands were on me. I was his favorite because I once handed out blow jobs to those who weren’t genetically related to me. My one rule was “don’t touch me.” I jerked away from him and grabbed Maxine’s arm, pulling her into her bedroom.

I shut the door behind us. “What is he doing here?”

“I told you, he’s-”

“Cut the crap. He’s not family. He was never our family. I remember what he did to you.”

Her usual pale complexion turned a purplish hue. “What are you talking about? He never did anything to me. You were the little slut puppy who-”

“I’m not talking about me. This is about you. I saw you. I remember exactly. You must have been eleven, and he had you in the bedroom. He had you cornered with your pants down.”

Her muscles tensed, and she raised her hand to hit me. I stared hard in her eyes, calling her bluff.

She lowered her hand and shoved her face within an inch of mine. “That never happened! You were the one who always-”

“Yeah, I did, but you know what? I’m honest about it. What kind of lies do you tell your therapist?”

She slapped me. Hard. My ears rang, and I rubbed my cheek to smooth out the stinging. We’d often argued, and she liked to threaten me, but this was the first time she had actually hit me.

“Believe whatever lies you tell yourself, but I don’t trust him.” I fumbled with the knob and yanked the door open. I went down the hall to the bathroom and sat on the tub, rocking back and forth, willing myself to cry, but no tears came. She had hit me. She hit me to protect

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her abuser. I didn't understand what had just happened.

Maxine was just stressed, I reasoned. Maybe she, too, was concerned about him staying here. I wondered if his presence brought back the nightmares. I used to hold her and stroke her hair until the screaming stopped. I wondered if she still screamed in her sleep, and if so, did she keep her door locked? I choked on my saliva at the thought of Gary attempting to comfort her, but the choice to allow him to stay was hers and hers alone.

I stood and leaned against the sink to compose myself. After washing my face, as if by magic, I stepped into dreamland, closing the door back on reality.

Maxine was in the den wearing a painted smile and invited us into the dining room.

Nothing. No acknowledgement that a line had been crossed by either of us.

Harley darted her eyes between my sister and me. She's the only one who hadn't learned to pretend everything was fine when it wasn't. I briefly wondered if I was teaching her an important skill or a relationship-destroying behavior.

The table setting was perfect to the point of frightening. If I were to take a measuring tape, every fork, spoon, and knife would be evenly spaced. The distance from the plate to the edge of the table was exactly the same for each one, and the glasses were all set in faultless proportion to every plate. The display didn't surprise me as I'd been to Maxine's house many times over the years, but it always sent creeping vibes up the back of my neck. The unobservant men sat down and grabbed up roast and potatoes as though they hadn't been brought up with any manners.

Maxine's domestic skills didn't extend to anything culinary, and I knew it was too much to hope she had gotten a store-bought cake. It wasn't traditional. As always, the cake looked better than it tasted. Her designs could have rivaled any professional cake baker. However, she was all appearance but lacking anything of substance.

“I don’t like it.” My brother, Josh, pushed the cake away after one bite.

Maxine stood and grabbed Josh’s plate and threw the whole thing in the sink. Porcelain met metal in a shattering resonance. I jumped up and ran into the kitchen. Yellow cake and white icing smeared the sink bowl. A few broken shards escaped to the counter and floor. “Go sit down. I’ll clean this up.”

Maxine didn’t move. She stared at the ruined plate. The ruined birthday. It wasn’t perfect.

“Maxine, don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”

“No. It won’t.”

My brother stood behind his chair. He had the open face of a child and large, dark eyes so beautiful that he must have been granted the special gift from a cherub, but the scar along the left side of his face gave him a menacing appearance whenever he hardened his eyes. “It’s my birthday. I’m sorry if I don’t like the cake.”

I slammed my hand on the counter. “Don’t you dare use that tone.”

“What tone?”

“The one that says you’re not sorry. The one that believes everyone owes you the fucking world. The one that says you’re entitled to act like a self-righteous prick just because it’s your birthday. Grow the fuck up.”

Josh slammed his chair into the table and stomped off. Thirty-eight years old and he still threw tantrums.

I put my arms around Maxine and led her into the den. “I’ll clean up the kitchen. You did a great job. The cake was delicious.”

As soon as her ample behind sunk into the plush couch, she buried her head in her arms and cried.

I watched her for a few seconds. I wanted to reach out to her, do something to make her feel better. Appreciated. Finally, I put my hand on her shoulder. “I’m going to clean up.”

Harley brought her cake into the living room and sat on the recliner catty-corner to the couch and chatted away at Maxine about music and

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the band she was forming. Despite the fact that I hadn't had the pleasure of giving birth to her, she was as much a part of me as any child could have been. I gave her a smile and a quick nod to let her I know I appreciated what she was doing for her aunt.

Gary helped me in the dining room and kitchen. We worked in silence as I put away the food, and he took care to pick up the plate pieces. When I started loading the dishwasher, he finally asked, "When did your brother become such a douche bag?"

"He's never cared about anybody but himself."

"I don't remember him being like that when we were kids. He was always so quiet and awkward."

The other kids pushed him around a lot, especially in school. I wondered if the way he turned out as an adult was a reaction to the treatment he got as a child.

"I tried to help him fit in when we were in high school." I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "I asked him to hang out with me and my friends. I would instruct him on how to pick up on social cues and how to respond. He would just get angry and yell at me."

"You were quite the social butterfly." Gary had a big, stupid grin on his face, no doubt presuming the real reason I was popular.

"I never really liked people. Still don't, but I did what I had to in order to survive foster care and high school."

He slid his hand down my arm. "You want to go out tonight?"

I jerked away from him. "No. I'm not like that anymore."

He put up his hands in a defensive gesture. "No pressure. I understand childhood was rough. No kid should have to go through what we did. Tonight's just a movie."

"I'm not up for it." I put the last glass in the machine, started it, and joined my sister on the couch. I looked over at Harley and nodded my head toward Maxine's bedroom.

Taking the hint, Harley stood up. "Aunt Maxie, can I get on your computer?"

With a wave of her hand, Maxine indicated that she could. Now we were alone. The silence between us was comfortable. The kind of silence one can only have with a long-term friend or with a sister who understood as a friend does. She slumped back against the couch. “He can be so insensitive sometimes.”

“He’s always insensitive.”

“Why do you hate our brother?” She had asked this question many times over the years. It was usually an accusation punctuated with anger, but this time her tone was quiet, as though she genuinely believed in my disdain for him.

“I don’t hate him, but I can’t stand the way he treats you.”

“I know you don’t like him, but he’s our brother. He’s not like this all the time.”

“Stop defending him.”

Maxine sighed. “He can’t help it.”

“We lived the same life he did. We both work. Neither of us depends on the government or our little sister for survival. I don’t abide by anyone’s excuses after the hell I’ve lived through.”

“What do you remember?” She looked at me, searching for answers I didn’t have.

“Foster care was the pits.”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

“I’m functioning. You’re functioning. I’m glad counseling is helping you, but I’m fine without it. I don’t need to remember.”

Maxine turned her head away from me, but I could clearly see the side of her face. She looked up and blinked several times, fighting back the tears. “I want to remember our parents.”

That was perhaps the biggest tragedy. I had scant memories of them, but Maxine was only three when they died. Our brother was born first in the spring. Maxine and I were both born in the summer. Each of us two years apart in succession.

I imagined Mom was a planner and had carefully organized the birth

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of each child as though we were biennial stair steps. I wondered if I thought of her that way because she used to fuss at me for being messy. Or maybe it had something to do with the time we made a garland for the Christmas tree that stood in the open area of our living room, displaying its simulated beauty to all who passed in front of the house (assuming they looked in our direction and squinted). Rural houses did not sit on the edge of the street, and ours wasn't an exception. Once, either Josh or I had asked about a real tree, but Mom had said they were dirty and had to be bought every year.

Mom and I had strung popcorn and cranberries for the garland. Five kernels to every cranberry. I had to keep an accurate count. If I didn't, I would have had to remove a popcorn kernel off the string. That part was easy, and we had plenty of popcorn. If I only had four kernels to a cranberry, I had to be careful sliding it down the string and not ruin it so it could be restrung. She was patient with me, as I made many mistakes, but she still insisted on perfection.

I didn't remember decorating the tree or what the ornaments looked like, but the sight of the homemade garland stood out brighter in my mind than any of the lights.

Sitting at the dining room table, drinking hot cocoa, and creating decorations with my mom was a memory I kept alive every Christmas. I always had an artificial tree, and I always drank hot cocoa while stringing together a popcorn and cranberry garland. I never put anything else on the tree.

I squeezed Maxine's shoulder. "You would have liked our mother. You're a lot like her."

## CHAPTER 2

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I really didn't want to talk to Maxine about her therapy sessions, but she had been through things I hadn't. Some of which were my fault. In order to pay penance, I listened to her.

"My counselor told me today that the reason I have to have everything in order is because I feel like my life is out of my control. That actually makes sense, but now you're saying Mom was like that, and I don't remember her." She ran a finger over her plump, soft hand. Even though she was only two years younger than me, her hands appeared to belong to a twenty-year-old, while the skin on mine was thin and dry, showing off the veins and ligaments.

"I doubt Mom was manic about it like you are. It can't be genetic with you. You're pathological."

Maxine stood and spun toward me. "I thought you were trying to comfort me."

"I'm agreeing with your therapist."

"No. You're being mean."

I threw my head back so she wouldn't see me roll my eyes. "Look. Life has been hard on us. Sometimes we need to loosen up a bit and laugh. Laugh at ourselves and each other."

"Fine. My pathology is perfect order. Yours is slothfulness, disorder, and sarcasm."

"You make me sound like a sociopath." I laughed. In retrospect, laughing over an accusation of being a sociopath was a sure-fire way of getting diagnosed.

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Maxine didn't laugh, but she didn't label me, either. Instead, she crossed her arms and looked down. "I'm amazed all three of us aren't sociopaths."

That sounded like something I would have said, but out of my mouth it would have been a flippant remark. She was serious.

I went home to finish the work I hadn't been able to complete for the past week. I flipped open my laptop. Ten of the data queries I sent out earlier had been answered but only three to my satisfaction. The other seven would have to wait. The heart study was facing a database lock, and we were under a deadline. I worked best under a deadline, and I tended to let things slide until they were due, but no one seemed to mind. My data was always submitted before it was due and more accurately than my coworkers'. Twice I had been offered a promotion, but I turned both of them down because it would mean working at the office. I preferred being home when Harley wasn't in school.

Despite the dedication to my work, Maxine's words kept buzzing through my mind. She couldn't cope without therapy. I stared at a spreadsheet of creatinine kinase and potassium values, thinking back on my teenage years and wondering if I was a sociopath.

Josh and I had just finished our freshman year in high school when we were told we were going to be moved again. The child welfare agency tried to keep the three of us together, but when a home was open to two children and another was open to one, we were sometimes split up. My freshman year we were together.

We were on the host parents' couch, lined up as though we faced a firing squad. Darla, our social worker, sat in a chair in front of us. Even though she leaned over with her arms on her thighs as she addressed us, I could still detect the slim tone of a runner's body. She had high cheekbones and a slender nose. She once told me that her mother was Haitian, and the French influence of her delicate features against the backdrop of dark skin was unmistakable.

“The Dobson’s are getting older and want to reduce the number of children,” Darla said.

“Does that mean we’re getting rid of Gary?” Ever since that incident with Maxine, I didn’t want him in or around me.

Darla clasped her hands in front of her. “Maybe. The bigger issue is that they can only handle two children.”

“They can keep three. Josh never does anything. He’s like a couch cushion. They won’t even realize he’s here.”

Josh popped his head up. “Hey!”

“I’m afraid the three of you are going to have to be moved again,” Darla said.

“That’s not fair.” I stood, flinging my arms up. “I’m in high school now. I am not going to be bounced around for the next three years. These are supposed to be the best years of my life. Or so the posters on the school walls keep telling us.”

“The only way you and Josh can stay here is if we separate you and place Maxine elsewhere.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere without Allie.” Maxine pouted.

“You won’t send her to the other side of the county, right?” I asked.

Darla shook her head. “There’s an open slot three blocks from here.”

“Good. We’re close enough to visit.”

“Allie, we’re supposed to stay together.” Maxine shook her head.

I knelt beside my sister and clasped her shoulders. “We’ve been separated before.”

“I know, but I’ve never liked it.” She whimpered as she forced her lip out. She looked like a porcelain doll when she pouted.

“It’s only three blocks away. We’re practically around the corner. I’ll come visit you, and you can visit me.” I bit the inside of my cheek and ran my hand through her silky hair. It was important that she agreed with the arrangement.

She gave a slow nod, and Darla slapped her thighs and stood.

I had kept my promise. I visited Maxine at her new home. And I visited her in the hospital.

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After Josh's birthday, the bursts of productivity I occasionally had became an everyday occurrence. When all the data was in, I called the research monitors asking for more work. I stopped taking naps and worked late into the evening, only taking time out to cook dinner and help Harley with her homework. I filled my time until I fell asleep from exhaustion. I had to keep working, and even that wasn't enough to drive away the nightmares and the guilt.

Analyzing data made sense. Human relationships were complicated. There were days when I turned off the phones and was thankful no one knocked on my door. I would spend hours analyzing every bit of information and generating queries for the data that didn't fit the guidelines. I was good at what I did. Not even my supervisor had a track record as good as mine.

I wasn't sure how long I stared at the screen. Lab values and medications tumbled together in a mass of digits. The data didn't make sense, and the more I strained my eyes to study the information, the more out of focus everything became. Maybe the lack of sleep had turned my brain into fried hash, or maybe I just needed a break. I shut down my computer and drove around for awhile. I didn't want to drive too long. Being alone with no stimulation led to thinking.

I steered into the parking lot of a bookstore. Mocha latte and books. The perfect combination.

Shelves of books, organized by subject, filled the expansive room. The tightness in my shoulders relaxed. I felt tired, as though all the stimulating factors that had kept me up the past two or three weeks suddenly left. I also felt invigorated somehow, knowing that behind each closed book were fictional people's secrets and guilt and an escape from mine. I selected a mystery and two thrillers and set them down on a corner table in the coffee bar.

The man behind the counter gave me a warm smile. It was just good customer service, but there was something else in the way his eyes lingered over mine.

"I haven't seen you around. Do you come here often?" As soon as he said those words, he looked down, hiding the embarrassment, which crept across his face in a mask of redness. "That sounded like a really cheesy pickup line."

"Yeah, it did," I said

"What can I get for you?" He looked up, back to giving me a smile.

"Mocha latte. No whipped cream."

I wasn't sure why, but I stood at the counter while he made my drink. I watched as he poured the ingredients together and worked the machine.

"What do you like to do for fun?" he asked.

"I don't take time out for fun."

"You should try. I work here during the day and take night classes, but I still find things to do on my days off."

"What are you studying?" I leaned against the counter, enjoying the simple conversation. I rarely engaged in small talk, yet this was somehow pleasant.

"I'm almost done with my paralegal degree. What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a data analyst for a pharmaceutical research organization."

"It sounds like you should definitely get out more." The skin around his eyes crinkled. I found his playful mischief to be sexy.

"I like my job."

"There's more to life than work." He handed me the drink. "Enjoy."

I went back to my books and attempted to ignore the barista's occasional glances. He wasn't bad-looking. He had a professional look. Short, brown hair. Neatly trimmed goatee. Even his body suggested a sedentary office job. He wasn't fat, just thick and didn't look anything like the shaggy, skinny types I typically saw at coffee shops.

When I was done with my mocha, I started to leave, but then paused. I turned around, caught the barista staring at me, and reversed my direction. I took a few steps before I stopped. I was being an idiot, and I'm sure I looked like one, too. I thought about going back to the counter, but I had embarrassed myself enough.

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“If you plan on buying the books, I can check them out here,” he said.

It was eleven on a Tuesday morning. Many people were at work, so the store was fairly empty. A few patrons milled about, but it was obvious the barista had very little to do. And if I thought that was why he offered to ring up the purchases, I was a fool.

“Thanks.” I smiled as I slid the books to him. I hadn’t planned on buying all the books, so why didn’t I put two of them back? Irrationality was the only answer that came to mind.

“By the way, my name is Steven.”

“Allie.”

“Pleasure to meet you.” His mouth dropped open slightly as he stared at me.

“Thank you.” I picked up my purchases, dropped them, picked them up again, and left.

That night, I fell asleep reading, but I had gone to bed three hours earlier than I had been lately. Maybe Steven was right. Maybe fun was in order for my life. Such a thing was a foreign concept.

The next day, I went back to the bookstore. A young girl was behind the counter serving coffee.

“Is Steven working today?” I asked.

“No. He’s off on Wednesdays. Is there anything I can get for you?”

“Mocha latte. No whipped cream.”

I sat at my corner table reading a book I’d bought yesterday and sipped the hot, chocolaty treat. It made for a pleasant midmorning, but I wasn’t having fun. I didn’t want to see just any young college twit. I wanted to see the thirty-something-year-old college twit who’d served me yesterday. This wasn’t like me. I didn’t stalk men. I avoided them. I left and decided not to come back.

When I got home, I put aside the book and turned on the computer and worked. My foray into the nonsensical musings of a teenage girl was over. It should have been over a long time ago after the embarrassing fling with Tim.

Tim was smart, athletic, and gorgeous. I couldn't believe he would slum it with a foster girl. Adults took pity on foster children, but to our peers, we were pariahs. Scorned and expected to know our place in the hierarchy of high school.

We met in the lunch line. I was a junior being pushed around by a group of football Neanderthals, fighting over their place in line.

"Gentlemen, the lady was here first." Tim's wavy blond hair brushed against his collar, and his blue eyes reminded me of pictures of the sea.

I thrust my chin up and walked past the football players, staring directly at the one in charge. We'd never met, but I knew who he was. Everyone knew Tim Donahue. Starting quarterback. Senior class president. Walking high school cliché. "Thank you."

"Don't let these thugs push you around. I'll protect you. What's your name?"

"Allie."

"Stand in front of me, Allie."

I took the place in line right in front of him. My heart performed an entire gymnastic routine across my chest when he smiled at me. What was wrong with me? I ate guys for breakfast, and this one turned me into goo.

After I paid for my lunch, he asked me to sit with him. My hands shook as I carried the lunch tray to his table. I walked past those who had called me names like slut and whore, and I could imagine the marks of jealousy scrawled across their faces when I sat with Tim Donahue.

I couldn't remember the conversation we had over lunch. I'm not even sure I could have remembered my name if someone had asked. The only thing that was important was that he focused on me and told his rowdy friends to hush. After lunch, he asked if I would watch his next game. I'm sure I squeaked out a yes, or maybe I just squeaked.

## CHAPTER 3

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I fussed with my hair, first piling the long, brown strands on top of my head, then trying it down, loose and free. It wasn't my first date, and technically it wasn't a date, but the excitement ran through me as if I were a naïve innocent anticipating her first kiss.

I finally decided on pulling the front section back into a clip. The makeup was easy; I was a minimalist. Clothes were the hard part. Everything I owned, which wasn't much, was handed down or bought at Goodwill.

The faded jeans didn't look too bad. At least they sat at my hips. But I tore my closet apart looking for an appropriate top. Charlie's Angels? Where did that come from? No, not that concert shirt. Or that one. I then decided I didn't want a T-shirt advertising a band. Too bad Maxine wasn't here. Her fashion sense was much better than mine. I finally picked up an oversized white shirt off the floor, sniffed it, decided it wasn't too offensive, and paired it with a belt.

I usually invited Josh to social gatherings, but I knew he would turn me down just as he always did, so I slipped out the door only saying goodbye to Mrs. Dobson, my foster mom. Since it was a home game, I walked the five blocks to the high school stadium. Students, teachers, and families were piling in through the gate leading to the bleachers.

"Allie."

I whipped my head around. "Monica."

Monica's honey-blonde hair was pulled into two low braids. She looked fresh and untainted. I envied her life. She had parents. She joined me in line with her boyfriend, James, tagging along. Every guy I had ever met named James, Jim, or Jimmy was a jerk. I would never date a guy named James.

"I didn't know you liked football," Monica said.

"Who wouldn't like football? It's Texas," James said.

"I don't." I glared at him before turning back to my friend. "I was asked to come tonight."

"By who?" Monica looked around.

A playful grin etched across my face. "You'll see."

When we got inside the stadium, I looked for seats as close to the home team as I could manage.

"Let's go over there." James pointed to the sidelines.

Monica smacked his arm. "You just want to get close to the cheerleaders."

James rubbed the spot Monica hit. "Not true. It's a good place to watch the game."

We finally found some seats higher up than I wanted to sit. It was still close enough to see Tim, but I worried he wouldn't be able to find me when he searched the stands.

Not long after, the teams came out, each player announced one by one. When Tim ran down the field, I jumped up and yelled louder than I ever had. I would have embarrassed myself if not for the other several hundred screaming fans. Several hundred screaming fans, and he invited me. I had become a princess. Dreams of the homecoming dance and prom played in my mind. I would wear something blue to highlight my eyes, and royal blue always made the red strands in my hair appear brighter. I decided against ruffles because it was too girly. I wanted something feminine, something to really show that I could be soft, but I wanted the dress to be sophisticated, and I would wear my hair in an upsweep with curls falling around my face. I just needed a part-time job so I could afford my fantasy.

## HOUSE OF THISTLES

Since I wasn't a football fan, I wasn't sure what happened. All I knew was Tim played a great game, he only threw one interception, and we won.

I pushed my way down the steps past the crowd of people. I leaned over the railing, hoping to catch a glimpse of the football hero. Off to the left, he stood with his helmet in his hand. His wavy blond hair was plastered with sweat. Even after playing a rough game, he was roguishly good-looking. "Tim!"

He jerked his head up at the sound of his name. He smiled and ran over when he saw me waving at him. "I'm glad you made it."

"You played a great game."

"Thanks. I'm going out for pizza with the team. You wanna come with us?"

"Sure."

"Let me get cleaned up." Tim left with his teammates and disappeared into the locker room.

Monica offered to wait around with me as her boyfriend pestered her to leave. He probably thought I was going to let it slip what I did for him for his birthday last year. While I didn't give a damn about James, he failed to understand my loyalty as a friend to Monica.

"I'll be fine," I said. "See you at school Monday."

Not long after she left, arms grabbed me from behind. I was all elbows and fists as I jabbed and punched my way from the grasp of my attacker.

"Allie. Stop."

I spun around, and Tim stooped over, clutching his stomach and groin.

"Why did you attack me?" I took a step back. I was ready to run, but I was also prepared to advance on him if necessary.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to surprise you." He struggled to stand as his mouth was agape.

"I thought you were going to ..."

"What? No. What's wrong with you?"

I looked up at the sky shaking my head. I couldn't meet his eyes. I couldn't believe I had messed this up so soon. "Tim ..."

“Don’t worry about it. Just warn me next time you decide to use your lethal karate moves.” His snarky grin suggested he forgave me.

My hands trembled over my mouth as I let out a shaky laugh. “You don’t want to mess with the martial arts queen.”

I pretended to karate chop his neck. He threw up his hands to block mine. After a few successions of chops and blocks, he gave me a quick kiss on the lips.

“Let’s eat. Wrestling with champion football players makes me hungry.” I swung my leg to the side and kicked him in the butt.

“Do you wrestle ... Sorry.”

I knew what he was about to ask me. With any other girl, it would have been a flirtatious joke, but asking me had a ring of truth to it. He refused to treat me like any other girl because of my reputation. I crossed my arms and decided to walk home.

“Hey.” Tim ran up and stopped in front of me, instead of grabbing me from behind. “Where are you going? My car’s this way.”

“Why did you ask me out?”

“Uh, you’re pretty. You’re feisty. And I hear you kick butt on the Ac Dec team.”

“How many other girls in Academic Decathlon do you ask out?” I crossed my arms and pursed my lips.

“Huh?”

“Don’t play dumb. I suck cock, and I’m good at it.”

His ears reddened as he looked away. “I just want to have some pizza.”

His embarrassment was real, which was his one saving grace. “Let’s go.”

We were one of the last to arrive at the pizza place. Michael Stepp, a large, black linebacker clasped Tim on the shoulder. “Hey man, what took you so long? Pizza’s half gone.”

“I was getting my ass kicked by a girl.” He ran his hand through the back of his hair.

Michael nodded his head in my direction. “Yeah, I know about her. Never heard anyone call it an ass kick. Maybe an ass lick.”

## HOUSE OF THISTLES

“It ain’t the ass she likes to lick,” another player called out. The group that took over the back tables erupted into laughter.

“How do you know?” I stuck my pinkie finger out. “Your dick’s so small I can’t find it.”

Tim shoved his hands in his jeans. The muscles in his face tensed with his jaw. “This was a mistake.”

“I can handle these assholes.” I glared at his teammates.

“That’s not what I mean.”

He didn’t want to be seen with me. I could be the dirty secret. The private whore. But football heroes don’t parade their whores in public unless they’re cheerleaders. “I get it.” I turned and walked toward the door.

He stepped in front of me again. “I promised to feed you. Sorry my buddies are acting like jerks.”

“They aren’t acting. You can grab a burger for me on the way home. I’ll suck your cock in your truck. That’s why I accepted the date.”

“That’s not what I want.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what every guy wants, and that’s all you’re getting. At least I’m upfront about it. Half the girls at the game tonight are going to get fucked, and the other half will be giving head. It’s a football night, Tim. It’s a Texas tradition. Get with the program.” I put a hand on the door.

“You’re a very frustrating girl.”

One of the other guys called out, “Tim, stop playing with your snatch, and get back over here.”

The rest of the team laughed.

Tim turned around and pointed his finger. “Dude, just shut up.”

He took me by the elbow and led me outside. We jumped into his truck and went to a drive-thru.

“Why do you let guys use you like that?” Tim asked.

“Why are you acting like a girl?” I leaned in and thrust my chin up. Then I snorted and shook my head. I started to wonder if he was worth it.

“You know what? I genuinely like you. At least, I thought I did.”

I didn't want to admit it out loud, but I liked him, too. He seemed . . . decent? There had to be an angle. No one was this nice, least of all good-looking, popular guys.

“Nobody's using me. Okay? I do what I do because I like it.” I settled against the back of the seat and looked out the window.

“You're lying to yourself.”

“What are you? My shrink?”

His clear voice rang out with his laughter. “Maybe someday. I'm going to major in child psychology.”

“Great.” I looked up and sighed. “That's why you're interested in me. I'm your class project.”

“You're a challenge.”

I gave him a sideways glance. “Maybe you like a challenge.”

We drove home as we ate our burgers. The conversation on the way back was much lighter. I found myself relaxing with him. When Tim pulled into the driveway, he escorted me to the door. No one had ever done that.

I invited him to my room, but instead of accepting, he kissed me and said it could wait for another time.

I ran my hand over my stomach. Pitted scars with no elasticity. I had been daydreaming again about things I had no wish to remember. There was no point in reliving what had been. The only things that mattered were in front of me: The daily tasks I needed to accomplish. I studied the data set and concluded the research coordinator was an idiot. I wrote a query requesting that the use of quinidine for malaria in a seventy-eight-year-old American heart patient be reviewed. Yes, the drug was used for malaria, but it was more commonly used for arrhythmia and congestive heart failure. I reviewed a few more pages of data and logged off of my computer. It had been too long since I had taken a nap.

## HOUSE OF THISTLES

Over the next two weeks, I settled into my regular habit of working when I felt like it and doing absolutely nothing when I felt like it. I worked to keep the memories at bay, but they charged at me anyway. I slept to escape, but they stole my dreams. Desire for my old anesthetic fought for dominance until I could think of nothing else. I paced during the night and took cold showers, only to discover that the idea of taking cold showers to control the libido was nothing but a vicious rumor. I jumped up and headed to the door.

I stopped with my keys in hand. I'd sworn I wouldn't do this again. I stopped crying over my decisions years ago, but when the nails started closing the door shut to any emotions, I realized I didn't want to lose my humanity just because I wanted to conquer and be conquered. But the war raged between my legs. I called out to Harley that I was leaving for the evening and walked out the door.

The club was close to empty on an early Wednesday evening. No one was on the dance floor, and only a handful of patrons were at the bar. I ordered a cranberry martini and waited. I didn't wait for anyone currently in the place. They all looked dull, lifeless, and ugly. I would have been better off answering an ad through the Internet. Not one of those semiclassy dating sites. A one-night stand encounter page.

I sat there, feeling the growing desire to fuck a door knob or a bumper hitch. I didn't care. Something. Anything. I jumped off the barstool and finished my drink. I walked down the length of the bar and back. I was prowling, pacing, anxious to get the night started. Taking my seat again, I ordered another drink.

I was halfway through my third glass when my blurred vision focused on a thick-bodied man with a goatee.

## CHAPTER 4

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If God exists, then He is providential. If He doesn't exist, neither does providence. God must exist because Steven just walked into my bar on his school night—the very same night I decided to abandon my resolution of continuing to live a celibate life.

“You're the girl from the bookstore.” Steven leaned on the counter next to me.

“You're the guy who makes a mean cup of mocha latte,” I said.

“Allie, isn't it? Do you mind if we relax together? My brain is still burning from the exam, and I could use company and a conversation.”

He remembered my name, which was flattering. “You're Steven, and I don't mind at all if you join me.”

“What are you having now?”

“Martini. What are you going to have?”

“Whatever's good here.” He smiled as he winked at me.

“You may have whatever you'd like.”

“Are we talking about drinks?”

“We can talk about whatever you want.” I rested my chin on my hand and looked up him.

His clear, baritone voice rang out with laughter. “I'll leave that alone for another time. You've had too much to drink.”

“So?”

“When someone is drunk, she may do things that in the morning she'll regret. I don't want you to suffer regrets.”

## HOUSE OF THISTLES

“Why do you think I’m here?” I asked. Truthfully, I wanted to go home with a stranger. Steven was a stranger, but there was something about him that my fuzzy brain couldn’t quite figure out.

“Why are you here?”

“To relax.” And bury my demons.

“I’m glad I found you here. It’s pathetic to drink alone.”

Steven hopped on the barstool beside me and ordered a chocolate martini. “I never used to drink, but someone turned me on to these things a couple of months ago.”

“Someone?” I raised an eyebrow, then flashed a teasing smile.

“A date. I went out with her a couple of times, but we weren’t compatible. She was a nice lady, though.”

“If you like nice ladies, why are you talking to me?”

“I’m a sucker for a pretty face.”

After Steven showed up, I barely sipped my drink. I wanted to sober up and get drunk on his conversation, which gradually moved to history and literature, and he mentioned the short story, “The Lottery.”

“It was my favorite story back in college,” I said. “The Lottery” had become a classic, detailing an annual event in a small town in which one person is randomly chosen, by a drawing, to be stoned to death by the other villagers, including spouses and children. They did it because it was a yearly, festive event. Life meant nothing so long as the tradition was upheld.

“It spoke to the very heart of things at the time Shirley Jackson wrote it, and it still applies today.” Steven spoke with the intensity of a college professor lecturing his students. “People blindly follow and do what’s expected of them, either feeling powerless to change or not knowing how wrong it is.”

“It was the most disturbing story I’ve ever read,” I told him. It was odd how a fictitious story haunted me so many years after reading it, yet my own past didn’t.

“Most people aren’t self-aware. They don’t know why they do the

things they do. Perhaps, if they stopped to think about it, they would be horrified by their actions.”

“That’s why they don’t think.” The meaning of what I’d just said knocked on the door to my brain. Something was trying to get in, some sort of wisdom I was trying to ignore. In that moment, I realized that I was one of the horrid villagers in the story. When I stopped to understand, even in the alcoholic haze, I realized I was on a manhunt. Not for my own pleasure, even though the need pressed deeply into my groin, but to kill the pain. I had come to that conclusion years ago. How easy it was to abandon new resolves for old anesthetics.

After finishing our drinks, Steven and I took a walk through downtown Fort Worth. The spring air warmed my skin even though the sun had gone down three hours ago. Steven’s fingers entwined with mine. I felt safe with him. Comfortable. How strange was that sensation after spending a lifetime of pulling away from any man’s touch? When he escorted me to my car, we lingered for another minute before he kissed me. The kiss was short and friendly. I expected more, but there was no danger on those lips.

After I got back home alone, I fell asleep thinking of Steven. I barely knew him, so I knew better than to delve into adolescent musings, but he was careful with me, as though I were an expensive vase. I didn’t even mind when he held my hand. Tim was the only other guy I thought I could trust.

The first week of school after the game was a mixture of excitements. Tim had invited me to sit with him at lunch every day, and he walked me to class when he could. There was also a buzz of rumors, and I wondered if he dated me for my reputation, or if he would dump me to save his, but he always escorted me past the whisperings as he carried my books.

He took me to his house one Thursday so we could work on his English paper. At his mother’s insistence, we sat at the kitchen table as

we brainstormed ideas. The table and chairs were made of cherry wood, but it was the black granite countertops with gold flecks that caught my interest. It wasn't just the cherry wood furniture and the granite countertops or even the carved staircase I passed on the way in. It was the arched pillars, the chandelier in the entryway, and the well-endowed kitchen that suggested his parents' wealth.

"What's the topic?" I asked.

"Write about the first time I ever fill-in-the-blank. I'm going to write about the first time I threw a football."

"Lame."

"How is that lame?"

"All the essays from the girls are going to be about their first kiss, and all the essays from the boys are going to be sports-related. Break out of the pack."

Tim plastered a stupid grin on his face as he gazed over my shoulder at a far-off event. "The first time my dad took me to the park to teach me how to throw a ball, I was around five. He threw a perfect spiral, but my fingers couldn't fit around the laces. The ball flopped over and dropped to the ground every time I threw it, but my dad would pick it up and encourage me. Whenever I came close to throwing it right, he would slap the ball and tell me how proud I made him. He was so patient."

"I wish I had those kinds of memories."

Tim squeezed my hand. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"You didn't. Write the essay you want to write. It means something to you, and that will show."

"What would you write about?"

I fiddled with my pen while I thought about it. "The first time I ever shoplifted."

When Tim let out a boisterous laugh, I laughed with him.

"It's not what you think. Listen. I was maybe four. I was at the mall with my mom, and I saw this big, blue teddy bear. I think it was almost

as big as me. I asked Mom if I could have it, and she told me no. So I grabbed it and ran past her and out the door. The theft alarm went off, but neither the clerks nor my mom could catch me. Finally, a security guard stood in front of me. That's all he did. He didn't touch me. I looked up at him, and I suddenly felt very afraid."

Tim slapped the table when I finished. "That's an awesome story."

I leaned in close and kissed him. He ran his hand down my back. My muscles recoiled from his touch, but instead of stopping, I reached for his hand and held it.

"Ahem."

I looked up. His mother stood over us.

"Sorry." I backed away.

We both maintained a look of seriousness until she walked away.

I snickered, covering my mouth. "Let's go to my house."

He agreed, and instead of taking the truck, we walked from his neighborhood to mine. Even though the houses in his area were newer and more expensive, the two neighborhoods were only separated by one major street.

"Are your foster parents going to be home?" Tim asked.

"Mr. Dobson's working. Mrs. Dobson has a women's Bible study on Thursday evenings. Even if she's home now, she'll be leaving soon."

"How many kids are there?" We passed one grand house after another. Each green lawn with flowering plants emphasized how alien his world was from mine. In my world, plants started dying in the autumn—at least, the ones that hadn't already been killed by the summer heat.

"Just me and my brother."

"Like a real brother?"

"No. A fake one."

He hip-checked me. "Now you're making fun of me."

"Yeah, Josh is my real brother."

We turned down Carter Drive. The yards were more normal there.

## HOUSE OF THISTLES

The grass was yellowing, signaling its time to rest after a long, hot summer. There were no flowers, just trees with a mixture of green and brown leaves. Two houses down on the left stood the beige brick home I'd lived in for the past five years. It was the longest I'd lived anywhere. I led Tim past the wood posts that served as part of the wall between the den and the great room. Mrs. Dobson was in the L-shaped kitchen cutting up the brownies she'd made for her Bible study. She wore a plain blue cotton dress, and her salt and pepper hair was cut in a blunt style.

"I have a casserole in the oven, and I'm leaving two brownies for you and Josh." Mrs. Dobson turned around. "Oh, you have a guest." She wiped her hands on a towel and introduced herself.

"I'm helping Tim with his English paper," I explained.

"I'm sorry, but there are rules in this house. He can't stay here while I'm gone." She leaned against the counter with one hand on her hip.

"When are you leaving?"

"In ten minutes."

"We'll just work in the den until you leave." Tim and I walked back into the front room where Josh was watching TV.

"You have to leave. Tim and I are doing homework."

"Go to your room. I'm watching TV." Josh stared straight at the screen without looking up.

"I can't. You know the rules. Go be a sloth somewhere else."

Josh turned off the TV and walked out without another word.

"How old is he?" Tim whispered.

"Eighteen, and he's a junior. Can you believe it?" I plopped my books on the coffee table and sat on the couch.

"Why are you in the same grade?"

"He's an idiot, and I was a child genius." Tim's puzzled expression prompted me to explain further. "I was on a second or third grade reading level when I was five. Instead of sending me to kindergarten, my parents enrolled me into private school so I could start first grade.

That put Josh and me one year from each other, but he flunked fourth grade, so now I'm stuck with him."

"If you were on that high of a reading level, you must have been above all the other kids, and you were the youngest. That must have been cool."

"Actually, it sucked. I was in a small country school, and first and second grade were in one room. I was bored with my division, and I understood everything Mrs. Beard taught her second grade class, but no one would move me up. I kept doing my schoolwork ahead of the class, and every time I did, Mrs. Beard erased my work and sent me to the corner."

"So now you're in the big city, taking honors classes." Tim gestured broadly in an almost mocking way.

"It's hard sometimes, but I like the challenges."

"So do I." A grin teased at the corners of his mouth.

"I'm not much of a challenge."

"In the way you're talking, not many girls are a challenge with me."

"You're a bit full of yourself." I raised an eyebrow.

He shrugged. "I'm honest. A lot of girls are easy with their body and soul. You're only easy with your body."

I sat back and studied him. Tim was so matter-of-fact. Nothing seemed to bother him, but he was right. I played as much as I wanted and with whom I wanted, but to allow access to my soul would give control over to another human being. "I think it's time for you to go."

"What?" Tim stood and stepped back. "I don't understand."

Mrs. Dobson walked in. "I'm sorry, but your friend is going to have to leave."

I crossed my arms and tapped my foot, not taking my focus off my guest.

"Will you at least see me to the door?" Tim may have been confused by my sudden change in attitude, but he played it cool.

I looked back at my foster mother. She had an eyebrow raised. She didn't know what had just happened, but she had an intuitive awareness that something wasn't right. To avoid questions, I walked Tim to the door.

## HOUSE OF THISTLES

Less than five minutes after Mrs. Dobson left, the doorbell rang.

I opened the door a crack, and Tim pushed it open the rest of the way. He shoved me against the wall and kissed me with a deep passion that I reciprocated. He pulled his head back to gaze in my eyes. His softly pursed lips brushed along my jaw, sending shivers through my body down to my toes. He grabbed both of my breasts with his hands.

Revulsion wrenched through my stomach. I grabbed his hands. “One rule: Don’t touch me.”

“I want to touch you,” he whispered. “I want to feel your body tremble under my hands.”

“You can feel my body writhe under yours.” I led him to my bedroom. The lights were off, and the blinds were drawn. I locked the door and pinned Tim’s wrists to the wall as I kissed him.

“Take off your clothes,” I commanded.

“You, too.”

Mainly, I gave out blow jobs and hand jobs. Despite my reputation, I’d only had intercourse twice before—both times in the dark and with the same guy. But I wanted Tim. He was sexy and one of the few people who was actually interested in my mind. After we both stripped, I grabbed his hand to lead him to my bed.

“Wait. I want to see you.” He flipped on the light.

“No!” I leaped toward the switch.

It was too late. I was bare before him. A look of horror mixed with disgust fought for dominance across his face. I grabbed my clothes and covered the scars. “Get out.”

“Allie-”

“I said, out!” Tears burned my eyes as I clung to my midsection, permitting him a closer glimpse of my soul than I ever wanted to allow anyone.

“What happened?”

I walked past him, and threw the door open. “Out.”

He slammed the door shut. “Let me get dressed first.”

Holding on to my covering, I went into my closet and put my clothes back on. When I stepped out, Tim was sitting on my bed, putting on his shoes. He gave me a weak smile. I was sure he pitied me.

“What happened?” This time his question bore a touch of sympathy.

“Fire.”

“Is that how your parents died?”

“I don’t want to see you again.”

He took a deep breath and hesitated before he walked out the door. I saw him at school, especially in the cafeteria, but we never said another word to each other.

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