

Chapter 1/ Dare

Caroline is on my mind. Through the kitchen window, the sky is such an unsullied blue miracle that I almost believe my life's most enduring wrong might somehow be made right. My Colombian housekeeper, Seraphina Perez, and I sit on stools at the marble island, decorating boiled eggs for the hunt the Episcopal church hosts for the children of Foxfield, Virginia. Easter's late this year. Just weeks before Caroline's birthday. It's the season of new life, of hope.

This afternoon, the alumnae association at our women's college is hosting a party in my garden for the senior class. Seraphina and I are waiting for the caterers to arrive. Three months ago, Holland Hutton, the new president contacted me at the *Journal*, where after a decade, a peek at the masthead with my name Dare Marston O'Day next to the title of Features Editor still makes me smile. *Your garden is the perfect setting for the event, Dare. And you won't have to lift a pinkie.* Now, when the caterers arrive, I step out to greet them and to let my one-eared, rescue dog Lucie tinkle beneath a flowering crabapple. As the team unloads their van, I brush a pop-up shower of pink blossoms from Lucie's coat, before leading her back inside. Still at the island, Seraphina uncaps a paint pen. "Let's stay here and watch."

"Like with a bucket of buttered popcorn and a box of Junior Mints?"

She grins. "If we keep the lights out, they won't be able to see us in here."

"Well," I say, taking a seat again. "I'll stay 'til we get the eggs finished."

The caterers drape round tables with white cloth and plant the legs of gilded chairs in the tender spring grass. A tiny woman laboring under an enormous, empty crystal punch bowl is crossing the terrace. Seraphina gasps and crosses herself until the woman sets the bowl safely on the end of a long table. At the whoosh of luxury cars nosing into the driveway behind my ten-year-old Toyota, Lucie lets fly a shrill bark.

“Hush, whistle britches. The alumnae are here.” On teetering heels, the women help the caterers carry plastic-wrapped silver trays from the van.

Seraphina touches the paint on the last of the eggs and satisfied, begins nesting them into the cartons we’d saved. “Thank goodness I remembered to put a pair of crossed spoons on the grass,” she mutters, “or else it would’ve rained.” The roots of Seraphina’s superstitions are deep and many branched, covering every human circumstance. I help her bag up pens, remembering the first time we’d met, when she’d been my mother’s caretaker. She’d reminded me of tiny, rawboned Carla from TV’s *Cheers*. But when she’d opened her mouth and Sophia Vergara came out, larger than life, I knew I’d met a friend. My mother, the indomitable Taft Marston, of Marston Candies, had grown weary of big city life. She’d up and left D.C. for northern Virginia and the hamlet of Foxfield. Here she’d hired Seraphina. Years later, when Taffy died and I’d moved from D.C. and into her home, neither Seraphina nor I had thought of a reason for her not to stay. She’d even coerced me into raising her already prodigious salary. Someone slams the back doors of the catering van, and we both look towards the sound. Lucie lifts her head from her dog bed beneath the table and looks at me, before letting go a menacing growl. Hopping out, she trots to her water bowl. “You know that’s like a crime van,” Seraphina—a devotee of Law and Order: Special Victims Unit—says, giving me a confidential side-eye.

I stare at her. “What *in the world* are you talking about?”

“A kidnapping van.” She flips a palm indicating the immaculate, white van with the fancy script on the side. “No windows to see the evil happening inside.”

“You’ve lost your mind. The only crime going on in there is highway robbery, their prices.” We’re laughing, as the living room clock chimes four and the thunks of car doors out

front announce the students' arrivals. "We better get those eggs in the fridge. I can't smell them anymore, but if somebody comes in, they might think . . . you know."

Seraphina grins. "What? That you farted?"

"Seraphina! *Me?* And don't use that tacky word." I open the refrigerator and push the cartons inside. She's still cackling as we watch the girls float into the garden in pastels and sunglasses, cellphones in hands, their hair gleaming black, chestnut and blonde in the sunshine. The alums greet the students with professional handshakes and direct them to a wrought iron table to fill out nametags with Sharpie Markers.

"I wish I could hear what they're saying," Seraphina says, fussy faced. I'd forgotten that Holland is not only the president of the alumnae association, but also has a daughter at the college. I watch them now, chatting and laughing at the edge of the terrace, as alike in appearance as in articulate mannerisms. The daughter moves behind Holland for a moment and gives her mom's shoulders a little massage. When another student appears, bouncing up and down, in an *I'm-next* posture, Holland steps aside and rolls her shoulders as though in relief. I read her bold pink lips: *Thank you, sweetheart.*

I reel with wistfulness. This is one of the times I long to text my daughter and know she'll ping me right back, maybe even engage in a brief dialogue about our days. *You should see what's going on here! Seraphina is having a field day.* Even though Caroline's an adult now, we haven't reached the point where we've become friends like many of the mothers and daughters I know. I wonder how often she thinks of me where she lives in California. Probably about as often as she cleans her rain barrel. It stings that we're not close, though I own my share of the estrangement that lies like a bottomless canyon between us. I sigh and turn my attention to the

girls filling their plates at the food table, forcing myself to focus on a sweeter topic: the petit fours on the dessert table.

“Why don’t you make coffee? I ask Seraphina. “Maybe they’ll leave a few of those cakes behind.”

“You make it,” she says, her eyes glued to the window. “I wouldn’t miss this for a night with Andy Garcia.” She makes a humph in her throat. “Those caterers. If they got a taste of my Tres Leches Cake, they’d be begging for the recipe.”

“True that,” I say, smiling again as I measure the Colombian coffee she insists we order online into the machine. Well-mannered and subdued, the girls seat themselves on the gilded chairs. Maybe they’re nervous, or just making their best impressions, before taking part in a discussion on the roll out of a slick, new alumnae magazine. The great glass bowl is full of with what appears to be pineapple punch. A caterer ladles it into a dozen or so cut-glass cups, and then moves on to help tend to the food. The washing machine signal burrs. Seraphina hops up to put the load in the dryer, muttering about the *cheap-ass* new detergent I’d bought that makes her itch. A pregnant alum hauls herself to her feet and brushes crumbs from her ship’s prow of a belly. She takes a microphone and thumps it a couple of times to check the sound. Looking out a low pane of glass in the back door, Lucie cocks her head.

“Good back there?” the alum asks the students at the farthest table nearest the refreshments. The girls offer her brisk thumbs ups and a discussion begins.

“Let there be sound!” Seraphina says hurrying back into the room. The alum asks the seniors what content they think should be included in the publication, based on their years at the college. I sip coffee and listen as a cordless mic is passed from hand to hand. “Check out the fake Kate Spade tote, Seraphina says.

“Where?”

“At the back table, on the chair of the chica with her hair dyed silver like an old lady.

Why the hell do they do that anyway?”

“How do you know the tote’s a fake?”

Seraphina sniffs. “I read *In Style* magazine.” I grin and raise an eyebrow at her green and white football jersey and purple stretch pants. She ignores me and pours herself a cup of coffee, then sits, her elbows on the island. From time to time, girls rise to go back for seconds on punch and refreshments. I check the petit fours: still half a tray left. “Miss Kate Spade sure has been back to the punch bowl enough times,” Seraphina said, twisting her lips to one side. “I knew we should have put a port-o-potty in the yard.”

I hoot. “That would have gone over really big with the alumnae association!”

Before long, the microphone is passed to the girl with the fake bag. She stands, the skinny heels of her shoes miring into the grass. Maybe all these heels will help aerate my lawn. The girl struggles to steady herself.

“What’s your name, please?” the pregnant alum asks her.

“Oh,” she answers, slapping a hand over the name tag on her chest. “I’m Allie Ahrens.” Then she hiccup-burps. Loud enough to be heard in Maryland. Right into the microphone. She turns the color of the lone raspberry on the fruit tray. “Please excuse me!” But as the girls at her table dissolve into giggles, Allie joins them and plops back into her gilded chair. She shakes her head and waves her hand in a *come-back-to-me-later* gesture. Seraphina is staring at something. I follow her gaze to the alum at the microphone whose face is waxen.

“Perhaps someone else has an idea for the student life pages,” she says through tick-tight lips. Then, “Yes,” she says with a grateful smile, calling on a tall black girl who has raised her hand from a table in the front.

Seraphina looks at me as the student begins speaking. “Joseph, Mary and Jesus,” she says, pronouncing the Lord’s name Haysoos.

“Well, they probably just have a touch of senior-itis,” I say, but with an unexamined sense of unease. When the shadows have lengthened across the terrace, the party wraps and the young women troop to their cars no doubt to get ready for big Saturday nights. As the caterers began their dismantling, the alums come inside, the chill spring night rushing past them.

Holland rubs briskly at her arms. “It sure feels good in here! What a cute dog,” she says, though I see the doubletake she gives Lucie’s missing ear. The pregnant one asks to use the powder room and toddles down the hall. A caterer makes a platter of leftovers to leave with Seraphina and me, including a packet of *five* petit fours. Woot! As the last of the alumnae cars pulls from the driveway, Lucie clips over to her food bowl as she does every afternoon promptly at 5:30. I feed her and pour myself a glass of wine to kick off another thrilling Saturday night. Is spending so much time with a cheeky, sixty-five-year-old woman making me old? I’m only forty-five, but sometimes I feel like I’m living a season of *The Golden Girls*. Taking my glass of wine with me, I walk Lucie down the block and back, waving and speaking to neighbors, stopping as our newest one meets me at her picket fence to return an empty casserole dish from the welcome meal I’d made her. Then Seraphina and I make our dinner from the leftovers, including two petit fours a piece for dessert. We’re in the living room and midway through a movie featuring Andy Garcia, when my cell chimes. I reach around Lucie, who’s snoring on a sofa cushion and collect the phone. Carmen Dimora from the paper. In ten years, my boss has

only called me once on a weekend, when the college was under financial stress and about to shutter, which would have pretty much closed down the town *and* the paper. This couldn't be good. Seraphina is mouthing something about arm wrestling me for the last petit four. I place a finger over my lips to shush her and with a prickle of foreboding, take Carmen's call.

"Dare," he says, his typically affable voice grim. "Can you come in? There's been a car crash." In an area where a women's and men's college are separated by a twisty, two-lane stretch of road, there are often accidents on Saturday nights. What's different about this one that Carmen had called me? He draws a breath. "A student, a Miss Allie Ahern struck a pedestrian with her car tonight. Her blood alcohol was one-point-six. The man's critical at Foxfield Memorial.

"Oh, my Lord," I whisper, as it sinks in that Allie Ahern was the girl acting like a twit in my garden today. I slump boneless into the corner of the sofa, my mind a Rube Goldberg machine. Carmen wants *me* to come in. But our news editor is the one who writes pieces of this nature. I search for a tactful response, one that proves my loyalty to the team. "Do you . . . uh, want me to come down and work up a piece?"

His next words are like a punch to my petit four-filled gut.