

## Chapter 1

---

# KAYLA

2010

I'm in the middle of a call with a contractor when Natalie, our new administrative assistant, pokes her head into my office. I put the call on hold.

"This woman is in the foyer and she says she has an eleven o'clock appointment with you, but I don't have her on your calendar." She looks worried, as though afraid she's already screwed up. "Ann Smith?"

The name is unfamiliar. "I don't have any appointments today," I say, glancing at the time on my phone. Eleven-oh-five. I should see the woman in case the screwup is on my end. I've only been back to work a couple of weeks and don't completely trust myself to think straight yet. "You can send her in."

A woman appears at my open office door as I wrap up my call and get to my feet. She's not at all my usual client—those thirty- or forty-somethings who've amassed enough money to build the home of their dreams. No, Ann Smith looks closer to sixty-five or seventy, though she appears to be fighting her age with vivid red shoulder-length hair. She

wears mirrored sunglasses that mask her eyes, but nothing can camouflage the way her red lipstick bleeds into the lines around her mouth.

"Ann Smith?" I ask, smiling and curious as I reach out to shake her hand. "I'm Kayla Carter. Please come in and have a seat. I didn't have you on my schedule today—something must have fallen through the cracks—but I have about half an hour. What can I do for you?"

She doesn't return my smile as she sits down in the red Barcelona chair I offer her. I wish she'd remove her sunglasses. I see only my warped reflection instead of her eyes. It's disconcerting.

"I want to put an addition on my house," she says, folding her hands in the lap of her khaki slacks. Her nails are long acrylics, the red polish sloppily applied, and her voice is deep. *Very* deep, with a bit of a rasp to it. She looks around my office as if searching for something. She seems uneasy.

"Well, tell me about your house," I say. "Where is it?" It's weird, speaking to my own misshapen reflection in her glasses.

"Not far from here," she says. "It's a boxy nineteen-sixties house. Too dark. I want to add a sunroom."

I picture the house, old and airless. I can imagine the way it smells and the tight feeling of the walls as you pass from room to room. It probably cries out for a sunroom and I've designed plenty of them, but I'm not sure I'm the right architect for this project. Bader and Duke Design hired Jackson and me specifically to bring a more contemporary element to the decades-old North Carolina firm. Ann Smith's house sounds like it needs a cozier aesthetic.

"Do you have any pictures of your home?" I ask.

She doesn't answer. Instead, she stares at me. Or at least, I guess, she's staring. Who knows what her eyes are doing behind those glasses? I feel suddenly uncomfortable, as though the power in the room has shifted from me to her.

"No pictures with me," she says finally. "I lost my husband and now the

house seems . . . oppressive." She leans forward a few inches. "You know how that feels, don't you? Losing your husband?"

A shiver runs up my spine. How does she know about Jackson? How does she know anything about me? Natalie must have mentioned something to her while she was waiting. "Yes, I do understand what that's like," I say slowly. "I'm so sorry about your loss. But back to your house. How would you like to use the sunroom? For entertaining or—"

"Mine had a heart attack," she says. "He was seventy, which probably seems old to you, but it isn't really. You're what? Thirty, maybe? You'll be seventy in the blink of an eye. Your husband, though. He was way too young, wasn't he?" Her dark eyebrows suddenly pop above the sunglasses in a question. "And to die like he did, falling off the staircase while he was building your new house. Just a shame."

How does she know all this? Any mention of Jackson can throw me off these days, and coming from this odd woman . . . I don't want her to know anything about me. I'll have to have a serious talk with Natalie. "Well." I try to get my footing again. "You're right. It's been difficult. But I'd really like us to focus on your project. Tell me what you—"

"How can you move into the house that took him from you?" She asks the question I've been wondering myself. "No one should've put a house there to begin with. All those new houses. They don't belong. But especially that one. Yours. So modern. And stuck back in the trees like it is."

My palms are sticky on the arms of my chair. At this very moment, we are in an office in Greenville, nearly thirty miles from the Shadow Ridge neighborhood in the outskirts of Round Hill, where my beautiful, newly completed house is waiting for Rainie and me to move into it. How can she know about the house? About my life? What does any of it have to do with her? "How do you know so much about me and what does it have to do with your project?" I ask.

"Shadow Ridge Estates," the woman continues, that deep voice of hers mocking. "Who came up with that pretentious name? All those trees suck

the breath out of you. You don't really want to move in there, do you? It's no place for a child. No place for a little girl. Especially one who just lost her daddy."

*Oh my God. She knows about Rainie.* I don't know how to handle this. She's touching me in my softest, most wounded places and I can't think straight.

I have to get myself under control. I sit up straight, ready to turn the tables on her.

"Would you mind taking your glasses off?" I ask.

"Yes, I'd mind," she says. "Light bothers me." She raises a hand to touch the edge of her glasses, and the loose sleeve of her white blouse slips a few inches up her arm, exposing a pink line across her forearm. Had she tried to kill herself at one time? But I don't think that's it. The line is short and rounded. It looks more like a birthmark than a scar.

"I think you'd better go to another firm," I say, getting to my feet. "I only do contemporary design."

She looks toward the ceiling as if considering the suggestion, then back at me. "If you say so, yes. I guess I'd better." She picks up her purse and stands suddenly, and I step back, afraid of her. Afraid of an old woman. I want her out of my office. I move toward the door, but she swiftly steps forward to block my path. "Do you want to know what keeps me awake at night?" she asks.

"I'd like you to leave," I say. She's too close to me now, so close that I can see the fear in my eyes in the distorted reflection in her sunglasses.

"*Thinking,*" she says. "That's what keeps me awake. Thinking about killing someone."

I push my way past her. Open the door and stand aside. "Leave." My voice sounds firm. At least I hope it does. But Ann Smith doesn't budge.

"I've been thinking about it for a long, long time," she continues. "Years and years and years. And now I have the chance."

My heart thuds against my rib cage. Is she talking about me? Am I the someone? *Years and years and years.* It can't be me. Still, I glance around the

room for a weapon, spotting nothing. I think of my three-year-old daughter. Leaving her an orphan.

"Who are you talking about?" I ask, distressed by the quaking of my voice.

"I don't think I want to tell you." She smiles the smile of someone who has all the power. Then she pivots and walks to the doorway. I say nothing as she leaves the room and I watch her move down the hallway with the ease of a younger woman. Shutting the door, I stand frozen for a full minute before my brain kicks in and I rush to the window. I look out at the tiny parking lot we reserve for clients and contractors, watching for Ann Smith, hoping to see what car she gets into. But she never appears and I stand there numbly, the specter of her presence still looming behind me.