

The
Haunting
of
Paynes Hollow

KELLEY ARMSTRONG



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One

The morning of my grandfather's funeral, I open the last email he sent me, the one that's been sitting in my inbox for six weeks. Sitting there unread, and even now, I don't feel the slightest twinge of guilt about that.

I pop it open, read and—

Fuck.

The text is innocuous enough.

Dear Samantha,

I think you need to see this.

Douglas Payne (your grandfather)

Who the hell signs an email to their twenty-six-year-old granddaughter that way? The same guy who insisted on calling me Samantha when from birth I was Sam, named after a character in a book my mother loved. As for the "your grandfather" part, that was just him being passive-aggressive, because he's a jerk.

Was a jerk.

Damn it.

I sit up in bed and roll my shoulders, as if I can slough off the

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prickle of guilt. “Douglas Payne (your grandfather)” never deserved my guilt. Never deserved my respect. Never even deserved my love. He’d wanted the respect, and he’d sure as hell wanted the guilt, but the love was immaterial. He did not give it, and he did not expect to receive it. As for the respect, he forfeited that when he cut my mother off without a cent after my father’s death.

My father’s *suicide*, which is how Dad chose to deal with the fact that I’d caught him burying Austin Vandergriff.

I instinctively stanch the surge of rage. Then I pause, letting it wash away the irritating wisps of that misplaced guilt.

I cross my legs and pat the bed for my cat, Lucille. Then I remember Lucille is gone, put down last week because I couldn’t afford to treat her cancer. Grief washes over me, only to lift guilt back to the surface. The guilt of grieving over a cat but not my grandfather.

Well, one had been there for me, and one had not.

I wipe away tears and go to delete the email, only to remember why I’d cursed. Not because of the message, but because of the podcast link below.

My finger hovers over that link. Hey, maybe it’ll be so bad that I’ll have an excuse to skip the funeral.

I can’t do that. I’m going for my aunt. I owe Gail that and more. So much more.

I click the link, and as soon as I see the episode title, I exhale in a long hiss.

Paynes Hollow: The Bermuda Triangle of Upstate New York?

“The Bermuda Triangle isn’t a thing,” I mutter. “It had a normal amount of accidents for a high-traffic zone.”

I know that’s not the point, but I still seethe. At least the title tells me this will be nonsense. Thankfully, there’s a transcript, so I don’t need to listen to the episode.

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Paynes Hollow is swathed in shadow when I visit. Massive maples and oaks cast the world into shade and

shadow, the only sound the distant roar of Lake Ontario. It's an empty place, desolate and overgrown, the wind howling through the trees, wisps of fog settling over the land. The kind of place where you feel as if you've stepped back in time, and the Headless Horseman will ride out at any moment.

I snort. "Wrong part of the state, dumbass."

"Sleepy Hollow" was set in Tarrytown, just north of Yonkers, over a hundred miles from Paynes Hollow. While my grandfather *did* claim that Washington Irving wrote his story after a visit to Paynes Hollow, that was just more of his bullshit.

Also, it'd be weird to have the wind howling *while* it's foggy, and the idea that Paynes Hollow is a desolate wasteland is ridiculous. I remember forests and beaches and a picture-perfect summer getaway spot, bustling with visitors.

I keep reading.

It's not the Headless Horseman that resides in Paynes Hollow, though. It's the Grim Reaper himself, riding across the land and slicing down the unwary. Yet the dead here don't fall to the ground. They disappear.

For two hundred years, people have vanished around Paynes Hollow. Hikers. Boaters. Campers. Even local residents. Gone without a trace.

Until Harris Payne murdered a thirteen-year-old boy and was caught red-handed—literally—by his own daughter.

That's how the story goes.

But is it the truth?

I don't doubt young Samantha Payne saw something that day, but I believe, in that shadowy place, where nothing is what it seems, what she really witnessed wasn't her father, but the Grim Reaper of Payne Hollow.

My shaking finger jabs the X to close the tab and keeps jabbing long after it's gone.

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I know what I saw. I wish to God I could say otherwise, but I can't.

I take a deep breath. This is why my grandfather exiled Mom and me from his life. Because he believed there was another explanation. Our father wasn't the monster. We were, for thinking Dad could do that.

The last time I saw my grandfather, I'd been sixteen. He'd invited me to visit, and Mom wanted to seize the olive branch. I'd endured a week of my grandfather trying to convince me that I was wrong about Dad, until I broke down, shouting at him, my voice raw.

"Do you think I *want* to believe he did that? Do you think I wouldn't give *everything* to be wrong? I loved my father. I *adored* my father. If I had any chance of getting him back—even just getting back the good memories—don't you think I'd jump on it?"

I sit on the bed, fists clenched. When my phone buzzes, I almost pitch it aside, as if it's my grandfather reaching out from the beyond. Then I see the text.

Gail: Pick you up in an hour? Grab a fortifying breakfast before the service?

The thought of breakfast sets my stomach roiling.

Gail: And by "fortifying" I mean so leisurely that, whoops, looks like we'll barely make it to the service on time

I have to smile at that.

Sam: Sounds good. See you in an hour.

Gail zips into the funeral-home lot and snags the last spot reserved for family. We jump out, and we're moving fast when a couple catches up. They look familiar, but I can't place them in any context related to my grandfather.

The man is in his fifties, rawboned and angular with silvering blond

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hair and a tanned face. He reminds me of a cowboy, and that nudges a memory, as if I've thought it before.

His wife is about the same age, with close-cropped curls, smooth dark skin, and wide-set brown eyes that radiate kindness.

I've thought that before, too.

"You probably don't remember us," the woman says, extending a hand and a tentative smile. "Liz Smits. This is my husband, Craig."

"Oh!" I shake her hand. "Mrs. Smits. Sheriff Smits. From Paynes Hollow. Of course."

"I was hoping to see your mother again," Mrs. Smits says. "It's been far too long."

"Uh, yes. She . . . isn't well." I swallow. "Dementia. She's in a home."

She blinks. "Dementia? She's only our age."

"It's early-onset. Runs in the family."

An awkward silence, broken as a young woman hurries up, her heels clicking. "Found it." She passes the older woman a pack of tissues. Then she looks at me. "Sam?"

When I hesitate, she thrusts out her hand. "Josie Smits. I was that tagalong brat always following you and the other summer kids."

"Josie. Right. Of course."

I do remember Josie, not as a brat but as an adorable little girl who'd done her damndest to keep up with the big kids. It just takes a moment to reconcile that little girl with the woman in front of me, tall and willowy, light brown skin, her short hair styled in a gorgeous twist-out.

I quickly introduce Gail, who shakes hands and murmurs, "We really do need to get inside, Sam."

"Right. Yes. We're already running late."

"Then let's move," Josie says, and we head inside together.

The service lasts forever. Or that's how it seems when I spend the whole time trying to keep a straight face as person after person says what a wonderful man my grandfather had been. I'd wondered whether my father's existence would be glossed over. But Dad is there, especially

in stories, where he comes to life as I remember him, and that's when I do cry.

Do I notice people glancing my way, leaning in and whispering? Of course I do, because while my grandfather liked to forget what Dad did, no one else has. I will forever be Samantha Payne, the girl who caught her dad burying his victim.

Tragic figure worthy of pity?

Or a monster with savage blood running through her veins?

One can be both.

The service finally ends, and then it's on to the cemetery for the burial. Gail manages to commandeer our own town car, avoiding her brother and his family. At the graveside, we stand apart, and I retreat into my cocoon, where no one can see me, no one can judge me.

Sweat trickles down my face in the humid August sun. After the burial, my cousin, Caleb, plants himself in my escape route. His parents—Uncle Mark and Aunt Ellen—stand behind him.

I glance over my shoulder, but other mourners are talking to Gail, and she doesn't notice the ambush.

"Couldn't stay away, could you?" Caleb says. "You smelled money and swooped in."

"No, I came to say goodbye," I say evenly.

Caleb snorts. "You hated him. You blamed him for what your dad did, and you took it out on an old man who loved you, in spite of everything."

In spite of the fact you were responsible for what happened. That's what he means.

Dad's the one who killed Austin, but I'm responsible for Dad's death because I "tattled" to my mother, who was equally responsible because she took me straight to the police. To Sheriff Smits.

What's that old saying?

A wife and daughter will help you move, but a proper wife and daughter will help you move a body.

"I'm sorry you think that," I say, as placidly as I can, and I take my petty pleasure in seeing Caleb's eyes burn with frustrated rage. "Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"You have a reading of the will to get to?" he sneers.

I look him in the eyes. “No, I have a mother to visit.”

“What? You’re not coming to the reading?”

I arch a brow. “You just accused me of being here for the money, and now you’re offended that I’m not staying for the will?”

Caleb seems almost apoplectic now, his pasty face dangerously red. “You selfish little *bitch*.”

“Caleb!” Aunt Ellen says, but her eyes gleam, secretly pleased.

“Wait a second,” I say. “So if I skip the reading, *that* makes me selfish?”

“Gail,” Uncle Mark says as my aunt hurries over. “We discussed this. You promised she’d be there.”

I slowly turn to Gail as Aunt Ellen says, “She needs to be there, Gail. The will can’t be read otherwise.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” I mutter the words under my breath, but Aunt Ellen still gasps, as if I shouted it at a funeral.

“I’m sorry,” Gail whispers to me. “I was going to tell you.” Then to the others, “I believe people want to express their condolences, and having us standing here whisper-hissing at each other does not look good.”

I clamp my mouth shut, and after a moment, the others back up and let us through.

Congrats, Gramps. You win. Again.

What a surprise.

Two

An hour later, I'm dragging my ass into that reading of the will. Gail and I have already argued over this. If my grandfather left me anything, she wants me to take it for my mother, whose care is about to bankrupt me. I've said it's a moot point because if he left me anything, it's a teacup and a KISS MY ASS donkey sticker.

Now Gail hovers beside me, her whole body practically vibrating with apology. I force an "It's okay" smile. She doesn't buy it. Her round face is drawn and pale, her blue eyes shadowed to gray. She's run her hands through her short dark hair enough that it's sticking up, and when I motion for her to pat it down, she's too upset to bother.

Get it over with. Take the teacup and the sticker, say "thank you very much" and walk out with my head high.

For Gail's sake, I won't delay the reading. She needs and deserves whatever she gets. She's a social worker, which I always think of as more a vocation than an occupation. It sure as hell doesn't fill her bank account. I just need to be sure she doesn't try to give any of her inheritance to me.

To Gail, I pretend money's just "a bit tight." The truth is that I've bookmarked a dozen websites on bankruptcy, and I'd file if I weren't terrified of how it would affect my mother's care.

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Mom is in an awesome facility, and I will do whatever it takes to keep her there. Initially that meant giving up on med school, lying to everyone and saying that my years of volunteering suggested medicine wasn't the job for me.

I'd landed a decent job in Chicago and zoomed from lab tech to researcher. Then the bank informed me that the med-school money was gone and the doctors told me that Mom was declining fast. She needed me home to advocate for her. So I returned to Syracuse, where the only job I could get was an entry-level lab tech at half my former pay.

Then, six months ago . . .

"We hate to lose you, Sam, but we were told to cut in order of seniority, and you're our newest hire."

So now I'm running data from home, making minimum wage, every penny I'd saved in Chicago already gone to my mother's bills.

Could I use money from my grandfather's will? Yes, but it would kill me to take it.

And it would kill my mother if I didn't.

"I hope you get everything," I whisper to Gail as we enter the room.

"If I do, half of it goes to you."

She catches my expression, sighs and shakes her head.

What if she *did* get everything? My uncle has his own money—plenty of it. Maybe my grandfather finally did the right thing and left it all to Gail, and I could agree to accept a sliver. Just enough to banish the specter of financial ruin.

"Miss Payne," a voice says, and I look up to see an elderly woman in a perfect pantsuit. "Isabella Jimenez, your grandfather's lawyer. I'm so glad you're here."

I nod mutely.

"If you and Gail will take a seat." She waves at a table. "We can begin."

So, I get a teacup. Not even joking. Okay, that had been an educated guess. My grandmother had collected teacups, and she always said that she'd leave me my favorite: a Wedgwood decorated with rabbits.

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Sadly, the ancient KISS MY ASS donkey sticker that adorned the basement beer fridge isn't mentioned.

There's a seemingly endless list of bequeathments. My grandfather's long-suffering housekeeper gets a few things, though far less than she deserves. Even the boy who cut the lawn receives the lawn tractor, and I can't help but wonder if this was why my grandfather insisted I be here.

Imagine what you could have gotten, Samantha, if you'd just sucked it up and pandered to me like everyone else.

When my phone vibrates with a text, I check it under the table. It's a nurse from Mom's care home.

Vickie: Your mom is having an excellent day, and she's asking for you. Can I tell her you're on your way?

That isn't a guilt-nudge. Vickie knows she only needs to say the words "good day" and I'll fly out the door. For an excellent day, I might not even remember to put on shoes.

Gail sees the text.

"Go," she whispers.

Ms. Jimenez clears her throat.

Gail straightens. "Sam needs to leave. Her part is done—"

"Her grandfather required that she stay until the end."

"It's her mother," Gail says.

"If it's an emergency, we can postpone this and reconvene tomorrow."

"How much longer?" I say.

She flips through her pages. "Ten minutes?"

I nod, even as I simmer. The lawyer moves on to the disposition of property, and if some desperate corner of my soul hoped for a sliver, it is disappointed. The house—probably worth a couple of million—will be divided into thirds, one going to my uncle, one to Gail, and one to Caleb. That's another reason why I'm here. If my cousin was entitled to a share, I would have been, too.

Gail reaches to squeeze my hand, her look promising me half of hers. I won't take it. I can't. She's thirty-six, recently divorced, and

considering in vitro fertilization for the baby she's always wanted. I won't steal that dream from her.

I still smile back. What matters is that the will is almost done. Mom's last "excellent" day, where I truly had my mother back, was two months ago.

My foot starts tapping. Gail gently touches my knee, and I grimace an apology.

"And now we come to what I suspect you've all been waiting for."

The end? Yep, definitely waiting for that.

"The dispensation of the Paynes Hollow property."

I go still. Shit. I'd forgotten about that. Willfully forgotten.

As the founding family, my ancestors had taken the best land and passed it down intact from oldest son to oldest son. My grandfather owned over three hundred acres of prime land stretching along the coast of Lake Ontario.

I haven't set foot on that land in fourteen years.

"I am supposed to share this." The lawyer lifts a piece of paper and adjusts her reading glasses. "During Mr. Payne's recent illness, he received an offer from a development firm."

My gut clenches as I envision my childhood summer paradise destroyed for high-end condos. Only it's not a paradise anymore, and it's certainly not mine.

"Mr. Payne wished for me to read the offer, which is valid for his heirs."

I check my watch. Then I tuck my phone under the table to text Vickie.

"That offer is . . ." Ms. Jimenez pauses. "Ten million dollars."

Aunt Ellen squeaks. Caleb fist-pumps, as if we're at a damn sports game.

Gail has gone pale.

Ten million dollars?

That's a joke. It must be.

No, actually, it makes sense. Three hundred acres. Forget condos, that could be a full-on subdivision. A hundred lakefront lots and more within a short walk of the water.

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Ten million is not outrageous at all.

“It’s divided the same as the house property, right?” Uncle Mark says. “Three ways. Me, Gail, and Caleb?”

I grin at Gail. I’m thrilled for her, but I also must admit to the rising hope in my heart. Even after taxes, she’d have two million. A sliver of that would solve all my problems, and she’d barely notice the loss.

“Split three ways, right?” Uncle Mark repeats. “No, wait, it goes to the oldest son. Which means me. Or Caleb.”

My heart stops. Is this why I’m here? To see that ten million go to Caleb, who’ll blow it on luxury cars and six-figure bar tabs while my mother moves into some squalid care facility?

“The property goes to a single beneficiary,” Ms. Jimenez says. “As you said, tradition is that it goes to the eldest male.”

Caleb chortles and fist-pumps again. At worst, it’ll go to his dad, who will give him whatever he wants.

Here, have a million bucks for your birthday, son.

My hands clench on my lap. It’s okay. I will walk out of here no worse than I entered.

“In this case,” Ms. Jimenez continues, “it would have gone to Harris.”

Caleb snickers, and every muscle in me tenses. If he says anything about my dad—

Ms. Jimenez says, “Since Harris predeceased him, tradition needed to be changed.”

“It passes to me,” Caleb whispers. “Oldest male—”

“The property—in its entirety—goes to Harris’s daughter, Samantha.”

My head whips up. Ms. Jimenez looks at me, and smiles, a kind smile that tells me I didn’t hear wrong.

To me? Did I misjudge my grandfather, tangled in my anger and grief?

“There is one stipulation,” Ms. Jimenez says. “In light of the break with tradition.”

My heart stops, and I stare at her, seeing apology in her eyes.

“It’s a simple one, though, Sam. And once you fulfill it, the land is yours.”

“Wh-what do I need to do?” I manage.

“Go back,” she says. “You need to spend a month at your family cottage. In Paynes Hollow.”

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When Gail drops me off at the care home, I'm still shaking. She says something as I go, but my swirling rage and impotence drowns it out.

I love my aunt. Adore her. But right now, as she tries to tell me it won't be that bad, that she'll come to Paynes Hollow with me, all I can feel is the scorch of betrayal.

I'm being unfair. I know that. Gail asked the lawyer every question she could think of to get me out of this devil's bargain. What if I refuse? Does the property go to Gail and her brother? She could gift me her share that way.

No, if I refuse, it goes to distant relatives, and I can't even tell myself maybe *they* need the money—they run a Fortune 500 company.

The only person I want to see right now is my mother. I want to see that light in her eyes that tells me she's my mother again.

After Dad died, Mom and I muddled through, growing closer in our grief and confusion. But then I hit my teen years, and when I lashed out, my wonderfully calm mom was so implacable it only enraged me more, like punching a brick wall.

Gail would blame my trauma, but I blame me. At the time, though, I blamed Mom—blamed her for marrying Dad, for not seeing what he was. All breathtakingly unfair, but at fifteen, I was a seething black

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hole of repressed rage and hormones and grief, and I aimed it all at my poor mother, to the point where I'd moved in with Gail.

I can't give my mom back what should have been our last few good years together, but I can make damn sure she gets the best care now, whatever the cost.

Even if the cost is going back to Paynes Hollow?

I stride through the care-facility doors, inhale the smell of fresh-baked cinnamon buns, and my pulse slows. Then I see Vickie, looking up from her paperwork to shake her head, and my insides shrivel. It's all I can do to cross those last few feet to her.

"I'm too late," I whisper.

"I'm sorry, honey."

"It was my grandfather's funeral. I couldn't get away."

She reaches over to pat my hands. "I know. And it was such a brief episode that you might not have made it even if you came right away. But it was so good to see, and I think we're going to get a lot more of those."

"With the new medication," I say.

Her warm smile falters. The new—and very expensive—medication. "It might not be that. Your mother is such a strong woman. I've seen this happen, where they rally on their own, and if anyone can do that, it's your mom."

It's a kind lie, but still a lie. If Mom is improving, it's the trial medication. Vickie was responsible for advocating to get Mom on that trial, but it's ending, and if she stays on it, there will be a price. A steep price.

A price for better medication. A price for this place, modern and yet cozy, like a Norwegian spa specializing in hygge living, as warm and comforting as a hug.

I didn't put my mother here. Given the choice, I'd have cared for her myself, which would have been a disaster to rival the *Titanic*, and at the end, we'd both have gone down with the ship.

Driven by guilt and love, I'd have surrendered any dreams of my own to care for my mother, who would have fought me every step of the way—with love when she was lucid and fury when she was not.

My mother's legendary calm slips as her memory does. She has

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rages, as if when her mind relaxes, her own suppressed anger at Dad finally rushes out.

Mom put herself here, without telling me, and as always, she did the right thing. She found this place, and it is exactly right for her.

“Is it okay to see her?” I ask tentatively.

Vickie smiles. “I believe so. Her episodes have been rarer, too.”

I know that. I’m here daily, and I’m as involved as I’m allowed to be. She *has* been getting better.

Because of the medicine I soon won’t be able to afford.

In a home that I soon won’t be able to afford.

Unless . . .

I clamp down on the thought. I’d spend a month in that hellhole, only to discover that I’d failed to fulfill some minor stipulation and I’d lose the property.

My grandfather had been careful to close off every loophole, but I’m sure he introduced a few. Just to torment me. A final act of spite, punishing me for the sin of turning in my murderous father.

The lawyer’s words ring in my head as she’d read from the note my grandfather left. Not a private note. One that he ordered to be read aloud to all.

I understand that Samantha was a child when she thought she saw her father do that terrible thing. I understand that she truly believes she saw it, and that he could have done such a thing to another human being, much less a child. But she is wrong. I may not have been able to make her see that in life, but I can do it now, after my death. She will return to Paynes Hollow, and she will spend a month there, and she will remember the truth. She will finally remember the truth.

Fresh rage whips through me. There is no doubt of what I saw. My father never tried to deny it. He ended his life *because* of what I saw. He left a goddamn suicide note, begging my forgiveness, ranting about inner demons.

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He never denied what I saw or my interpretation of it.

Vickie leads me into the sunroom, my favorite spot in the home. It's empty, as it usually is. You'd think that if loved ones cared enough to pay for this home, they'd be here as often as they could, but that's my naiveté talking. Paying for an expensive long-term-care facility only means you have money, and sometimes, having money means you can plunk Grandpa in a place like this and wash your hands of him, content in the knowledge you've done your duty.

I take a seat by the window overlooking the Seneca River.

"Gail," a voice says, and my heart cracks a little as I rise to face the woman entering the room. She's petite and beautiful, with hair just beginning to gray, her face unlined. She looks thirty-five, not fifty-five, a cruel trick, as if some higher power made up for her mind's rapid degeneration by letting her body stay young.

"Mom," I say. "It's me. Sam."

She stops short. Then she smiles. "Ah, you and Sam are playing a joke on me." She wags a finger. "My daughter would never dress like that. If you want to do this properly, you need to show up in jeans and hiking boots."

I look down at my funeral garb. She's right, of course. This dress is far more Gail than me. Yet Mom makes the mistake no matter what I wear. I look too much like my aunt, and Mom still expects me to be a teenager.

I don't keep trying to correct her. I know the drill. One or two attempts is fine, but more will upset her.

As her mind wanders, my trick for communicating is to imagine if the situation were reversed, and Mom kept insisting it was a different year or she was a different person. I would find it funny at first, but eventually I'd get angry.

"Do I smell cinnamon rolls?" I ask.

Mom sighs as she sits across from me. "They're as bad as your brother, always bringing me treats."

I tense. By Gail's "brother," she means my dad, who always brought us both treats, and Mom always teasingly scolded him until I offered to eat hers, too.

"It's a lovely day," I say. "Maybe we could go for a walk along the river?"

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“Oh, I don’t think that’s safe,” Mom says. “You never know what’s in the water.” She folds her hands in her lap. “Those cinnamon buns smell like they’re almost done.”

I smile. “Sure, we’ll wait for your cinnamon bun, Mo—Veronica.”

She leans forward, as if someone might be listening. “Have you seen Sam lately? I know she’s busy, but she never comes to see me anymore.”

“I was here yester—” Deep breath, even as my hands shake. “She’ll be here soon.”

Mom’s hands twist in her lap. “I think she’s still angry with me.”

My eyes fill. “No. She’s not angry with you. If she ever was, she didn’t mean it.”

Mom nods, gaze down.

“Really. Sam loves you so much. She’ll be here tomorrow. I’m sure of it.”

“I hope so,” Mom says, in a tiny voice that breaks me in two.

An hour later, I’m hurrying out of the building, trying not to cry, when someone hails me. I turn to see the administrator bearing down.

“Ms. Payne,” he says, panting slightly as he catches up. “We need to discuss your account.”

I raise a hand. “I know. I’m behind on the latest payment—”

“You are two payments behind. It is the sixteenth. August’s payment was due yesterday.”

“I’ll have July’s payment on Friday.”

“And August?”

“I . . . I’m speaking to my mother’s insurance company next week. They promised to cover part of her stay, and they’re dragging their heels.”

“I understand, but you need to pursue that separately. We have bills to pay, too, Ms. Payne. If you cannot catch up by next week, you will need to make other arrangements for your mother.”

I open my mouth, but he’s already striding back into the building.

I stand there, staring at the door as it closes behind him. I’m not sure whether I want to scream or cry. Both. At once. I want to rage

against the world that did this to my mother. That put her through that hell with my dad and then took away her mind.

Ten million dollars, a voice whispers in my head.

I swallow hard.

I keep saying I'd do anything for my mother. I gave up on med school for her. I left a good job for her. I moved back to Syracuse for her. I let my cat die for her.

Maybe I should be raging at the world that keeps demanding more sacrifices from me, but every time I feel that, I think of my mother, and *her* sacrifices, what she endured and keeps enduring.

I say I would do anything, but I won't spend a month at Paynes Hollow? I'm not being asked to sacrifice a limb. It's a month in a cottage on a private beach, for fuck's sake.

The world that keeps demanding more has finally offered something in return. Compensation beyond my wildest imaginings. Enough money that I could write a single check to cover Mom's stay for the rest of her life. Enough money to keep her on that trial and buy every medication she needs. Enough to get her the best help—private nurses, dedicated caretakers, anything she might need as she deteriorates.

I could give her that. I just need to have the guts to do it.

As I walk to the bus stop, I call Gail.

"Hey," she says, her voice tentative.

"I need to be sure," I say.

"Sure about . . . ?"

"That it's real. That if I spend a month there, I'll get the money for Mom. That there's no way this is a trick, no loopholes I can stumble through. I don't need ten million dollars. But I have to be sure that I will get *enough*."

"Of course." Her voice firms, and I can imagine her straightening. "Let me call Ms. Jimenez. I'll tell her we want to talk. I won't let you go through this if there's any chance your grandfather is playing games. And I won't let you go through it alone."