

Chapter 2

Heather

Chicago, Illinois

“Your mother isn’t answering her phone.”

Heather wished she hadn’t answered the FaceTime call. Her grandmother loomed at her, holding the phone too close as usual, so the screen was all big pink-lipsticked fish lips.

“Isn’t she?” Heather strove for mildness, even though she felt the usual wave of stress at the mention of her mother. She stole a glance at the Post-it note stuck to the windowsill behind her computer. *All my emotions have a place at the table, even the uncomfortable ones.* Heather took a deep breath and rose from her desk—calls with Bon-Bon were never quick. She felt her back crick as she stood; she’d been working, hunched over, for hours.

Heather kept her gaze fixed on the patchwork of Post-its that had built up on the windowsill and the wall since she’d downloaded her e-therapy app. *Don’t look back, you’re not going that way*, on brooding purple; *I am allowed to take a break*, on blue; *Good things are coming*, on Sunkist soda-colored orange.

Working at home hadn’t been good for Heather. She spent all day on her ass, in sweatpants and a nice sweater (relaxed on the bottom, ready for Zooming on top), eating junk and sweating deadlines that only seemed to hide more deadlines. This wasn’t

how she'd imagined her life. She'd imagined herself in shafts of sunlight, the apartment clean and zen-like, an idyll out of *Architectural Digest*. But actually, working from home meant that she was stuck in her sloppy, ordinary life *all the time*. The hour when she used to commute just filled up with work. There was no more walking through the seasons—there was only watching clouds and rain and snow through her window. When she remembered to look up. She missed *Chicago*. Sitting here, staring at a screen, she could be anywhere at all. Or nowhere at all.

Be where you are, a yellow Post-it chided her.

“Are you listening to me?”

Heather tried to smile at Bon-Bon on FaceTime. “Yes, Bon.”

“When was the last time you spoke to her?” Bon-Bon demanded.

“Who? Mom?” Heather carried her phone in front of her as she did a lap of her one-bedroom apartment, massaging her tight lower back with her knuckles. By the time she reached the bed she was walking a little easier.

“You *have* spoken to her?” Bon was getting sharp. Sharper. Because when was Bon ever not sharp?

“Yeah, of course,” Heather lied. She'd been dodging Mom's calls for a while. She didn't want to hear about Dad's affairs, or about the latest round of the divorce, which was a blood sport. He was her *father*. Sure, he was a lying, cheating, self-focused, immature dick, but he was still her dad.

It's okay to set boundaries. Many hours of late-night therapy with a series of calm online therapists had led to that pink Post-it. Boundaries certainly weren't a problem anymore with Dad, though, as he'd barely spoken to her since he and Mom broke up. It was as though when his marriage dissolved, Heather's relationship with him had dissolved too.

“When did you speak to your mother?” Bon-Bon demanded. Heather could see a flash of sky on the phone as Bon-Bon moved outside. God, look at that. It was clear blue skies in Tucson, with bright sunshine. So bright Bon-Bon slid sunglasses on.

Maybe all Heather needed was some blue skies and sunshine. She looked out her window at the gray day. As much as she

loved Chicago, sometimes she missed Arizona, mostly during the slush end of winter, which dragged into spring.

“When?” Bon was relentless.

“I spoke to her a couple of days ago,” Heather lied. She was lying a lot lately. Like when she’d told her now-ex-boyfriend Shawn there was someone else. It was the only way she could get him to accept the breakup. Although even now he insisted on calling it a “break” rather than a “breakup.” The breakup itself was another result of *It’s okay to set boundaries*.

“And how was she?” Bon-Bon asked. “Jacqui says she’s bad?”

Oh, thank God Aunt Jacqui was talking to Mom. That made Heather feel a little less guilty about dodging her calls. Aunt Jacqui was the brisk type, she could manage Heather’s mother, Sandy.

“She was the same the last time I spoke to her.” That wasn’t a lie.

“Bad,” Bon-Bon said grimly.

“Bad,” Heather agreed. Her palms were sweating. She hated the thought of Mom’s sadness.

Bon swore and pressed her bright pink lips together. The image on the screen jostled as she lowered herself to the edge of her pool and sat down.

“It’s warm enough there to get in the pool?” Heather focused on the sparkling blue water and unsuccessfully tried to stay in the moment. There was a terrace pool in Heather’s apartment building, but she’d moved in at the beginning of winter and so she hadn’t used it yet. She couldn’t wait until summer to dive in. Even though she worried about avoiding Shawn at the pool, as well as in the corridors. . . .

Ugh, what had she been thinking, dating someone in her building?

And now here she was, falling into spirals of bad thoughts about Shawn again.

“I’m not getting in the pool, I’m just soaking my blisters. How I love you, Junior, for choosing a saltwater pool. So good for the blisters. Have you said hi to Heather yet, honey?” Bon-Bon turned the phone in the direction of a small wooden box. It

contained her husband's ashes, which was equal parts romantic and gross.

"Hi, Junior." Heather felt a pang. She'd liked Junior. He'd been a big cuddle of a man, with a thick white head of hair and twinkling eyes.

Poor Bon-Bon.

Only poor Bon-Bon wasn't poor Bon-Bon, was she? There was nothing poor about her. She was there wearing pink lipstick, sitting by her pool in the sun. And she was a *widow*. Not for the first time Heather wished Sandy had inherited a dose of Bon's buoyant nature.

"Why *do* you have blisters?" Heather asked.

"Hiking," Bon-Bon said happily. "I've been hiking. Surely you've seen my pictures on Facebook?"

Heather couldn't imagine Bon-Bon hiking. She must have misheard. "I'm not on Facebook, remember?"

"What are you on?"

The last thing Heather wanted was her grandmother finding her on socials. "Nothing," she lied.

"Shame. You're missing out on some spectacular posts. I met a lovely young man," Bon-Bon said, "and he's into hiking."

"A man? Already?" Heather supposed she shouldn't be shocked. After her grandpa died Bon-Bon had brought home boyfriends. Lots of them. Until she met Junior.

"Not that kind of man. This one's just for being friends with. He's too young for me. Shame, because he's a hottie."

Heather laughed. "Is there such a thing as too young for you? How old is he?"

"He's more in your range than mine."

"Ah. That's definitely too young." Heather didn't want to think about Bon-Bon with a man Heather's age.

"I was thinking he might be good for your mother."

"Oh." That took a minute to hit. "Oh! *Ew*."

"Definitely not *ew*. Quite the opposite. And did I mention he's Paula's grandson?"

"Who's Paula?" She shouldn't have asked, because now Bon-Bon was off and running. Conversations with Bon were hard to

keep track of at the best of times, but now that she lived alone and was starved of company, forget about it. It was like being hit by an avalanche. Heather couldn't keep up with all the asides, except she somehow gathered that Paula was Bon-Bon's neighbor and that Heather might have met her at Junior's funeral. There was something about Paula having a daughter who lived in Boulder, and photography, and somehow Peru came into it . . . And hiking. Lots of hiking.

"I'm going to work up to the big hikes. Today we tackled Ram's Canyon. There's one called Romero Pass that takes all day—I'll be doing that by April, you wait."

Heather glanced at the time on her desktop. "I can't talk all day, Bon, I'm at work."

Bon-Bon wasn't pleased. "You work too much." She paused. "What do you actually do again?"

Heather couldn't be bothered explaining. "I'm in software," she sighed, as she always did. She'd given up trying to parse the details of software quality assurance with her family. "And I have a backlog, so I'll have to dash."

"Everyone deserves a break," Bon-Bon went blithely on, unknowingly paraphrasing the blue Post-it. "What's this about you meeting the perfect man? You haven't told me anything about it."

"I haven't met the perfect man." Heather went hot and cold. The thought of Shawn made her feel guilty and uncomfortable.

All my emotions have a place at the table. Even the Shawn-shaped ones.

"I'm glad. Perfection is boring, if you ask me. Now, tell me about him. What's his name? What does he look like? What does he do?"

"We broke up," Heather blurted. And to her shock tears flooded in. Damn it, what was she crying for? *She'd* broken up with *him*. And she was happy about it. But she felt so wretchedly guilty, like she'd committed a crime.

Bon barely missed a beat, tears or no tears. "What did he do?"

"Nothing." Heather reached for a tissue. "He didn't do anything. I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm crying."

“No, you never were one for crying. You were always one for repressing.”

Heather scowled. Well, if she was, it was because she'd been expected to.

“It's your mother's fault. She didn't leave you room to have any emotions; she took them all for herself. A girl has to get mad if she's to know her own mind.”

That made no sense to Heather. She felt like she was always mad. Everyone was always telling her to lower her voice, to calm down, to get a grip.

“Your mother may be a grade A weeper, but she's never understood the value of a really good fit of rage.”

The one benefit of Bon's chatter was that it gave Heather a chance to pull herself together. She pushed the tears away and wiped herself up.

“Which is quite an achievement, given she's the angriest person I know.”

“She's not angry,” Heather sighed, “she's passive-aggressive.” And sad.

“Exactly. Passive aggression is just anger leaking through the cracks.” Bon took her sunglasses off, her periwinkle-blue eyes kind. “Now, tell me. What happened with Mr. Not Perfect?”

Heather gave a shaky shrug.

“Did he leave you for another woman?”

“God, no.” That was one fear Heather had never had. “Shawn would never.”

“How do you spell his name? S-E-A-N or S-H-A-W-N?”

“The second one.”

Bon pulled a face. “He wouldn't change it? *Shawn* sounds like someone who'd go and watch monster trucks.”

Heather was startled into a laugh. “Not this one.” She couldn't think of anything more ridiculous than Shawn, with his expensive bamboo T-shirts and perfectly trimmed fingernails, watching monster trucks.

“Well, that's something. So why wouldn't he cheat?” Bon-Bon sounded suspicious.

“He loves me.”

Bon snorted. “Since when has that ever stopped them?”

“What?” Heather felt a sour spurt in her stomach. “Who cheated on you?” She hoped it wasn’t her grandfather. A cheating father was bad enough without adding a cheating grandfather to the mix.

Bon-Bon waved a hand. “Stop trying to change the subject. Why did S-H-A-W-N leave you if he loves you?” She frowned. “Did *you* cheat?”

From the corner of her eye, Heather saw a reminder flick up on her computer screen. Thank goodness, she had only a couple of minutes before the next burst of meetings. “I have to go, Bon.”

“You can’t hang up yet, I haven’t even got to your mother.”

“Thanks for letting me know that Aunt Jacqui is checking in on her. It makes me feel less worried.” Heather wasn’t playing this game. “I really do need to go now.” Before she lost control of her boundaries, which were still new and shaky.

But Bon-Bon bulldozed right over her. “We need a Zoom. The three of us. Tonight works for me. How about eight thirty your time? You’ll need to email the link through—your mother won’t answer if it comes from me, but she always wants to talk to you.”

“She always does,” Heather agreed tiredly. She had strings of unanswered messages on her phone.

Bon was wearing an expression that made Heather’s stomach squeeze with anxiety. You never knew what her grandmother might do next—she was the very definition of a loose cannon. “Don’t worry,” Bon assured her, “I’ll handle your mother. I have a plan.”

“A plan for what?”

But Bon-Bon was already saying goodbye. “Eight thirty! If you don’t send the link, I’ll call you back to remind you. And I want to hear more about S-H-A-W-N.”

Then she was gone. Heather felt like all the air in the room had been sucked out through the phone. Bon-Bon had that effect.

Heather glanced at her computer. Her next meeting was about to start, but she was feeling all tangled up now, the way she did every time she interacted with her family.

She punched open her e-therapy app and stared at her options. Meditation. Chat. The sound of rain in the jungle at night. It didn't cut it.

She called her brother. Not FaceTime. She didn't want to control her face.

"Hey," Chris said. He sounded sleepy.

"Did I wake you?"

"Nah, I've been up for an hour or so." He was clearly lying. Chris was a nurse, and he pulled a lot of night shifts.

"Have you spoken to Mom?" she asked.

"Ever?"

"Very funny. Lately."

"About a week ago. Since then I've stuck to texts. Because . . . Mom." Chris was the one who'd recommended she try the therapy app. Because *Mom*.

"Has Bon-Bon called you?"

"Ever?"

"Stop being a smart-ass. Bon-Bon called *me*. Just now."

"Ah, how's she holding up? I feel bad I don't call her more, now she's all alone." But he didn't sound sorry enough to change.

"She's the same. But she called me to hassle me about calling Mom. Why isn't she calling *you* about that?"

"Because I'm a boy." He sounded smug. "It means I don't have to take responsibility for my mother, or bring pie to Thanksgiving, or talk about periods or how uncomfortable my bra is."

"Dickhead."

"But I do have to shovel snow, listen to Dad make remarks about hot women—"

"Gross!"

"And scratch my balls in public."

Heather rolled her eyes. "How *was* Mom last time you spoke to her?"

Chris sighed and Heather heard the same teeth-grinding tan-

gle of feelings in it that she felt, which was why she'd called him.

"The same," he admitted. "Depressed."

"Maybe she needs to see someone?"

"Maybe."

There was silence.

"Dickhead. You could suggest it. You're a nurse, it makes sense."

"Yeah," he said dryly, "but you're the *girl*. She doesn't want *me* to say it."

"I don't want to say it. I don't want to talk to her anymore. I spent *months* talking to her after he left. I can't do it anymore. Whenever she kicks Dad out, she wants me to fill the emotional hole he leaves. And I just can't."

"Good, I'm proud of you."

Heather groaned. "I hate you." She hung up on him. Then texted him, *Love you. Dickhead.*

He texted back, *I'm too busy scratching my balls to reply.* Then, *Good luck with Mom.*

It took Heather hours to send the Zoom link. Before that she ran the gamut of meetings, emptied her email inbox, stacked her dishwasher and then went out to get coffee. Her homemade coffee wouldn't cut it—today she needed something with foam. She checked the corridor before she dashed to the elevator, always cautious about running into Shawn, even though he worked at home only half the week and today wasn't a usual home day. She sighed with relief when the elevator doors closed and she was still alone.

As she stepped outside the wind hit her like a slapping wave, straight in the face. The freshness of the afternoon was stunning. Marvelous. Heather took a deep breath. Already she felt alive again, the skin on her face tingling. She left her mittens in her pocket, enjoying the slap and chill of the afternoon on her bare skin. She *had* to get out more. When she was home all the time she got trapped in her head.

Heather avoided the closest coffee place. She hadn't gone there since just after the breakup. It had been one of "their"

places, and the last time she'd gone Shawn had been sitting in their favorite booth, looking like he was still waiting for her.

Like a stalker.

Maybe that wasn't fair of her. He was just having coffee. Ugh. This was the problem with Shawn. With *men*. She had such a hard time telling a red flag from a green flag, because of the weird model of love she'd grown up with. Was it a sweet green flag that Shawn still had hope, that he went and sat at their coffee spot and pined? Or was it a screaming red flag that he wouldn't take no for an answer?

Heather headed for a coffee place a few blocks over that she'd been meaning to try for months. They roasted their own beans, and the smell billowed into the street as she opened the door. The place was as white as the inside of a cloud, minimalist, with rattan furniture and olive-green pottery cups stacked on shelves along the shiplap walls. The warmth was stifling, like sticking your face in a wool rug. Maybe she'd get her coffee to go and walk down to the park. . . .

"Heather!"

Shawn.

Couldn't she go *anywhere*?

Shawn and his roommate, Kyle, were standing at the counter. As always, they reminded her of the old Looney Tunes cartoons of the bulldog and the yappy puppy. That was mean, but she couldn't help it—she thought mean thoughts around Shawn now. Her app said that was okay, but she still felt horrible when she did it. A bulldog wasn't the right kind of dog to describe Kyle, though, she thought as she sized them up. Kyle was more like a massive cuddly Saint Bernard, all hair and beard and shoulders. Next to him Shawn was a lean cord of repressed energy. Kyle was chilled in the extreme; Shawn was so kinetic he vibrated. That intensity had been part of what she liked about him, at first.

Even away from their building, away from their corridor, away from their usual coffee place, she ran smack bang into him. Damn it. Damn it. Damn it.

And damn *him* for looking so good. The breakup really

suiting him. He leaned into the romance of suffering. The scruff of his hair and the shadow of stubble along the planes of his face made him look decidedly sexier. She liked him better in the slouchy gray hoodie and sheepskin jacket too.

No.

She wasn't doing this. This was what happened. She saw him, and he did that face he was doing, and then he started talking, and she lost her resolve. . . .

Not this time. This time she was sticking to her guns.

"Heather." The thing was, when he saw her he looked so wretchedly *happy*. Just because she'd walked in. And it felt good to have someone be glad to see you, even when you felt horrible about the fact that you didn't necessarily want it to be *him*.

"Hi," she said grudgingly, giving Shawn and Kyle a limp wave. She could hardly turn and run, could she? She was already in the shop. Kyle gave her a pitying look.

How long did she have to be polite here before she placed her order and bolted?

"Getting coffee, huh?" she said lamely. She'd have to go farther afield in the future, she thought grimly. Or move.

Oh God. Shawn was staring at her with those huge hazel eyes, which were full of longing.

Red flag? Or green flag?

Why couldn't he just accept that they were no longer together?

Maybe because *she* couldn't seem to explain to him why they were no longer together. He'd begged for explanations, but she couldn't explain it. Hell, she couldn't even explain it to herself. He was *ideal*. The kind of man you dreamed you'd meet; the kind of man your parents loved; the kind of man who wasn't out of place beside you on a sun lounger at the poolside of your expensive apartment building. But . . . there were just so many flags. Red or green or tangerine, they were there. And she didn't want them. Or him.

Heather had been fighting the feeling for a long time. Because he was everything she was supposed to want. Mom was over the moon about him. She said he was everything Heather's father

had never been. Given Dad was nothing but red flags, that was a good thing. Wasn't it?

Breaking up with Shawn made no sense to anyone but Heather. And because it made no sense, and she couldn't explain it properly, poor Shawn couldn't accept it.

Although to be fair, he probably also couldn't accept it because she kept slipping up and sleeping with him.

"Yeah, we're getting coffee," Kyle rumbled, stating the obvious when the staring got too awkward. "It's good here."

Heather dragged her gaze away from Shawn's naked adoration. She'd almost forgotten that she was in a conversation. That happened in these situations. Shawn's longing sent her tumbling into self-doubt.

Kyle scratched his beard and gave her a rueful look.

"You look amazing," Shawn blurted at Heather, as though Kyle hadn't spoken. His long-suffering hazel eyes said she looked more than good; those moody eyes said she was the best thing he'd ever seen.

Which was patently insane, because she was still wearing her sweatpants and her hair was a bird's nest from the wind. She was limp and colorless from lack of sun, and she was doughy from sitting at her desk all day. Nothing about her looked amazing.

"You might need to get your eyes checked," she joked. Then she felt like a complete witch when he winced. What was wrong with her? He was clearly still suffering from the break(up). She was a horrible, horrible person.

Shawn said she was afraid to let herself be loved. It worried her, because it felt true. But then most of what Shawn said about her felt true.

She didn't want to think about it—she was sick of thinking about it. Couldn't she get coffee without plumbing the depths of her defective emotional range?

"You look good too." She shouldn't have said it because he flared with hope. She didn't mean to give him false hope; she'd just been trying to atone for her stupid joke and her mean thoughts. Besides, it was true, he did look good.

Oh no. No. She couldn't do this anymore.

Heather stepped past him and made for the counter, knowing exactly what would happen next.

He followed her. "I have tickets for Kyle's show tonight, if you don't have one yet. . . ."

From the corner of her eye, Heather saw Kyle wince in sympathy. For both her and for Shawn.

"Oh, you have a show?" Heather asked Kyle, although she knew perfectly well that he did. She'd seen the posts on his socials. She prided herself on how composed she sounded. Which was an achievement when your ex was staring at you without blinking.

She ordered her coffee, extra-large, extra foam.

"Yeah, at that club you came to last time, the one in the basement under the pool hall," Shawn sounded desperately hopeful. He ran a hand through his hair, and it flopped in that way it did, in the way she used to like. Mentally she stressed the *used to*.

"Right." There was no way she was going back to that place. It was not her scene. It stank of stale beer and weed. And, also, Shawn would be there, and the last thing she wanted was to be in a dark club with Shawn and his naked longing for her, when he was looking this good, and she was feeling this shaky.

"You'd like it if you'd just loosen up." He read her mind, as always. He knew she didn't like the claustrophobic dimness, or the noise, or the crush of people, or the pills and the lines and all the rest of it. And sure, maybe she would enjoy it more if she loosened up. But also, maybe she also didn't *want* to loosen up.

"Order for Shawn!"

He didn't move, even though his coffee was up on the counter. Sighing, Kyle collected it for him. "Come on, man."

"I'll text you the ticket," Shawn told Heather. He was in earnest.

Heather felt a surge of panic. "I can't tonight." She reached for the fiction she'd been pedaling. "I have a date."

God, it was like kicking a kitten. Look at his face.

"A date?"

"I told you I was seeing someone." Even though she wasn't.

But maybe she should, just to end this ridiculousness once and for all.

“Oh. You could . . . bring him along.”

Sure. Good plan. She’d bring her imaginary boyfriend to Kyle’s gig.

“He, uh, hates music.” He hates music. Good one. Heather shot Kyle a desperate look.

“No sweat.” Kyle was unruffled. “I have days when I hate it too.” He held Shawn’s reusable coffee mug out to him. “Come on, man. Let’s leave the lady to her day.”

“Heather!” The barista slid her cardboard cup up onto the counter. Damn it, she’d been hoping her coffee would take longer, to give Shawn time to leave.

“We’ll walk you back,” Shawn offered.

Heather hated the way her hands and feet started to sweat and the way she couldn’t meet his eye. “I’m not going back,” she said, trying to sound brisk. “I’m taking a break for a bit.”

“Shawn, man, come on.” Kyle looked uncomfortable.

“Right, bye.” Heather snatched her coffee off the counter and left before Shawn could say more. She picked up the pace and headed for the park. The starkness of the winter gardens matched her mood and she stayed longer than she meant to, well after her coffee was gone, circling the park as her thoughts looped around themselves in discontent coils.

She felt all messed up when she saw Shawn. It didn’t matter how many laps she did of the park, the messed-up feeling just wouldn’t go away. It was only when she got a warning text from her grandmother that she finally headed home to send the Zoom link, dragging her messed-up feeling with her.

“You can’t be serious.” Sandy couldn’t even summon the energy to sound outraged, although she clearly meant to.

“At least go comb your hair and slap some lipstick on,” Bon-Bon ordered cheerfully.

Heather’s mother, Sandy, looked terrible. She was in her oldest, baggiest workout gear, with her hair twisted up in a tight, ugly dark knot. She had deep circles under her eyes, and her

shoulders were slumped. She was sitting at the built-in desk in the kitchen, on her laptop. The screen was angled so the camera caught her in an unflattering spear of light from the downlights. She looked old and sad and tired. In the background, Heather could see empty spaces on the walls, where pictures used to hang. Pictures that were now in Dad's condo.

Heather felt like crying. How could Dad have kept hurting Mom like that, for all those years? And why had she *taken* it? Heather was scrunched up with a toxic mix of anger and sadness as she looked at her mom. Sometimes, to her shame, she felt angrier with Mom than she did with Dad.

Maybe because Mom needed saving and Heather wasn't up to the task.

"Why wouldn't I be serious?" Bon was chattering. "You'd be much happier. Everyone's happier with a little lipstick on." Bon was the opposite of Mom. She'd changed her outfit since this morning, dressing for their catch-up in a turquoise shift dress and a pair of orange beaded earrings. She looked amazing. Heather noted that she'd also clearly discovered the "touch up my appearance" feature on the app.

"I look fine just the way I am," Mom said flatly. "No one's going to see me anyway."

Heather topped up her wine. She couldn't do these Zooms without wine. And a Zoom this stressful warranted an expensive bottle from her "cellar," which was a cupboard in a kitchen stacked with fancy wine she'd imagined drinking by candlelight, to soft music, with someone special. As usual, Actual Heather didn't live up to the dream. Actual Heather was using the fancy wine to numb herself.

"We see you," Bon-Bon complained. "What are we, chopped liver?"

Mom narrowed her eyes. "Fine." She turned her camera off. "Is that better?"

Heather didn't think there was enough wine in the world for this. "Well, this is fun," she said. "Great idea, Bon."

Bon pursed her coral-colored lips. "I might need a gin."

“Mom, why don’t you get a drink too?” Heather suggested, a touch desperately. “We’ll have cocktail hour together.”

With her camera off, Mom had been replaced with a photo. The picture had been taken years ago, at Heather’s twenty-first birthday; in it, a much happier Sandy was grinning broadly, looking fresh in a crisp white dress, her blue eyes sparkling. Cropped out of the photo was Dad, but his arm was still visible, draped around Mom’s shoulders.

“Drinking makes me too sad. I’ve given it up.” Mom’s disembodied voice came from the screen.

“Well, I’ve given up giving things up.” Bon’s screen showed her empty living room. “Giving things up makes me too sad.”

“Well, giving things up is not always a choice. Sometimes it’s forced upon us.”

Oh God. Mom was in fine form tonight.

Bon-Bon’s head popped sideways into view. “You think widowhood is a choice?” she asked sharply. “Don’t talk to me about sadness being foisted on you, Sandra Margaret. I’ve known more sadness than you ever could.”

“Ohhhhh-kay,” Heather interrupted, giving the time-out gesture. “If you two are going to fight, I’m leaving. You’re ruining a good wine.” That struck her as wise, and she reached for a Post-it and her Sharpie. *Don’t waste good wine on bad company.* She stuck it to the windowsill and then ignored her own advice and took another gulp of wine.

Bon-Bon huffed rather good-naturedly and then disappeared. There was a splashing sound and, when she returned, she was holding a full glass.

“What did you want to talk about, Bon?” Heather asked.

“Good Lord, girl, don’t you believe in small talk? We’re supposed to chitchat for a bit first, not dive right in.”

Mom’s camera snapped back on. “Dive right into what?” She was suspicious.

So was Heather. They never did collective calls like this, so something was up.

“First, we’ll ask Sandra about the state of her affairs, and

then we'll ask Heather about her job and that boy she broke up with," Bon insisted. "*Then* we'll move onto the main thrust of things."

"I don't want to talk about the state of my affairs. I'm not the one having affairs." Mom snapped, and then she gasped as Bonnie's words sank in. "Hold on. What boy she broke up with?" All of Mom's limpness vanished. "Not Shawn! You didn't break up with Shawn?" She gave a despairing moan. "Honestly, Heather! What was wrong with *this* one?"

Why did Bon always have to stir her up? Heather watched, disgruntled, as Bon sat back to enjoy the show, while Sandy leaned forward, alive with displeasure, which was directed squarely at Heather.

"He was so nice!" her mother scolded.

"He still is, he's not dead," Heather said sourly.

"He treated you like a princess!"

Heather caught herself grinding her teeth. Why had she agreed to this? She could be watching Netflix right now.

"Maybe she doesn't want to be treated like a princess," Bon-Bon suggested.

"Who doesn't want to be treated like a princess?" Mom was a picture of sheer disbelief. "That's pathological."

"Maybe being treated like a princess isn't everything," Bon said sharply.

There was a chilly silence. When Mom and Dad were in the honeymoon stages of their cycle, Dad treated Mom like a princess. Heather remembered the flowers, the jewelry, the holidays, the cuddling and flirting. And then the cycle would turn, and he'd get restless, they'd get tense, his attention would wander elsewhere, there would be drama, *endless* drama, fights and tears, ruptures, explosions. Mom would kick him out. They'd suffer. Then he'd return and the sparks would rekindle, and they'd fall back into their ritual, honeymoons and flowers, and she'd be a princess again.

"Junior sure treated *you* like a princess," Mom reminded Bon-Bon tersely.

“No, honey, he treated me like a *queen*. There’s a big difference.”

“Alright,” Heather jumped in before they could really kick off. Their bickering could be epic, more like siblings than mother and daughter. “That’s probably enough small talk. Get to it, Bon. Why are we here, having this lovely moment of family bonding?”

Now Bon leaned forward, while Mom slumped back. Mom had her arms crossed and her lower lip was thrusting out. She looked like a petulant teen.

“Well, my little prickly pears, I don’t know if you remember, but I just had an important birthday.”

Heather winced. Junior had died two days before Bon-Bon’s seventieth birthday. The extravagant party had been canceled, replaced with a wake at Junior’s golf club. Not the ideal way to usher in your eighth decade.

“Of course we remember, Mom.” Heather was glad to see her mother thaw into sympathy. Her face softened.

Bon waved away any nascent condolences. She hated sympathy with a passion—especially when it was directed toward her. “Yes, it was all very sad,” she said promptly, “but I have an idea for how to make up for lost frivolity.”

“You want a party?” Heather guessed. Bon always loved a party.

But Bon looked horrified. “Good God, no. I’m a *widow*.”

Heather felt an inch tall. Bon was glib on the surface, but she felt things deeply, and of course she was still in the early months of bereavement—which was hardly the time for parties. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think.”

“*That* is exactly why no parties. ‘I’m sorry’ is all anyone will say, all night long. The wake was bad enough.” She cast a sideways glance, and Heather knew she was looking at Junior’s wooden box. “You don’t get to be the center of attention at my party as well as yours, Junior.”

“Oh, Mom.” Heather’s mother rolled her eyes. “Really.”

“Really. I don’t want to be the ‘brave widow’ at some awk-

ward party where everyone is trying not to say the wrong thing to the poor suffering woman,” Bon announced. “I want some damn fun. I want to embrace something different, to run toward something, rather than waiting out my final days watching the clock’s secondhand tick toward death.”

Heather took a sip of wine to hide her expression. Trust Bon to go all telenovela on them.

“Your final days,” Mom scoffed. “*Your* father lived past ninety!” Mom was looking more like herself again. She pulled the scrunchie from her hair and ran her fingers through her dark waves.

Bon-Bon ignored her. “I want to have an adventure.”

“Has this got anything to do with the young hottie you’ve been hiking with?” Heather asked dryly.

“Maybe.” Bon was sly.

Heather laughed. “I knew it! I knew there was no such thing as too young for you!”

“What young hottie?” Mom froze, hands in her hair, all trace of her earlier thaw gone. “Please tell me you’re not seeing someone already?” Mom covered her face with her hands. She was still wearing her engagement and wedding rings, Heather noted. It gave her a horrid shivery sick feeling to see. It would be so much easier if Mom would just move on. After all, she was the one who’d kicked Dad out. Why couldn’t she make it a clean break?

“You always do this,” Mom accused.

“Always do *what*?” Bon wasn’t about to take criticism.

“You run from heartbreak straight into the arms of another man. You never take the time to grieve. You just ping from one man to the next like a pinball.”

Heather winced. Seriously? That was low, even for Mom, who had a famously sharp tongue when she was in a mood. Bon was in mourning, for Pete’s sake. Young hottie or no young hottie, the woman was carrying around her dead husband—and if that didn’t tell you something about her state of mind, nothing did.

Bon’s coral lips drew tight. Heather could practically see her

wrestling with herself. Heather braced. She knew Bon would lose her battle to control her own tongue.

“Is that what you’re doing? Grieving?” Bon said archly. “Because from where I sit it looks an awful lot like wallowing in victimhood.”

And there we go.

“How apt, given I *am* a victim,” Mom snapped. “And if you had an ounce of humanity, you’d understand what it must be like for me, to find out my entire life has been a goddamn lie.” Mom leaned in until her angry face filled her camera. “You’ve never understood. You act like I can control it, like I’m somehow to blame. Like Nick’s behavior was *my fault*.”

“I never said it was your fault, I said you made choices.”

Mom made a noise like a spitting cat.

“Time-out!” Heather yelled, muting them both. Her stomach was all knotted up, and her chest was tight. She could see their mouths moving vigorously, but now she couldn’t hear a word. Thank goodness, because she didn’t want to hear any more. The mute button was one of the greatest inventions of the twenty-first century. Heather only wished she could mute people in real life.

“I’m getting off this call if you don’t keep your tongues sheathed.” Not for the first time, Heather felt like the only adult in her family.

Eventually they realized they were muted, and they turned their irritation on her, rather than on each other. They looked eerily similar as they scowled at her. “Here are the rules,” Heather said firmly. “I’ll unmute you, but if either of you so much as thinks about being mouthy to the other, then I’m ending the call. Understand? It’s been a long day and I’m too tired for this garbage.”

She unmuted Sandy first, her stomach twisting.

“We’re not children, Heather.” Mom was flushed with anger, but at least she wasn’t limp and miserable anymore, or raging at Bon.

“Well, you can prove that by listening to Bon’s plan for adventure without throwing any more fits, okay?”

Mom's eyes narrowed.

"I mean it, Mom. I will block your calls for a month if you don't behave. We've talked about this. Keep your calm." Heather's hands were clenching and unclenching, and she couldn't seem to find a Post-it that helped. Boundaries weren't enough; she needed a battlement or something.

Mom took her time to come to terms with the ultimatum. Heather could see her turning it over. But Mom knew it wasn't an empty threat.

"Fine," Mom sighed, "I'll listen."

And then she turned her camera off again. Heather wished she wouldn't, because it hurt to look at the old photo. Even though he'd been cut out, Heather was hyperaware of the space where her father used to be. She missed her father. Heather felt just as discarded by him as Mom did.

At least Mom's camera didn't stay off for long, so Heather didn't have to keep staring at Dad's disembodied arm. It snapped back on the moment Bon announced her grand plan.

"What do you mean, *we're* going to Peru?" Sandy didn't seem shocked so much as exasperated.

Heather, on the other hand, was blindsided. "Not Peru the *country*?" she said, confused. Maybe Bon was talking about a Tucson restaurant called Peru.

"Yes, Peru the country!" Bon was thrilled with herself. She was grinning from ear to ear. "You'll need to get fit before the trip, as we're going to be hiking. You only have a few weeks, so you'd best get to it. Walk. A lot. Maybe find a StairMaster to train on . . . And I'll email you a list of things to buy for the trip. And the itinerary. This is going to be great!"

"Whoa, slow down, Bon," Heather interrupted. "What do you mean, *Peru*?"

"What's not to understand? I want to climb Machu Picchu for my seventieth birthday, and I don't want to go alone. And neither of you have much going on right now."

"Are you insane? I'm not going to Peru, Mom," Mom snapped.

Neither was Heather! She couldn't have been more shocked if

Bon had suggested they go to the moon. *Machu Picchu*? Where the hell had that come from?

“Of course you’re going. It’s already booked. You’re going to Peru and you’re going to climb Machu Picchu with your grieving mother, to celebrate her seventieth birthday.”

“I can’t go climbing Machu Picchu either, Bon,” Heather protested, unable to believe the scale of Bon’s surprise. “I have work!”

“Take a vacation. Besides, you work remotely. If you work from home, then surely Peru can be home for a while. It’s only a one-hour time difference. I looked it up.”

“Right, so I’ll take meetings while hiking,” Heather said sarcastically. As if.

“I have work too,” Mom reminded Bon sharply.

“No, you don’t. Jacqui said you’re on unpaid leave, and that all you’re doing is watching Netflix and stalking Nick on Facebook. Trust me, you need this more than I do. Besides, the tickets are non-refundable, and they’re in your names and non-transferrable too, so it’s too late now!”

“Jesus Christ, Mom!” Despite her promise to behave, Mom exploded.

Bon was wrong about Mom never getting angry, Heather thought dryly, as she turned the color of an overripe tomato.

“This is completely nuts,” Mom ranted. “You can’t just drag people out of their lives like this. We have commitments. We can’t just drop everything.”

“Sure, you can.” Bon sipped her gin, looking inordinately pleased with herself. “And I’m paying for it, so what’s to complain about? I don’t want to travel alone.”

Heather’s crazy grandmother was serious. She’d actually booked them non-refundable tickets to *Peru*. Without asking.

“I don’t know anything about Peru!” Heather knew she sounded as panicked as she felt. She didn’t want to spend an enforced vacation with her mother. She had boundaries now, maybe soon even battlements, damn it. How was she supposed to keep those in place if she was stuck with her mom twenty-four/seven?

“Take Jacqui if you don’t want to go alone!” Mom snapped. At least she also didn’t want to go.

“I don’t want to take Jacqui; I want to take you.”

Heather’s mother was astonished. “You hate doing things with me.”

Bon-Bon looked genuinely startled. “Since when do I hate doing things with you? We always used to take little trips together.”

“When we went to Miami you accused me of ruining your whole vacation because I chose to read a book by the pool instead of going shopping, and in Palm Springs you said I was as much fun as a martini without the gin.”

Bon flapped her hand. “You take things too personally.”

“Well, I’m not doing it!” Mom was an immovable object.

Where even *was* Peru? South America somewhere, but Heather had no idea if it was in the east, west, south, north, or smack bang in the middle of the continent. And when Bon said hiking, how seriously did she mean it? Was she talking about a walk, or *mountain climbing*? Surely seventy was too old for serious climbing?

“It’s not a discussion,” Bon said blithely. “It’s all organized. I’ll be at your place on the second of May, Sandra. We’ll fly out of Phoenix together. Heather, I booked your flight from Chicago. I hope you don’t mind heading to Peru alone, but I want to catch up with Jacqui in Phoenix for a couple of days and spend some *quality* time with your mother before we get to Lima. Won’t it be nice to have girl time?” Bon said sweetly to her daughter.

Heather felt like she was on a runaway train. “I might not be able to get time off work!” she insisted. Although part of her was stirred by the thought of traveling. She hadn’t gone overseas in a very long time . . . And her work was task based, so she should be able to rearrange her schedule and knock off some tasks in advance. . . .

But God. Traveling with Bon and *Mom*?

“I mean it, Mother, I’m not going!” Mom insisted.

Pointedly, Bon pulled Junior’s wooden box into view. She cra-

dled it to her chest. “I lost my *husband*, Sandra. On my *birthday*.”

“Not *on* your birthday.” But Mom had winced, and Bon had noticed.

“What a present for my seventieth birthday . . .” Bon made sure the box stayed in the center of the frame. “And here I am, trying to make lemonade out of the two-ton truck of lemons dumped on my doorstep. . . .”

“You’re so manipulative!” Mom complained.

“Is it manipulative to tell the truth?”

“I’m in the middle of a divorce, Mom! I can’t fly off to Peru.”

“What better time?”

“Why Peru?” Mom shook her head disbelievingly, the fight draining out of her.

“Why not? Have you ever been? I sure haven’t. And I’m up for seeing a wonder of the world, aren’t you? My life’s in desperate need of a bit of wonder.” She blew them a kiss, her coral lips puckered up like a grouper’s. “Check your emails! We’ll talk soon, my lovely girls. We’ll need a quick planning chat before the trip!” And then she was gone, and Heather and her mother were left staring at each other in shock.

“See what I had to live with growing up?” Mom griped.