

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday, November 19

The sight of the tiny Mini Cooper crashing into the rear of the Range Rover made onlookers cringe. It looked like David against Goliath without a slingshot for David.

Peg Ryan, the driver of the Mini Cooper, fought the air bag in her face and her own sense of shock. How could she have spent the last half hour crawling north on Clark Street, unable to maintain any semblance of speed in the bumper-to-bumper traffic, only to suddenly find the front of her brand new car crumpled into the rear end of the massive vehicle in front of her?

Peg was traveling on the main drag of the Andersonville neighborhood in Chicago, a stretch of commercial property chock-full of boutiques, restaurants, coffee houses, taverns, and gay bars. Late on a Saturday afternoon, its sidewalks were still crowded with shoppers, and Clark Street was clogged with cars. It wasn't until she reached the four-way stop at Berwyn that a little space opened up in front of her. With pedestrians crossing the street in droves, it took some time and some welcome acceleration for Peg to make it through the intersection. That's when the Rover that had been in front of her for the last few blocks slammed on the brakes, leaving Peg with no chance of avoiding a collision.

Peg managed to put her car in park and unsnap her safety belt. The cars behind her started to lean on their horns, a noise that cascaded backward as the frustration of yet more road blockage flowed from behind the crash scene. Pedestrians paused on the sidewalks, waiting to see what they could see. The irony of the situation was not lost on Peg. Irony seldom slipped by her unnoticed. She had resisted getting a car for the entire year she had been living in Chicago. Having spent her adult life in New York City, she felt more comfortable in a cab or a subway car. But she had been increasingly tempted by the freedom to roam her new city that a car would provide, and parking was so much more manageable than in Manhattan. She finally gave in and bought the car she'd had her eye on for quite some time — the impossibly cute Mini Cooper. She had to fold her six-foot frame in and out of it, but it suited her perfectly. She had picked it up just the day before.

The blaring of the horns grew louder, but the sound of the driver's door slamming on the Range Rover cut right through it. Peg was just stepping out of her car as the Rover's driver marched toward her. She was nearly as tall as Peg, looked to be a bit younger than Peg's forty-nine years, and was angrier than Peg had probably ever been. She was dressed expensively in a long cashmere coat, designer jeans, and Italian boots, and she would have been stunning, had it not been for the snarl on her face.

Oh, boy, thought Peg.

The woman frowned at the front of the car rammed into the rear of hers and rounded on the driver. “What the hell were you doing?” she yelled, pointing at the crumpled cars as if Peg might misunderstand what she was referring to.

Since it was clearly not going to be an amicable encounter, Peg adopted her unruffled mode. This surface calm served her well in the courtroom and with most of life’s irritating people and situations, but there were times when Peg longed to haul off and clobber the people who acted like this woman.

“I think we should exchange our contact and insurance information and let our representatives sort this out.” Peg leaned into her car to grab some paper and the insurance card that was still in her bag, not yet even put into the glove compartment.

The other driver moved in closer. “I don’t give a shit what you think. I’ve called the police. You’ll get a ticket for this, and then your insurance will pay for my damage.”

Peg sighed as she straightened up and opened her notebook. She refused to look at the woman next to her, mainly because the refusal to engage was undoubtedly going to drive her crazy. Peg heard the sound of another car door closing and looked up to see a woman moving toward them from the passenger side of the Range Rover. She was lovely — a warm and inviting face, long, silky brown hair, a body wrapped up in a wool coat... Peg instantly wanted to unwrap her. The woman walked toward them, a look of concern on her face as she looked at Peg and annoyance when she turned to her companion.

“I didn’t know there was anyone else in the car,” Peg said. “Are you okay?”

The woman turned back and smiled briefly. “Yes, I’m fine. Are you?”

“I’m okay.”

“That’s good.” She turned back to her friend. “Camille, what is the problem? Let’s get these cars out of the way of the traffic. I’m sure this woman will exchange information with us and we can all be on our way.”

Camille did not relent. “No. We’re waiting for the police. She rear-ended me and I want them to issue a citation. They’ll need a statement from you, too.”

“I don’t think you want to do that.”

“Of course I do. She rear-ended me. By law, she’s in the wrong.”

Turning back to Peg, the woman extended her hand. “I’m Allison Mitchell; this is Camille Bardon. I’m sorry this has turned into a scene.”

Camille’s hand slammed down on the hood of the Mini. “Why are you apologizing to her? She’s in the wrong, not me.”

“I think that may be debatable,” Allison said.

“Why would you say that?” Camille asked, leaning against the Mini toward Allison.

Peg wondered what was going on with these women. Camille seemed like a spoiled teenager, and Allison didn’t seem like a woman who would be

with a person like Camille. Maybe they weren't together. Just because they were in Andersonville it didn't mean that every pair of women was a couple, but the odds were great that they were.

More people were gathering around. The horns had quieted down, the traffic having found a way to cope with the obstruction by taking turns through the narrow lane still open. A police car finally pulled up and found a place to perch on Berwyn. Camille went straight over to the officer to start presenting her side of things; Peg went over to Allison.

"Are you okay with her? She seems a little volatile," Peg said.

Allison glanced over at Camille. "She is a very forceful woman, but I've never seen her act like this. I'm very sorry."

"You really don't have to apologize. Let me give you my name and number, and hopefully we can just let the insurance companies sort this out." Peg handed over a page from her small notebook, her cell number underlined twice.

"Thanks."

Allison looked up at Peg, and for a moment Peg could see interest in her eyes. "And I'm relieved that your friend isn't often angry like this. I think I'd worry about you a little bit."

Peg was standing not far from Allison, trying to find that small spark in her eyes she'd seen moments before, but Allison was turning her head, trying to locate Camille. Peg's head was spinning a bit — from the accident, from the anger spewing from Camille, and from the germinating idea that this accident might turn out to be a very good thing. She looked over to see the officer and Camille heading toward them. "Here they come," she said to Allison.

Allison pulled a card out of her coat pocket and handed it to Peg. "If this thing gets messy, maybe we can talk about how to work it out."

Peg pocketed the business card and turned toward the police officer, careful to not look at Camille. She gave the officer her license and registration and followed his order to move her car out of traffic, relieved to find that the car was drivable despite the alarming dents in the front end. Camille moved her car at the same time, and when they rejoined the police officer Peg saw that Allison had left the scene.

"Where did Allison go?" Peg asked Camille. She saw that the officer was busy writing out a citation.

"Leave Allison out of this. She's no concern of yours." Camille turned to the officer. "Officer, are you issuing this woman a ticket?"

"That's next. This ticket is for you for traveling too fast for conditions."

Peg took Allison's business card out of her pocket and stared at it while waiting for her own ticket and listening to Camille yell at the police officer.

Allison was nearly home when her cell phone rang. It was no surprise to see Camille's number on the display. Allison decided to answer rather than put up with a dozen follow-up attempts to reach her. She was aware of Camille's

habitual persistence, but the person she'd seen following the accident was new to her.

"Hi, Camille."

"Where are you? One minute you were there, and the next you'd disappeared."

"I decided to walk home and let you all hammer out the details. Is there a problem with that?"

"A problem? No, I don't suppose so. I just thought you'd stay with me. I also thought you'd stick up for me more than you did."

Allison saw her opening and took it. "Camille, I don't stick up for positions I don't believe in. It's a little presumptuous of you to think I'd lie for you. You slammed on your brakes when you dropped your stupid Blackberry. You were as much in the wrong as the person who rear-ended you, and frankly, I didn't like what I saw in you out there."

Camille was silent for a bit. "You're mad at me, aren't you? I can hear it in your voice."

Allison could hear the change in Camille's voice. She sounded worried. "I'm upset, I'll put it that way. We've only been seeing each other a short while, and I saw a side of you today that I haven't seen before. It concerned me."

She walked up her front porch steps. Mamie, her calico cat, was curled up on the wide window ledge in the living room overlooking the porch; her head swiveled toward Allison when she heard the footsteps. Mamie jumped down to wait for Allison inside the door.

"I'm really sorry if you were upset by this whole thing," Camille said. "I think I can explain myself and ease your concerns. I'm on my way over."

Allison stifled a groan at the idea of Camille trying to smooth things over. *Why can't she say, "I'm sorry I was an ass" instead of just trying to smooth things over?* It occurred to Allison, in a way that it had not before, that Camille's words and actions were all geared to getting what she wanted, usually under the guise of being charming, reasonable, and generous. She'd buy you a diamond, but she expected some loyalty in return. Allison felt a little sick, the diamond necklace she wore suddenly heavy.

"Do not come over," Allison said with steel in her voice. "You have to let me alone for today, Camille, because talking to you right now is not going to be good for either of us. You can call me on Monday, and we'll figure out a time to get together. I really need some time to myself right now."

There was silence from Camille's end. Finally she said, "I just need two minutes to try to make this up to you, Allison. That's all."

"Please, don't argue with me about this."

"Okay, okay. I'll call you Monday, but Allison, please remember that I care so much for you. My anger today had nothing to do with you. I know I can explain this and we can go back to having fun — like we were right before the accident."

"I'll talk to you Monday." Allison disconnected and went into her house. She felt relieved and suddenly liberated. She had the whole evening ahead of

her and it felt like a gift, while just an hour before she'd been with Camille, on her way to dinner and the theatre, looking forward to the evening. The anger and deceitfulness she had seen in Camille had changed everything for her, but she suspected she had been uneasy with Camille before that. It was true that Camille had a way about her that made all of their dates a lot of fun, and fun had been the extent of Allison's ambition when she started dating again. Camille was wealthy and gorgeous and, frankly, wickedly good in bed, but there was nothing drawing Allison in beyond those superficial qualities. It wouldn't take much to topple the illusion that they had any real relationship at all, and Allison could see that the accident scene was a breath on the house of cards.

After feeding Mamie and changing into sweats, Allison listened to her voicemail. She was having an unusually busy November at her real estate agency and found that there were multiple voicemails each time she called in to her office. Thankfully, this time there was only one.

Allison, it's Peg Ryan calling. We met a short time ago under difficult circumstances. I'm the one who rear-ended your friend's Range Rover. Anyway, I wanted to make sure you're okay. You disappeared, so I figured you'd gone on home, caught a cab, or something. That's what I would have done, too. I see from the card that you gave me that you're in real estate and also that your agency is just a block away from the house I'm renting on Burling. It looks like my transfer to our law office here is going to be a permanent one, and I've been thinking about looking for a place to buy. I'm traveling the first part of next week and then there's Thanksgiving, so I'll give you a call after the holiday weekend to see if you can help me out. Take care. And let me know if there are any aftereffects from the accident. I want to make sure you're taken care of.

Allison saved the message and hung up. She dropped down onto the church pew in her large foyer and stared straight ahead. She wasn't sure what to make of Peg's call, but she knew what she'd like to make of it. She sat for a while, letting her thoughts settle before returning Peg's call to confirm their plans. Certainly, if Peg had been just any prospective client she would have returned the call right away, so she wasn't worried about looking over-eager. She was more worried about sounding like a nervous schoolgirl, because that's exactly how she felt.

Peg and her friend Morgan were standing in the small brick garage behind her rented house in Lincoln Park. They were staring at the front of Peg's Mini Cooper, frowning over the crumpled front.

"Man, that is cruel. You just picked the car up yesterday?" Morgan asked.

"Yep. I was heading north on Clark this afternoon when it happened."

Morgan shook her head. Morgan and Peg looked like sisters standing side by side in the dim light. Both were tall and lanky, dressed in trousers and jackets and long coats. Peg was older by ten years, her salt and pepper

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"Yep. I was heading north on Clark this afternoon when it happened."

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hair short, her reading glasses perched on the top of her head. Morgan was dressed for her job, her gun and cuffs and other accoutrements of a Chicago homicide detective visible beneath her jacket. They had been introduced through a mutual friend at Peg's law firm and hit it off right away. Morgan was one of Peg's few friends in her new city.

"The worst thing about the whole accident was that the other woman in the car in front of me was someone I would ask out in a heartbeat, and I can't remember the last time I felt like that." Peg fished the business card out of her pocket and handed it to Morgan.

"Hey, I know Allison Mitchell. She's the agent who helped me buy my place this year. She's gorgeous. I wanted to go out with her myself, but I was seeing Sandy at the time. Sandy? No, Cindy. Hell, I should have asked Allison out. But then she wouldn't be available for you." Morgan grinned. "You have very good taste. I'm relieved also to hear you're not dead from the waist down."

"Do you know if she is going out with this Camille Bardon? That's the driver of the Range Rover that I ran into."

"I think so. I remember Allison mentioning her at our closing. Is Camille the one who acted like such an asshole? Wow. I know Allison had just started seeing her at that time, and she wanted to know if I knew anything about Camille."

Peg looked surprised. "You mean as a police officer? Is she a criminal or something?"

"No, not like that. Just dyke drama-wise. You know — did I know any of her ex-girlfriends, that sort of thing. I only knew her name from the gay paper; she's usually at the big benefits, and I know she gives money to various charities and causes. You see her name on the donors list on playbills and stuff like that. Allison seemed happy to be dating again, but I wouldn't say she was jumping up and down about Camille."

"Why do you say she was happy to be dating 'again'?" Peg asked as she and Morgan headed for the back door to Peg's house.

"She had been in a long relationship that broke up a year or two ago. I guess she was slow to get back on the horse," Morgan said.

"I'm thinking she picked the wrong horse."

"You're hoping, anyway."

With darkness fully settled over the quiet neighborhood, Camille pulled her car into a spot just around the corner from Allison's house. She could see anyone entering it from the front, and a glance at the side-view mirror would tell her if anyone entered the alley that ran behind it. She could then crane her neck to see if that car pulled into the open spot next to Allison's two-car garage. Camille had taken the precaution of going home to pick up her other car, a Lexus sedan, knowing that the Range Rover with the crumpled rear would be as obvious as if it were lit up with search beams.

Camille's experience in business had taught her that her gut instincts were usually dead on target, and her instincts were telling her that there was something more to Allison's anger with her than her loss of temper at the accident scene. Camille knew on some level, though the evidence was scant, that Peg Ryan came into play, and she was prepared to sit patiently and watch. It wouldn't have surprised her at all to see the dented-up Mini Cooper rolling down Allison's street, Peg peering out the window, looking at the house numbers. Camille thought about the absurdity of worrying about losing Allison when she could have just about any woman she wanted. She'd certainly had plenty already. And that was the problem. None of the others compared to Allison — the way she looked, the way she threw her head back and laughed, the way she moved under Camille when they made love, the way she drove a conversation beyond the expected and into the delightful. Camille Bardon had many things in her life that were expendable or replaceable. Allison Mitchell was not one of them.

CHAPTER TWO

Thursday, November 24

Driving home from Thanksgiving dinner at her mother's, Allison reflected on her upcoming schedule. The period between Thanksgiving and New Year's was traditionally the slowest in the real estate year, and Allison always looked forward to having more free time. She would shop for the holidays, catch up with friends, clean a few closets, and luxuriate in the simple pleasure of staying in one place for a time instead of jumping around from appointment to appointment. She would spend time thinking about hiring an assistant so that she didn't have to keep so many appointments herself, and then she'd get busy again and not get around to hiring the assistant. Still, there was little she didn't like about running her real estate agency. If she was overly busy, she only had her own success to blame.

As she thought about what she had to do the next day, she realized that if she stopped by the office to pick up a file, she wouldn't have to go in to the office at all until the following Monday. She pulled off Lake Shore Drive and headed through Lincoln Park toward her office, smiling as she spied a legal parking space right in front of the door. She executed a perfect parallel parking maneuver into the tight spot, her skills honed from years of selling real estate in a big city. As she was getting out of the car she saw Peg Ryan walking along Halsted, her long coat open despite the cold air. Peg stopped when she recognized Allison, and they greeted each other with a smile.

"Good lord. Do you work on Thanksgiving, too? I thought lawyers had it bad," Peg said.

"Lawyers do have it bad; I used to be one. But no, I'm not working, just stopping by to pick up a file on my way home. What are you doing out on Thanksgiving?"

"Just walking. I live close by, remember?"

She remembered. Each time she came or went from her office, Allison looked for Peg. She'd driven down Burling Street a few times trying to guess which house Peg was living in. She knew the inventory so well, knew who had recently bought and sold, who rented their places, that she was able to narrow it down to two or three houses. And knowing so little about Peg, Allison had succumbed to the temptation to make up facts about her. She was lonely but proud; she had a mysterious past; she was brilliant; and she was a magnificent lover. And here she was, suddenly faced with the reality. Gathering her wavering poise, Allison managed her usual warm smile. "Well, it's cold out here. Come in with me while I pick up my file, and then I'll try to talk you into having a drink with me."

Peg followed Allison into the office and stood in the foyer while Allison disabled the alarm and turned on the lights. She found the file she was looking for on top of her desk and turned to Peg. Her breath caught when she saw intense gray eyes looking back at her. Peg's hair flopped over her fore-

head; her hands were jammed into the pockets of her coat and her lips set in a crooked smile.

"I'm wondering what I'm doing here," Peg said, not taking her eyes from Allison's.

"Perhaps the offer of a drink sounded good?"

"No, that's not it. I don't drink, actually."

"Well, then, I'm not sure what brought you in either."

There was a silence as Allison tried to keep from running off at the mouth and Peg looked to be trying to come up with something to say.

"So, you were a lawyer?" Peg asked.

"I still am, but I don't practice. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure why I keep my license up," Allison said.

"What kind of law did you do, real estate?"

"No, I was a litigator at Benson, Jacobs."

"Really? I'm a partner at Ungrath in litigation. How come you left?" Peg asked.

"I left because I felt if I went in there one more day, my soul would shrivel up and fall right out of what was left of me."

"Ah. You hated it, then."

"You could say." Waiting for the next word from Peg, Allison was concentrating on how insanely attractive she found Peg's awkwardness. She could feel a buzz in her mid-section, and it was making intelligent conversation hard.

"Let me ask you this," Peg said. "Would you like to finish my walk with me and then stop in at my place for tea or coffee or cocoa or whatever? It's just the next block over."

Without being aware that either of them had moved, Allison found that they were now standing closer together. Peg was not quite within her space bubble, but she could have put her arms around the bubble and burst it quite easily. "Lead on, Macduff. I'll just lock up here and put my file in the car."

For the next twenty minutes the two women walked the residential streets, looking up at the windows of spectacular homes, many ablaze with lights in the front rooms as families entertained for the holiday.

"Just before I ran into you this evening I was walking around here, looking in these windows and feeling an overwhelming melancholy at all these people milling about in their living rooms." Peg gave a wry smile. "That sounds a little maudlin, I know."

"Not to me, it doesn't. I can feel a little sad, too, when I look into the lighted homes along these streets, and it's not because the homes are beautiful or the people rich. I would have the same feeling in any other neighborhood. I find that I start imagining that the families inside are incredibly happy, that their time together is relaxing and carefree, that everyone is loving and kind but also witty and entertaining, and that their lives are everything mine will never be." She shrugged. "I'm realistic enough to know that no family is really like that and that I am happy with my very fine life, but there you have it."

“Hmmm.”

“Hmmm?” Allison mimicked.

“Well,” Peg said, “that sums up the feeling pretty well. ‘Comparing people’s outsides with my insides’ is how I’ve also heard it expressed. But while you and I have been walking together, looking at these houses, I’ve felt more charmed by the sight than depressed by it.”

“Really?” Allison stopped and turned to Peg. “What do you think that means?”

Peg remained still as she continued to look at Allison, then she looked down at the ground and back up again, her hands still jammed into her coat pockets. “I don’t know if it means anything,” she said finally.

Allison smiled at Peg’s discomfort. “Well, I do think it means something.”

Peg tilted her head. “What would that be?”

“Oh, I don’t think I’ll share that just yet. Now, come on. You promised me cocoa.”

Allison made herself comfortable on the couch in the living room. She heard Peg in the kitchen putting cups and plates on a tray, and she nervously patted herself down in various places — hair, clothes, face. She hadn’t felt nervous around a woman in a long time. It was two years since she and Lorraine had broken up and ten years before that when they had first gotten together, but there was no mistaking that it was a flutter she was feeling now. Peg seemed as if she might be interested, as well, but she was very guarded. Allison could catch a brief glimpse of the emotions that passed across Peg’s face before she reined them in and shut them down, and one she had seen clearly was desire.

She looked around the living room, trying to get a handle on Peg. Bookcases crammed with books lined one wall of the room. She walked over to them and noted that the titles were mostly fiction, classics as well as modern general fiction. There was one bookcase devoted to hard cover editions of mysteries.

Decorations in the room were spare, but beautiful. On the wall were a number of original oil paintings, several by the same artist. There was a smattering of art boxes, carvings from Africa and Asia, and a beautiful bust of a woman’s head on the mantle above the fireplace. There were no photographs, no TV, no magazines, no slippers kicked under the sofa. A blanket on the sofa and a good reading light at one end made Allison imagine the hours that Peg sat there, reading. She pictured her perfectly at peace doing so.

Peg brought the cocoa into the room, catching a faraway look on Allison’s face. Giving her a quizzical look, Peg put the tray down and sat next to her on the couch. “You okay, there?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. Just a little tired, I suppose. I love my mom, but spending a few hours with her can be thoroughly enervating.”

“I can relate. I call my visits home going to Trigger City. It takes an enormous amount of energy to just resist the urge to jump in a whiskey bottle whenever I’m with my mom.”

Allison looked at Peg. “Ah.”

“Not very subtle, was it, the way I just came out to you as a recovering alcoholic.”

“The disease is subtle enough, no need for you to be as well.”

Peg poured some hot chocolate into a cup and handed it to Allison. “Sounds like you know something about it. Are you in recovery?”

“No, I’m not. But I have family members who have been in Twelve Step programs, and I’ve spent some time in Al-Anon. I respect all of it. How long have you been sober?”

“It’s been a while. I’ll have my seventeenth anniversary in a couple of weeks. I’ve been trying to feel at home at the meetings here, but I miss my group and my friends back in New York.”

Allison sipped her chocolate, glancing at Peg over the cup. “Do you miss anything else you left in New York?”

“Such as what — Central Park, Fifth Avenue?”

“Very funny. How about a boyfriend?”

“A boyfriend? You’re kidding, right?”

“Well, no. I don’t know anything about you, other than that you’re fairly new in town. Why wouldn’t you have a boyfriend?”

Peg laughed and leaned back on the couch, draping her arm along the back. “I haven’t had a boyfriend since I was sixteen. Girls were it for me after that. And no, I’m not involved with anyone in New York, or here either, for that matter.”

Allison flushed, embarrassed by her awkwardness but also excited with relief. Wanting to let Peg know that she was a lesbian, in case she hadn’t figured that out, and that she wasn’t serious about Camille, Allison blurted, “Me, neither,” and then turned a brighter shade of red.

Peg started to laugh again but then stopped when she realized what Allison had said. Allison could plainly see the hope on Peg’s face, and her heart soared. Then just as quickly she saw Peg’s face take on its mask.

“I thought you were involved with Camille.”

“I have been dating Camille, but it’s never been anything serious on my end.”

“Camille seems pretty serious. Perhaps there’s a reason for her to think it’s serious between you or at least could become so?” Peg moved her cup and saucer around the table rather than look at Allison.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that I’m not responsible for how others think or feel, as long as I’ve been honest with them. And I have been honest with Camille. She’s been a gracious and generous companion on dates to the opera and the theatre, and restaurants or whatever. But I never once let her think that I was falling in love with her or that her buying me gifts would make me fall in love with her. Whether or not we had met tonight, I would be telling her at our next meeting that I didn’t want to see

her anymore. It's clear that she feels something more than I do, and I really don't want to hurt her."

Peg stood and paced around nervously. "What does meeting me have to do with it?"

"Nothing. That's what I just said — that I would be breaking up with her anyway. What did you think I meant?"

"I don't know. I mean, I don't want you to break up with her on my account." Peg sat down, crossing her arms.

Allison stared at her. "Are you being obtuse or something? I know you're smart enough to follow a sentence with more than three clauses. You are a lawyer, after all."

"So are you, as I have just found out. What's that all about?"

"What's what all about? I don't even know you. Have I been somehow derelict in my responsibilities to our non-relationship by not telling you earlier what I used to do for a living? Jesus, what did you put in your cocoa?"

Peg smiled faintly. "Is that what we have, Allison — a non-relationship?"

Allison got up from the sofa and reached for her coat. "What we have is a failure to communicate. I'm not sure where things went haywire here, or why, but I guess I'll be leaving now."

Following her to the front door, Peg reached around Allison to open it. "Well, hopefully you'll want to see me next week when I get back from New York. I'd like to go out and see some properties. I think it's time I rejoin the ranks of property owners, don't you?"

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, Allison turned to look at Peg. "I cannot keep up with you. Now you want to go around with me as your real estate broker?"

"Well, yeah. I thought that was understood from our voicemails. Is there a misunderstanding?"

"No, no misunderstanding. Just give me a call with a couple days' notice and I'll set some showings up for you. Thanks for the cocoa."

Allison walked down the street, back toward her office. She waited as long as she possibly could before turning to look back, hoping that Peg would be standing there watching her. She was. With a quick wave Allison turned back around, a smile on her face and a longer stride in her step. Peg wasn't nearly the challenge that she thought she was. Allison could read her like a book.

Friday, November 25

The following day, Allison met Camille at a neighborhood Thai restaurant. While she was a bit uncertain as to how things would play out with Peg Ryan, Allison knew she needed to end things with Camille. Looking across the table, she tried to gauge Camille's mood. Always seemingly under perfect control, Camille had never been anything other than solicitous, sometimes to a fault. That control had been absent at the accident scene on Clark

Street, and Allison knew instinctively that what she'd seen there was a truer and perhaps dominant aspect of her character, not the composed version displayed to Allison when they were out together. If Camille were to cause another scene, Allison would feel more comfortable in a public place.

"Not that I'm not happy to see you, but what prompted the sudden lunch invitation?" Camille poured tea for both of them and looked at Allison over her cup.

"I don't know how to say this other than to come right to the point." Allison reached over and held one of Camille's hands. "Camille, you've been absolutely lovely to me in all ways. You've treated me like a queen and spoiled me rotten, and I hope you know how much I've appreciated it."

Camille withdrew her hand. "I don't like the sound of this."

"There's no way to do this nicely, is there? I can't date you anymore, Camille. My heart is just not in it, and it's not fair to you to pretend that it ever will be. It won't. That much is very clear to me."

"You're kidding, right?" Camille sounded a little panicked.

"No, not kidding. You are the first person I've dated since my breakup, and it was never my intention that we be a long-term or exclusive relationship. We talked about that at the beginning; I hope you don't feel I've misled you."

Camille raised her cup and bought some time by sipping her tea and wiping her mouth. Finally, she looked back at Allison. "No, of course not. We were getting along so well that this has caught me by surprise. And disappointed me. I was looking forward to seeing more of you, Allison."

"I am really sorry. I absolutely dreaded the idea of hurting you in any way."

"Well, you have to do what's right for you. It's certainly a rule I live by." Camille took her hand and squeezed it gently, giving Allison what seemed like a genuine smile. "Is there someone new in the picture?"

"No, there isn't. But this way, there can be for you and, someday, for me. And I hope we can be friends."

Camille stood and slung her bag over her shoulder. "Of course. No hard feelings; I wish you only the best. I mean that sincerely. But right now, I think I'll excuse myself."

With a sigh of relief, Allison watched Camille leave the restaurant, grateful that she'd been so gracious and that the breakup had gone so smoothly.

Camille exited the restaurant as quickly as she could without breaking into a run. Her Lexus was parked right in front, visible to Allison who was seated near the window. Camille managed to keep a blank expression on her face as she got in her car and pulled away from the curb. When she was a block away from the restaurant, she took a sharp left onto Ravenswood and pulled over alongside the rail embankment. She opened the car door and stumbled out

to the side of the street where she vomited. A long, shuddering sob followed the sound of her retching. She kept her head down between her legs.

In a few minutes Camille regained her composure, got back in her car, checked her face and the traffic in the rear-view mirror, and pulled back on to the road. She picked up her cell phone and called her assistant, Tim McNally.

“Where are you? I need to see you.”

“I’m on my way in to the office,” he said. “What’s up?”

“Good. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes myself.”

“You sound odd,” Tim said. “Did you catch a cold?”

“What I just caught was a kick in the face. Allison dumped me.”

“Uh oh.”

“Uh oh is right. If Allison thinks I’m letting her leave me for that bitch Peg Ryan, she doesn’t know me very well.”

“She certainly doesn’t,” Tim said loyally. “And who’s Peg Ryan?”

“That’s what you’re going to find out for me. Call Sam and have him meet us in my office. We’re going to put a full-court press on the woman who’s trying to take Allison from me.”

Camille flipped her phone closed and sped toward Lake Shore Drive to head downtown. With a plan formulating, the horrible pain of rejection seemed a little easier to take.