



Four shirtless construction workers posed on the roof like suspects in a police lineup. But because of the direction of the afternoon sun – and the fuzziness of her twenty-year-old memory – Kat couldn't tell which was the father of her child and the only man she'd ever loved.

She squinted, raising a hand to block the glare. *Him?* No. The man on the far left was too short and stocky. Even at sixteen, Riley Bohland had been over six feet tall. *That one?* No. Riley's hair had been curly and dark and his shoulders much broader, even as a kid.

Then recognition hit her with a thud, pinning her feet to the wet West Virginia clay. Her breath went shallow. She broke out in goose bumps from head to toe.

'Is he up there?' Nola's whisper was squeaky with excitement, and she gripped Kat's upper arm so hard it hurt. 'One of them is staring at you! Is that Riley? Is that him? Holy shit, this is going to be pure, Grade-A drama!'

As the man in question cocked his head and frowned down at them, a hammer hanging useless in his hand, Kat nodded her silent reply. *Oh yeah, that's Riley Bohland all right – the bastard – all grown-up, filled out, and still walking around advertising the fact that God had*

Supersized his order of good looks, and it really pisses me off.

Nola put her lips to Kat's ear. 'You said he was cute, but seriously, hon, you could have gone into a little more detail.'

Kat's homegrown heart pounded under her Parisian bra as she stared at him. This wasn't going to be as easy as she'd imagined. Why couldn't Riley have gone flabby over the years like a normal guy? Not that physical appearance was the measure of a man, but why did he have to be so well-preserved? He was still long and lean, without an extra inch anywhere. His arms were corded with ropes of muscle. A pair of beat-up jeans hung low on his spare hips.

The instant he dropped the hammer and started down the ladder, Kat's whole world shifted. Suddenly, her righteous return felt all wrong. The glamorous Fifth Avenue makeover that thrilled her yesterday seemed embarrassingly over-the-top up here in the Allegheny mountains. The three-inch stiletto boots that looked so sexy on the city sidewalk were sinking into the muck.

'I think I might black out,' Kat mumbled.

'Man up, sister,' Nola said. 'This is the moment you've been waiting for. Do what you came here to do.'

Riley's work boots left the last rung of the ladder and hit the mud with a *splat*. He turned. He took graceful, confident strides in Kat's direction. One step. Two. Spine straight. Chest rock solid. Long arms relaxed.

Lips curled in a sneer.

'I'll be in the car.' Nola ran away faster than a scalded dog.

Three steps. Four. Five.

Kat fluffed her razor-precise hairstyle with her

perfectly manicured fingers. This was it. Riley's face came into focus. She could see those impossibly blue eyes blaze with an intensity that made her stomach flip. She'd practiced this a million times. She could do it. Sweet revenge was within arm's reach. Kat took a deep breath, steadied herself, and prepared to drop the bomb on the man whose selfishness had forever determined the course of her life.

Without warning, a big, black SUV drove right in front of Kat, splattering mud from her bangs to her Blahniks. She let out a yelp of shock, which was accented by muffled obscenities from inside the car.

As she tried to wipe some of the glop from her eyes, her brain seized with panic. Her makeup! Her hair! Her clothes! *This could not be happening.*

Riley walked right up to her. He moved so close that she could smell him – a potent mixture of memories, sweat, and rage.

'Where the *hell* have you been?'

'Uh, Baltimore.' Kat let go with a nervous laugh, still wiping her eyes. She told herself that she must be having the mother of all bad dreams. She's be waking up any minute.

Riley leaned closer. Even through her gunked-up eyelashes, she could see every day of thirty-seven years of life on that chiseled face. She watched his nostrils flare. If this was a dream, it was a very detail-oriented one.

Riley bent down so that his nose nearly touched her own. From behind straight, white, clenched teeth he asked, '*What in the name of God have you done with my son?*'



Riley shouldn't know about her son. How could he? *No one* from her past knew about Aidan, not even her own mother. There was something very wrong here.

Kat took a moment to regroup. According to her plan, she was, at this moment, supposed to be informing Riley Bohland of his paternity and watching him fall to his knees with the weight of his loutishness. And she was supposed to be doing that while looking hot enough to scorch the man's eyeballs.

But instead, she was covered in slime and had just been denied the right to utter the punch line she'd perfected with twenty years of practice in front of mirrors! And store windows. Every shiny surface she'd ever encountered, really. *I was pregnant the day you dumped me, you lying, selfish jerk.*

Construction noise had stopped. Kat realized she had an audience for what was shaping up to be the most completely fucked-up moment of her life, which was saying something.

The driver of the SUV slammed his door shut. 'Very sorry, madam,' he said.

'Tell me my son's name.' Riley tightened his fists at his

sides. His body trembled with tension. 'Is he healthy? Is he happy? What have you done with my goddam *boy*?'

Kat closed her eyes, feeling the tears mix with the mud and mascara. She choked out an answer. 'His name is Aidan. He's nineteen and in his second year at Johns Hopkins.'

Riley said nothing. He gave a slow, disgusted shake of his head, then spat in the mud. 'You're the coldest bitch on the face of the earth and I will never forgive you for what you've done to me.' His voice was flat. He turned away.

Apparently, their big reunion was over.

'Forgive *me*?' Kat waved her muddy arms as she shouted at his back. 'What do you mean, you'll never forgive *me*? I don't forgive *you*! Riley, stop! Get back here! How did you find out about Aidan?' He kept moving. 'Don't dare walk away from me! Wait!'

He didn't wait, which was almost a relief, since she had no idea what to say next.

Riley called over his shoulder, 'Leave your contact information with your dad so my lawyer can find you.'

Kat's arms collapsed at her sides. She went numb for an instant, just before the anger rushed in, hot and bitter and spreading its familiar vigor through her mind. She could not allow Riley to turn his back on her today, just like he'd done when she was sixteen. Twenty years ago, in the span of a single afternoon, she learned she was pregnant, got tossed out of school, kicked to the curb by her boyfriend, and sent away by her parents. Every minute since had been tough as hell, but she'd clawed and fought and survived so that one day – *today* – she could blow into town and get satisfaction. She deserved it. Riley Bohland owed it to her. Her parents owed it to her.

The whole stinking, stupid, nothing town of Persuasion, West Virginia, owed it to her! *And this is all I get?*

Nola returned to her side and patted her shoulder. 'I think he really dug your outfit,' she said.

Madeline Bowman may have put on a few pounds since tenth grade, but Kat decided she looked a hundred times better without the freakishly big high school hair she once had. Madeline chatted away while escorting her two guests to their rooms at the Cherry Hill B and B, which, she wanted them to know, had been under her proprietorship for the last six years. Madeline was so pleasant that she even told Kat not to worry about the clumps of mud she was depositing on the polished oak staircase.

'I almost died when you walked in the front door, Kat! Oh my God! I had no idea that was you making the reservations on the phone! I suppose you're using your married name these days?' Madeline unlocked the door to Nola's room, got her settled in first, then escorted Kat down the hall to her suite. She lowered her voice to a whisper. 'I have to admit that I'm just *dying* to know what happened to you! We always expected to see Kat Cavanaugh's face on a milk carton, or on *America's Most Wanted*. But obviously—' She scanned the splattered velvet of Kat's pencil skirt. 'You were off to the big city, having some sort of amazing life that no one back here knew a thing about! You were always such a brain in school. I bet you went to Harvard and made a million dollars or something!' She opened the door. 'I'm sure this isn't as glamorous as you're used to, but it's the nicest accommodation in town, by far. It's our honeymoon suite!'

Kat let Madeline's entire hyperactive soliloquy go without comment, including the obvious question of who in their right mind would want to honeymoon in Persuasion. She looked around the room. A cozy sitting area was done in a mix of overstuffed modern pieces and Victorian tables, all arranged around an ornately carved mahogany fireplace, which Madeline was quick to point out had been upgraded to gas. Next, Madeline demonstrated the convenience of the small kitchenette with its coffeemaker, refrigerator/freezer, and microwave. The bedroom was next on the tour, and Madeline opened a set of double doors to reveal an antique four-poster bed so high off the ground that it required its own step stool. Kat made a mental note not to attempt to scale that sucker after a couple glasses of wine. Then came the generous bathroom, with a double sink, a shower, and a deep antique claw-foot tub with an ornate brass faucet.

Kat smiled to herself. This room ran just shy of two hundred a night and it didn't even faze her. She'd been stinking rich for only three months, but as it turned out, she was a natural at it. Who knew?

'Thank you, Madeline. It's really nice.'

'So, you're married?'

The woman was obviously on a mission. 'No. I've never been married.'

Madeline didn't bother to hide her confusion. 'So what did you do – change your name?'

'Something like that.'

'Is that your Jaguar out in the parking lot?'

'Yes.'

'So you live in New York City?'

'Nope.'

‘But it has New York temporary tags from a dealership in Manhattan.’

Good God! ‘Yes, it does.’

Madeline’s brown eyes flashed; then she looked at her feet, embarrassed for her shameless curiosity. Kat knew it had to be mind-blowing for a missing person to suddenly pop up, twenty years after her disappearance, rich and fabulously dressed and driving a brand-new Jag. At least she prayed it was, since that was the whole point.

‘I can’t wait to relax in this fabulous bathtub, Madeline. Is there a dry cleaner in town where I might be able to take my clothes?’

Madeline perked right up. ‘Oh! Just leave everything outside your door and I’ll take care of it. I can even get your boots cleaned, if you’d like.’

Kat glanced down at the recently acquired burnt caramel suede designer boots, now coated in sludge the color of dried blood. ‘I’d appreciate that.’

‘We got a lot of rain the last couple days.’

‘So it seems.’

Madeline smiled slightly, turned to go, then changed her mind. ‘There’s towels in the cabinet.’ She began shifting her weight from foot to foot and cleared her throat. ‘Look, I’m sorry for being nosy. It’s just that – well – it was always a mystery why you and Riley never got together again. I mean, you were so totally in love! Everyone knew it! Your leaving just about killed him. He ditched so much school he flunked out, but I guess that’s old news to you. We all figured you’d come back for him one day, and here you are! That’s why you’re here, right? You’ve come back for Riley?’

Kat wasn’t sure she’d heard correctly. Her leaving just

about killed *him*? She had trouble seeing that, since Riley had chosen such a sensitive way to break up with her. *Go away, Kat. It's over.* She never got to share the news about the baby.

Kat prepared to answer Madeline. She raised her chin, straightened her back, and reminded herself to tuck away the old hurt. She was an expert at it. 'Seriously, Madeline. I hardly think it's my fault that Riley Bohland never bothered to finish high school.'

Madeline screwed up her face in bewilderment, then exploded with laughter, her eyes sparkling. When she regained her composure, she said, 'Of course he finished, silly. He just had to repeat that one year.'

'Well. I'm glad for him.' She really was. At least maybe when Riley was too old and stiff for life on the construction crew, he could go to community college, like Kat had, and put his perfectly good brain to use. Riley was always able to coast by on charm alone, but he'd also been blessed with a relentless mind. Even when he was a kid, that mind would spin and twist until it grabbed onto something and made sense of it. Kat had always admired that in him, and she'd been pleased to see the same keen intellect at work in her son.

Well, Riley's son, too.

Madeline stared at Kat, deep in concentration. She jangled the master key ring in her hand. 'So you were out at the construction site today? Is that how you ruined your beautiful clothes?'

'Yes, unfortunately.'

'So you've already tracked him down?'

Kat noticed the strangest combination of worry and glee on Madeline's face, and she racked her brain for the

specifics of how the tenth-grade food chain had once been structured. Kat herself was just a nerdy tomboy, preferring books and old movies over mascara and mousse. But Madeline Bowman had been a pom-pom princess and the queen of the Sadie Hawkins dance, the kind of girl Kat steered clear of whenever possible. People change, of course, but Kat figured it was best to keep the details of her visit from her graciously nosy hostess.

‘Riley and I spoke briefly. The owner of the Sunoco told me he worked out there on Saturdays.’

Madeline’s eyebrows arched high on her forehead and she continued to stare. Eventually she cleared her throat. ‘Uh, so you haven’t even gone back to Virgil’s house yet?’

‘No. That’s on the agenda for tomorrow. My parents are going to be very surprised.’

For a long moment, Madeline stared at Kat like a doe in the oncoming high beams. ‘Oh, my,’ she finally whispered.

‘Yeah. The three of us haven’t exactly been close.’

Madeline blinked a few times, not able to hide her discomfort.

Kat couldn’t say the reaction surprised her. The mere mention of Virgil Cavanaugh’s name had always gotten some kind of awkward response. What could people say? *Your father is such a beautiful human being!*? Not hardly.

Madeline suddenly gave a crisp nod, pursing her lips so tight that Kat could see deep lines around her mouth. She quickly removed two keys from the ring and handed them to Kat, explaining that one was for the front door of the B and B and the other for her suite. ‘I’ll let you relax, then,’ Madeline said, already scurrying to the door, avoiding eye contact. ‘I’m serving dinner at six thirty, and I’ll set the table for you and your friend.’

As Madeline slid into the hallway and shut the door, Kat groaned with relief and rubbed her forehead, coming away with a palm dusted with dirt. What she needed was some silence, a hot bath, and a nap. Maybe then she could start to figure out what kind of new-and-improved mess she'd just made for herself by coming back to people who had never loved her and a place where she'd never belonged.

And to think, just three days ago, over a two-hundred-dollar bottle of champagne in the Four Seasons bar, this had all sounded like such a good idea.

Why now?

That's all Riley could think on the drive home. He cranked down the window of the old pickup, hoping that a blast of autumn air would smack some sense into him, but all it did was make him shiver. He was obviously nowhere near sensible, because he felt alive in a way he hadn't in years. All he could think about was Kat's shiny strawberry blond hair, those big golden eyes, her sweet pink mouth. All he could hear was that raspy girl voice that cut him to the quick with the weight of memory. God help him, but he'd wanted to touch her. It took everything in him not to walk over to her, grab her, and kiss the bejesus out of her before he told her how much he hated her.

Because he did hate her. There was no doubt about it. And he'd once loved her with everything he had in him. And he couldn't figure out why the hell she decided to pick this particular moment to rise from the dead and throw his life into chaos – yet again. What did she want? Did she want to apologize for denying him his right to be a father to his own child? She sure didn't look apologetic.

Did she want money for the boy's college? God knew he'd gladly hand over everything he had left, but Kat didn't appear to be hurting for cash. She came rollin' through the holler in a brand-new Jaguar for God's sake, posing in a getup that belonged on a Paris runway. Was that really fringe on those boots that went way up past her knees? She looked like a slutty fur trapper!

Riley laughed out loud, remembering that the last time he'd seen Kat, she'd been in Kmart jeans and Converse sneakers. She'd looked normal. She'd looked cute and sweet and perfect and his sixteen-year-old hormones told him he should lay her down in the backseat of the Nova and devour her.

That didn't happen, because no matter what his hormones were telling him, his daddy had just informed him that he was too young to be so serious about a girl and if he didn't break it off with Kat immediately he'd lose his car and the right to play varsity sports. So Riley said what had to be said. And Kat's cute and sweet face turned to stone. She walked away without a word, and he never saw her again.

Until now.

Riley pulled into the drive and hopped out, wincing not only at the squeal of the old truck door but also at the sheer weight of his own stupidity. Sometimes he wished he'd never learned any more of the Kat Cavanaugh story, that he'd been allowed to go through life never knowing why Kat left, or that he had a child out there in the world he couldn't locate. But about a year ago he'd been given just enough information to turn his world inside out, to scrape out his guts and make him question every damn thing he thought was true.

For a year now, he'd been carrying around the ugly suspicion that on that day twenty years back Kat had asked to meet him out on the quarry road for the sole purpose of telling him she was pregnant. But before she could even get the words out, he'd broken up with her. He'd been cold about it, too. It was the only way he could do it.

Riley grabbed the mail from the box out by the street, shaking his head at the memory of that day so long ago. He'd flunked a chemistry test and been benched for showing up late for basketball practice – twice. He remembered how Big Daddy got right up in his face and accused him of storing his brain in his Fruit of the Looms. Big Daddy had been right, of course, but only partially so. The truth was, Riley was In Love – in his mind, soul, *and* Fruit of the Looms.

He had to laugh at the reasoning prowess of his sixteen-year-old self. He'd had it all figured out. He'd break up with Kat temporarily to get Big Daddy off his back, then patch things up with her in a couple months. The pitiful truth was, Riley hadn't even made it through that first evening without Kat! He was banging on the Cavanaugh's door by nightfall. But she'd already gone.

He dragged his thoughts out of the past and headed up the curved brick walkway, his eyes automatically scanning the ungainly majesty of the old Queen Anne house. The mansion might still be considered the showplace of Persuasion, but all he saw was loose roof tiles, crumbling mortar, and the world's largest second mortgage. Riley's steps eventually took him under the shadow of the huge house, and his eyes adjusted to meet the gaze of the most loving, dependable girl a man could want. His face broke

into a smile as he called out his usual greeting: ‘Hello, my beauty! How was your day?’

As always, Loretta waited for her man from the top step of the big front porch. Her eyes sparkled with adoration, her sleek hair gleamed in the afternoon light, and her tail thumped hard against the porch floor.

Riley reached down and rubbed her stone-hard head, then pulled gently on one of her droopy ears, a gesture that always produced a grunt of pleasure from the old hound.

‘She named my boy Aidan. Can you believe that irony?’ As he pushed open the front door, Loretta howled to hold up her end of the conversation. ‘No joke. Turns out Kat was sentimental enough to name our child after Big Daddy but never even bothered to inform me there *was* a child. Can you kindly explain that oversight to me?’

Loretta let loose with another plaintive wail.

‘Don’t you think that once in twenty years the woman’s heart might have melted enough – just enough – to tell me I had a son?’

Almost immediately, the front door opened and shut behind Riley. He didn’t even have to turn around to know who it was.

‘What you fixin’ to do now that she’s back? You got any beer?’ Matt walked right on through the cavernous foyer and straight into the kitchen, not waiting for his brother to answer him on either count.

Riley shook his head in annoyance as he sorted through the mail. His little brother hadn’t lived in the Bohland House since he graduated from college but still traipsed in and out like he did. ‘Don’t you have a refrigerator in that swanky loft of yours?’

‘Yep, but there’s no beer in it.’

Riley heard the pop of a bottle cap and rolled his eyes. He had half a mind to call the cops on Matt. He’d do it, too, if his brother weren’t the chief of the Persuasion Police Department.

Riley threw down the mail and followed Matt to the fridge. ‘You know, seriously, it wouldn’t kill you to knock, Matt. What if I was in here all tangled up in a game of nude Twister or something?’

Matt took one long gulp of beer after another, staring at his brother over the length of the bottle. Eventually, Matt let out a sigh of relief, slammed the empty on the counter, and patted Riley’s arm. ‘I didn’t know our girl Loretta was into freaky shit like that.’ Matt then belched loudly, moved into the parlor, and flopped on the settee.

Riley grabbed a couple more beers and went in after him. ‘Hilarious. Take off your boots, man. They’re covered in mud.’

‘Right.’ Matt unlaced his work boots and set them on the wood floor by the couch. ‘Look, I gotta tell you – I really feel bad about spraying Kat Cavanaugh with muck like that.’ Slowly, Matt turned his head to look at Riley, and after a moment of tightly wound silence, the two burst out laughing. Loretta joined in.

‘You did that on purpose, dickhead.’

‘No, I swear I didn’t! I wasn’t paying much attention to Kat, to tell you the truth. I didn’t even realize it was her I nailed until I got out of the cruiser.’ Matt grabbed one of the fresh beers from the coffee table. ‘I’m not ashamed to tell you that my focus was on the brunette in the Jaguar. I’m lucky I didn’t run Kat flat over.’

Riley shook his head and took a swig of beer.

‘Hey. Aren’t you on call? Should you be drinking?’

‘Shut up,’ Riley said.

‘I thought you weren’t supposed to drink when—’

‘Shut the hell up, man.’

Matt shrugged. ‘Fine. Well, Kat looked good. Real good. She must be loaded.’

Riley laughed and took off his own boots. His feet were achy and wet and he needed a shower. What he really needed, he knew, was a mercifully slow night on call and for Carrie to forget to contact him for about a week. He didn’t have the patience to deal with her now. Lately, she’d been teetering on the line between ex-fiancée and completely psycho ex-fiancée. He sure as hell didn’t want her to find out that the infamous Kat Cavanaugh had materialized. It could be the ticket to push ole Carrie right over the edge.

‘I’m thinking about becoming a Buddhist monk.’

Matt hooted with laughter at Riley’s lament, and Loretta howled right along for support. ‘Hey, man, before you go taking a Norelco to your noggin, you should know that Lisa Forrester’s been asking about you every day. Remember her? The second-shift dispatcher with the belly ring I was telling you about?’

‘Wow, Matt. You sure can pick ’em.’ Riley was trying to take another sip from his beer bottle when Loretta head-butted his forearm, sending a slosh of foam onto the area rug.

‘See? Even the dog knows you’re not supposed to be drinking on call.’

‘Hey, Matt?’

‘I know. I know. Shut up. And here I am, not only trying to find you a love connection but working

construction for you nearly every damn weekend – and this is the thanks I get?’

‘Thanks, Matt.’ Riley didn’t have the energy for a clever retort.

‘Well, as much as I’m enjoying this conversation, I gotta scoot.’ Matt straightened from his slouch, then grabbed his boots and his beer. ‘I just wanted to make sure you were cool. You know, not oiling up Daddy’s old twelve-gauge or something stupid.’

‘Thank you for keeping our community safe.’

Matt got to his feet. ‘Just so you know – Madeline informed me the women were staying at Cherry Hill.’

Riley nodded. ‘Figured as much.’

‘You know what that means, right?’

Riley slowly raised his head, checked out his brother’s expression, and closed his eyes against the realization. ‘*Fuck.*’

‘Hey, I know Madeline’s a gossip. But she’s a nice woman, and she makes a mean lasagna. It didn’t work out with us, but I still think you should ask her out – you know what they say about the sexual needs of divorced single moms.’

Riley opened his eyes, ignoring Matt’s ridiculous suggestion. ‘No chance Madeline would forget to tell Carrie that Kat was here?’

Matt snorted. ‘Are you on drugs or something?’ She tells Carrie *everything.* The two women were friends after all.

‘Great.’

‘Look, Bro.’ Matt cleared his throat. ‘Are you, uh, you know, thinkin’ about going over to the B and B for a little friendly chat with Kat tonight?’

Behind his brother's smirk, Riley knew there was real concern. Matt and Carrie were the only people who knew Riley had a son, and Matt was clearly worried about how all this would turn out. 'She named him Aidan. Isn't that a riot? And she says she's been in Baltimore.'

'Hole-eee God.' Matt's eyes went wide. 'Big Daddy would've loved that shit.' He headed toward the kitchen but stopped after two steps. 'Baltimore? As in Baltimore, Maryland?'

'Do you know any other Baltimore?'

'Huh.' Matt gave a slow nod of comprehension. 'That would go a long way toward explaining why we never found her in California.'

'Yeah, it would. Wrong end of the continent and all that.' Riley had been given wrong information about Kat's whereabouts and he couldn't safely say if it had been deliberate or not. But it wouldn't surprise him if it was. With a deep sigh, he rose from the sofa to see his brother out. They'd nearly reached the front door when Matt suddenly spun around, eyes bright with anger.

'What the hell's wrong with you, man?' Matt shoved him in the chest.

'What the f—?' Riley stared at Matt in disbelief. He couldn't remember the last time his brother laid a hand on him. 'What was that for?'

'Kat just came back from the dead, man!' Matt waved his arms around. 'You're going to finally get to meet your kid! But you're moping around like you just found a boil on your ass or something! What is *with* you? You're like some zombie-assed robot!'

Riley's head snapped back from the force of his brother's words. Matt was pissed. Over something that

was really none of his business. ‘I don’t want to get into this right now, all right? I’ve got a lot on my mind.’

Matt laughed bitterly. ‘You never want to get into *anything*. Nobody knows what you’ve got on your mind because you never want to share nuthin’ with nobody.’

‘Drop it, Matt. This is not the time for an intervention.’

‘Fuck you, too! Here’s the thing – and you know what I’m about to say is true – you didn’t say a damn word when Daddy died. Do you realize that? You didn’t cry. You didn’t talk about him. Nothing.’

‘Jesus, Matt.’

‘And you won’t talk to me about the problems with the building money. You haven’t talked about your kid in months. You don’t talk about crazy Carrie. So now Kat is back and you say *nothing*. And I know what’s next – you’re gonna wallow around in one of your megafunks and not come out of this tomb except to work.’

‘It’s the way I am.’

‘That’s just dandy,’ Matt said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. ‘But here’s the thing. I swear to God that you’re wound so tight you’re going to explode on me one day – just *snap* – and the next thing I know I’ll be getting a report of a twenty-seven-eight in progress at the Bohland House.’

Riley calmly reached around his brother’s body and grabbed the carved brass doorknob. ‘Thanks for stopping by.’

Matt let out a hiss of air. ‘Hey, asshole. I grew up here, same as you, and there ain’t no “stopping by” involved.’ He yanked open the heavy door himself. ‘And just ’cause Big Daddy made you executor of his estate don’t mean this house isn’t as much mine as it is yours, so don’t go gettin’

all high-and-mighty on me like this is your own stately manor house and you're the Earl of Persuasion or some shit like that. It might deflate your head a bit to remember that our great-granddaddy paid for this place with bootlegging profits he kept under his mattress, for crying out loud!

Riley would've laughed if Matt's words weren't so true and didn't slice down to the raw core of his guilt. Matt had no idea that his trustworthy, honest, straight-and-narrow big brother had mortgaged their ignoble inheritance to the hilt and, barring some miracle, they'd be in foreclosure by the New Year.

Riley swallowed hard and waited for the transition he knew was coming. Matt's M.O. had always been the opposite of his own. His little brother would blow his top, then cool off, and never hold a grudge. Riley envied that sometimes. So he watched as, true to form, the hurt and anger drained from Matt's face.

'I'm sorry, Matt,' Riley said. 'I don't mean to be a jerk.'

'And I had no business going off on you like that.' Matt slapped Riley's upper arm affectionately.

'It's cool.' Riley hated himself for not telling Matt the truth, and swore in silence that he'd come clean about everything. Soon. 'I'm not shutting down, Matt. There's just a lot going on right now.'

Matt bit his lip. 'Kat showing up like has got to be hard to deal with.'

'It is.'

'I hear you.'

Riley tried to produce a smile as affable as his brother's. 'Hey, look, you're right – this is your home as much as it is mine, and if I'm in the middle of a game of

nude Twister with the belly-ring babe when you walk in, then so be it.'

Matt nodded a few times, then began to frown, as if something just made sense to him. 'Baltimore? Are you sure?'

Riley shrugged. 'That's what Kat said.'

'But her mom claimed she was in California.'

Riley sighed. 'BettyAnn was either setting me up or out of her head on the pain meds. That's all I can think.'

Matt sighed. 'Daddy always said you couldn't trust a Cavanaugh.'

'I think he was referring to Virgil.'

'No doubt. See ya.'

Just as Matt's boots crossed the threshold, Riley's pager filled the foyer with a shrill *beep beep beep beep*.

'Busted!' Matt said with a grin, slamming the door behind him before Riley could ask him what a twenty-seven-eight was.