

# CH H A P T E R TWENTY-TWO

MY INTAKE OF BREATH WAS SO QUICK IT ALMOST SOUNDED like a whistle. I whispered, "Seriously? She's in jail?"

Lexie was still crying into her pillow, so I turned to the computer and jiggled the mouse enough to wake up the screen. The Washington State Department of Corrections website popped up, along with the heading **Find an Offender**. The search results consisted of a listing of prisoners with the last name of Cobb. There were a few men with that last name, but no women. And no one named Laudine.

Had she been released? Is that why Lexie was upset?

I clicked on the next window. It was a death notice. Three years before, Laudine Cobb had developed an infection and died in prison. I leaned back in the chair. But then I noticed several other windows open, so I clicked on one of them. Yahoo search engine, with the

search results from the words *Washington*+ inmate+  
Laudine.

Hundreds of entries came up. One that Lexie had clicked on was from the local NBC affiliate with the headline *CROWD ATTENDS LAUDINE COBB SENTENCING*. I scanned the news article from over eighteen years before.

"Convicted murderer Laudine Cobb, 29, was sentenced to life in prison plus 65 years for the murder of her two children."

I gasped and looked over at Lexie. That was why she was upset. Not that Laudine Cobb was dead, but that she'd been . . . a murderer.

I kept reading.

One rainy night, Laudine Cobb called 911, said someone had broken into their house, shot her in the leg and shot her two children, both of whom died on the way to the hospital. Her tearful pleas from her hospital bed, to find whoever was responsible, made the national news. Prosecutors spent months checking her story and finally found enough evidence to convict her of the crime. She had shot herself in the leg to solidify her story. I checked the dates.

I said to Lexie, "Are you sure this is her? She was in prison when you were born."

Lexie rolled off the bed, and came over to me. Her eyes and face were red, glistening with tears. There were other windows open and she clicked on one of them. The article, dated several months after the first, was short. The first line read: "Under heavy security, convicted

murderer Laudine Cobb gave birth at St. John's Hospital in Gig Harbor."

I stopped reading and glanced back at the date. Lexie's birthday.

Lexie said, "She was pregnant with me when she went in. Father unknown."

I grasped her arm. "You don't know this is her. You don't know this is your birth mother."

Lexie asked, "Did you see the photo yet?"

I shook my head.

She reached down and moved the mouse, clicking on another window. There was a posed photograph of a woman and two children. It was small, so I leaned in to look more closely.

The woman had bleached blond hair. She was pretty. Not as pretty as Lexie, but she looked a lot like her. Enough to be her mother?

Most definitely.

Lexie sighed. "Still think it's a coincidence?" She sunk down onto the carpet beside the chair.

"This doesn't mean anything." I said.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Doesn't mean anything? My birth mother was a murderer! How does that not mean anything?"

"No one has to know," I said. "No one *does* know."

Her face crumpled and she started to cry again. "Did Mom and Dad know? Did they know they had a murderer's baby?"

I slid off the chair and sat next to her on the floor,

putting my arm around her shoulders. She leaned into me. "Did they know?"

I said, "You heard Mom go on and on about that night. About the next year, waiting until the adoption went through. They had a baby. An innocent baby."

Lexie sat up. "What if I'm not innocent?" She pointed to the computer. "I looked it up. She was psychotic. She was narcissistic and histrionic. I looked those up. Psychopathy can be inherited."

"No." I shook my head. "You're not any of those."

With the back of a hand, she wiped tears off her face. "Really? She was egocentric. Antisocial. Manipulative. You don't think I'm any of those?"

I swallowed, realizing I had to tread carefully so I didn't make her more upset. "You can be those without being psychotic! Little kids can be manipulative, for God's sake."

"So you think I am those things."

*Oh crap.* "No, Lex. I didn't—"

"Like mother, like daughter," she said. "Isn't that how it goes?"

I pointed down. "Your mother, your real mother, the mother that raised you, is sitting downstairs right now, taking care of her children. You should be glad to be like her."

"She's not my biological mom."

"Lex! Your birth mother has had nothing to do with you your entire life. She has had no influence, no impact.

All she did was give birth to you. And she's gone. You are not her and you never will be." I tightened my arm around her.

She breathed in and shuddered, then set her face against my chest. "I can't, Eli."

"Can't what?" I asked.

She sighed, the sound shaky and ragged. "I can't be from a monster. I just can't."

I didn't know what else to say, so I just sat there while she cried.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Go away!" said Lexie.

The closed door muffled Eddy's voice. "I'm looking for Eli."

I told Lexie, "It's fine." Then I said more loudly, "Come in."

Eddy walked in. As soon as he saw us, he frowned.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," snapped Lexie. "It's none of your business."

But Eddy didn't retreat as I expected him to. He closed the door, then walked over to us and stood there. "What's going on?"

Lexie looked at me and shook her head. But I wondered if this was the moment that I could stop being their intermediary, stop being the buffer between them.

If Eddy was the person I thought he was, then he *was* capable of being a brother to Lexie, just as much as I was.

I would give him this one chance.

The letter from the state was sitting above me, on the desk. I reached up and grabbed it, then, praying I wasn't making a huge mistake, I held it out to Eddy. "Lexie found her biological mother."