

Chapter One

Time's almost up. Run faster.

I pumped my legs. My shoes hammered the sidewalk.

Dad's curfew ticked closer.

Almost there.

I zeroed in on the white porch halfway down the street. My house. The outside light was still on.

Hope gave me a last burst of energy. I raced in and out of shadows.

The porch light turned off. I cried out. Stumbled. Bent over for several seconds. Squeezed my waist as I sucked in air. My side aching, I walked the last fifty steps. Clumped up the steps, energy gone.

The bay-window blinds twitched.

I called, "Mom, please let me in. I'm only one minute late."

No answer.

"It wasn't my fault." I pressed my hand on the door. "I was at Emily's. Studying like I said. But the bus was behind an accident. I couldn't get home any faster."

Still no answer. I was sure I heard shuffling on the rug by the door. Mom was listening. "Please, Mom. Dad will never know."

The door cracked open. The chain lock was in place. Mom's fingers curled around the edge of the

door. She whispered, "He came home from work feeling awful. He said ten forty-five sharp. I'm sorry, Joanne."

Shit. Everyone called me Joey or Jo. If Mom was using my full name, I was in big trouble. "But—"

"He's sick and angry. He said if you're late, he'd better not see you before he goes back to work." Mom took a shaky breath. "You'll have to stay away. I'll text you when he's feeling better."

The door closed.

I stood there, gut twisting. I'd only been late once before. Dad had made me sit outside until midnight, but then he'd let me in. With a scowl so deep I'd thought he was going to hit me. He never had, but there were times when the threat heated the air in the house.

I was good at moving like a whisper, barely stirring the air. But once in a while, I couldn't resist getting loud. Making him explode in a rage. When

I gave in to that urge, Mom paid the price. Also unfair. Was that why she hadn't shown her face? Had he hit her again?

My fault, even when I didn't mean for it to happen. I sat on the top step, fighting tears. What could I do? Crawl under the porch through the opening at the far end? I shuddered. I'd hidden in small spaces when I was little. I used to feel safe in them. Then Dad had locked me in a closet when I was eight. For hours. Now small spaces creeped me out.

A voice boomed from the upstairs window. "If you can't respect my rules, get the hell off my property."

I raced to the tree out front where it threw a deep shadow. I couldn't go back to Emily's. There was no room in their tiny house. As for anyone else I could think of, they were only school friends. I couldn't ask for such a big favor. Stay for a few nights or a week? Not a chance.

And what about food? How much money did I even have in the bank? I checked my phone. Dad had turned off the modem. No Wi-Fi. Of course, he'd never let me get a data plan. I'd have to walk the four blocks to the strip mall by the bus stop. Check my balance at an ATM.

As I shuffled away, I had the weirdest feeling. As if the connection to Dad was stretching like an old elastic. It grew thinner, and I got more pissed off, with each step. At the corner I faced the house. The elastic snapped. A rush of anger heated my body. What gave him the right to treat me like this? My voice stayed calm and low as I said, "Screw you, Dad. I'll be eighteen in eighty-seven days. Then you'll never see me again."

I marched away. To hell with him. I'd get a part-time job, rent a room. Finish school on my terms.

At the strip mall I checked my balance at the ATM. Four dollars and eighty-five cents. I hit the machine.