

P A R T O N E

Labor Day

CHAPTER 1

Lil

Aunt Mamie's words are always hard to shake. Her words from their phone conversation the day before sit at the pit of Lil's stomach and haunt her. She cannot keep her mind on her work. All she seems capable of is staring out the window and remembering.

"Just remember what I said about time," her aunt said, as if Lil could forget.

Gripping the telephone to her ear, Lil watched the rain come down in sheets. She'd heard her aunt's opinion about having a child loud and clear. But women were having children later these days, weren't they? She had time as far as she was concerned. She wasn't quite forty yet. And she really didn't see what all this had to do with womanhood, not really.

"Lil, you still there," Aunt Mamie said.

"Yeah," she answered and changed the subject. "It's coming down pretty hard out there, isn't it?"

"At least you made it home in time," Aunt Mamie snapped.

In time for what, Lil wondered, having pushed the Porsche to top speed to cut the three-hour drive from Atlanta to

two and half, but she didn't dare ask for fear that she'd be pulled into an unpleasant conversation about her aunt's day of reckoning, all she seemed to want to talk about these days—and, of course, Lil having a child.

"Listen, Aunt Mamie, I'm really sorry I didn't make it yesterday, but I couldn't miss the crisis meeting. You know that. Barbara would never let me hear the end of it."

"Is what your boss thinks all you care about? There's other things in life. Humph!"

Lil rolled her eyes, glad that her aunt couldn't see her. "Anyhow, speaking of other things, I brought you something pretty." Her aunt was eerily silent. "I won't say what it is, but I will say it's mauve. It's just a little something, but you'll love it, Aunt Mamie. You'll see tomorrow."

Mauve was her aunt's favorite color—surely she would be pleased. But she didn't even respond. Lil couldn't understand why Aunt Mamie was being so stubborn. She'd never been the easiest person to get through to, but normally, she came around. They had been like mother and daughter for nearly thirty years.

Lil's mother died when she was ten, leaving her and her two sisters with their father, a busy high school principal. In the beginning, Bud Lee would tie his necktie with one hand and scramble eggs with the other, simultaneously, like he didn't need help, though his childless sister lived next door. But after a few episodes of burned dinners, bleached-out clothing, and tangled hair, he must have concluded otherwise. Though the girls objected at first to this seemingly hard-hearted woman meddling in their business, Aunt Mamie became their surrogate mother until their father remarried and moved them to Ohio. Lil was twelve then and had no interest whatsoever in moving.

She wanted to stay in Georgia. There, she would always be reminded of times when life was certain, as certain as her

mother's presence. There, she didn't have to deal with cold weather and cold people, like she did in the poky town of Steubenville, Ohio.

But her father refused her pleas and moved her to the place with steep hills and harsh landscapes anyhow. He did, however, agree that she could visit Georgia in the summertime, so every summer she took a Greyhound bus a week after school turned out and endured the long, rambling journey with the help of a good book. She could count on Aunt Mamie to be at the Riverview Station waiting for her.

The older she got, the more she looked forward to the summer, in spite of Georgia's stagnating heat. The truth was, on the Buildings, she didn't have to worry about anybody making her uncomfortable—not anybody, not her peers and not her shady uncle-in-law, Mickey. She hadn't thought of him for years, but she would never forget him.

Anyhow, ten years ago, she had taken a job with Cosmed, making it possible for her and Jerome to move back to southwest Georgia permanently, to be near her aunt and her husband's family. At work, she had a quick rise to the top, but it didn't do her marriage any favors. Jerome strayed. So just over a year ago, she had finally kicked her husband out. Enough was enough.

Now Aunt Mamie lived in a nursing home, not quite the same as her small, cozy house on the Buildings, but God willing, she would return home soon, to pick up where she left off, and Lil would visit her there. Until then, Lil saw her at the nursing home every week. Yesterday had been her first miss in three months. Didn't history count for something?

When lightning flashed across the room, she knew her aunt would hang up soon, whether she had something to say or not. Aunt Mamie couldn't stand talking on the phone or doing anything that required electricity or water during bad weather.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Aunt Mamie. I might even knock off early.”

“Humph, it’ll be all over by then,” her aunt said as the thunder roared.

“What will be all over?” Lil couldn’t help asking.

“The storm,” her aunt said. “Anyhow, just remember what I said about time.” Her aunt hung up. Lil stewed, gazing out the window.

NOW LIL DROPS INTO HER CHAIR and starts working on the crisis strategy. She slips her feet in and out of her high heels. Her eyes feel dry, her eyelids heavy. She has tried every remedy she knows—ibuprofen, a macchiato, sparkling water—to get rid of the veil hanging over her eyes today, but it dangles there along with her thoughts of her aunt. She drops her pencil onto the desk.

When they last saw each other, her aunt had said something to Lil about her womanhood slipping away with time if she didn’t have a child. And she was obviously making the same point again last night.

The phone buzzes, causing her to flinch.

“You have an urgent call on line one,” her secretary says.

She grabs up the phone. “Aunt Mamie?”

“It’s Will,” her aunt’s stepson says in his brittle, scraggly tone. She pushes the hold button and takes a deep breath.

“Jennifer! You didn’t tell me it was Will Owens.”

“You didn’t give me a chance.”

Will has never called her before. She does not trust him. She can’t say why, except he has inserted himself into her aunt’s life in a strange way. Lately, every time she has visited the nursing home, he’s been sitting at the foot of the bed, following her movements with his curious eyes. Thank God, her aunt shoed him off the last time she was there.

“Did he say what he wants?”

“No, but he said it’s urgent. He’s your aunt’s son, right?”

“Stepson.” She returns to the call and shudders at the sound of his heavy breathing. “Hi, Will, what can I do for you?”

He grunts, grating on her nerves. “Momma2 passed in the middle of the night.”

Lil reaches for the stress ball near her computer. Her fingers encircle it and squeeze it. She can feel her chest constricting and the faint pressure of her aunt’s pearl necklace around her neck. She can’t have heard him right. She wants to ask him to repeat himself, but her voice is stuck in her throat.

“You act like you didn’t hear me. I said Momma2 died last night.”

This time her brain processes his words. Momma2 is Aunt Mamie; Aunt Mamie is Momma 2. She feels as if a rug has been pulled from underneath her, though she is sitting. It’s similar to the way she felt when her mother died. Then her father had been there to hold her up, offer his shoulder to lean on and cling to. Now all she has is a plastic telephone with the harsh voice of a stranger delivering the news.

“This can’t be right,” she says, her head spinning. “I mean, I just talked to her last night.”

“So did I,” he says.

By now, the dizziness is so powerful that her head is pounding, as if something were chipping away at her temple. “I don’t understand. She sounded well when I talked to her. What happened?”

“She died,” he says. “A natural death in her sleep.”

She feels the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She props the telephone on her shoulder and intensely rubs the back of her neck.

“I ain’t surprised,” he says. “She tried to prepare us.”

As much as she hates to admit it, he’s right. “I’ll call Foster’s straight away,” she says.

“For what?” he asks. “I’ve already called Baine’s. They’re going to pick up her body later this morning.”

“You’ll just have to call them back.” She nearly drops the phone as she continues to massage her neck, which feels like it is on fire. “The funeral home is Foster’s. It’s in her will.”

“I ain’t calling nobody back. The decision to go with Baines is final.”

“You need to call them back, Will. Tell them.” She raises her voice, feeling her body lift out of the chair at the same time.

“All I need to do is stay black and die.”

“Who put you in charge?” she asks, ignoring his comment. “Why did the doctors call you, anyhow?”

Will stalls, but she knows the answer. The bastard probably told the doctors not to talk to anyone except him. He did that the last time her aunt got sick, but Lil’s father had set him straight, told him to his face not to disrespect Lil ever again. After all, she was the closest thing her aunt had to a child. “Did you tell the doctors not to call me? Is that why they called you?”

“For the record, the doctors didn’t call me,” he says. “Papa called me. He is her husband, remember? Papa—her husband. He the one thought you would appreciate a phone call. But I see that was a mistake. Don’t worry about me trying to do you any more favors.”

“You do me a favor? Give me a break. I have just as much of a right to know as you do, if not more. I’m her closest relative here, or have you forgotten?”

“Papa is her closest relative anywhere, Lil Lee. Get a grip, girl.”

Lil pulls the phone away from her ear again and curses under her breath. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I will be there as soon as I can.”

“For what?”

“You know for what!”

“No, I don’t know. We ain’t changing the funeral home if that’s what you think. And everything else is going to get done with or without you.”

Now Lil wants Will to stay out of the matter altogether. He’s messed things up enough already. In fact, she wants him out of her aunt’s life—out of her death, to be more specific. And that means getting him out of Aunt Mamie’s house. He has been staying there since her aunt and his father moved to the nursing home. “You’ll need to move out of Aunt Mamie’s house as soon as possible.”

“Why?” he says. “It’s my house now.”

“That is a lie!” She hears the firmness in her voice.

“Bullshit,” he says. “Momma2 left the house to me.”

“Aunt Mamie left her house to me. It’s in her will. You must know that.”

Will’s sudden quietness gives her the feeling she has pushed him beyond anger. Then without any warning, his voice erupts in a heated flow. “No, I don’t know that, but I tell you what I do know, bitch. She left the house to me, and I am not moving!” He slams down the phone.

The phone slides from its safe place between her shoulder and neck and falls to the floor. She doesn’t bother to retrieve it, just sits trembling and clutching the pearls around her neck.

THE SENSIBLE PLACE TO GO FOR A COFFEE before a senior management meeting should be the lounge, but Lil can’t face her colleagues. They will be assembled in the tight space, anticipating the worse about the thousand cases against Timeless, Cosmed’s anti-aging cream. Women throughout the world who have used the product religiously for almost ten years are now linking the cream to their skin cancer. The first verdict is expected this morning.