

CHAPTER ONE

Newscaster Ashley Lanovan knew she'd never forget today's date, but she still pulled up her iPhone calendar and typed TERMINATED. In the Notes section, she entered, "Said I was out of touch with my audience. Inferred that was to be expected at my age."

What did that mean? She was only thirty-eight years old.

Pressing the calendar's "Add" button, she tried to swallow back the lump in her throat. Didn't help. The sting in her eyes and uncontrollable quiver in her chin only made things worse.

She was still in good shape. Trim. Fit. A marathon runner. Up on all the latest trends in clothes. Had a makeup artist on staff who worked wonders. Even had a facial and massage every week to keep herself looking younger. She'd opened her mouth to defend herself and her show at the same time a large manila envelope had been slid in front of her.

By one o'clock, after conferring with her personal attorney, she'd accepted the new station owners' severance offer, cleaned out her desk, and headed straight to her loft condo. She'd have already moved to a more modest area if not for the three-year clause in the divorce decree. The one that gave her ex, Bradford, half the sale price if she sold sooner. At least the lucrative-severance agreement from the station would allow her to take a few months to evaluate her future options before looking for a new job.

Feeling nauseous and weak in the knees, she eased onto the closest stool at the kitchen island. "This is not supposed to happen to me."

The newscaster career she'd worked so hard to build had all been shattered in less than three hours. She picked up the manila envelope holding the agreement she'd been given. Shook it with a vengeance. Then curled it into a cylinder shape and pounded the top of the counter.

Knowing she might as well let her emotions have their way, she cried and cursed and, finally, calmed. With everything out of her system, there was nothing left but a giant hole.

Casually, she flipped the calendar to the next day's schedule. *Visit Dot and Lloyd Gregory, Nature's Crossing, Missouri.*

"Oh my gosh. I've been so busy at work, I completely forgot." Intent on canceling the trip, she scrolled to Dot's phone number. Then remembered how excited they'd been for her to visit. She blew out a sigh. "Come to think of it, I was looking forward to getting away, too."

She tucked the phone into her pocket. Might as well go since she had nothing else to do.

Tomorrow should be better. Maybe not better, but at least different. A different place. Different people. She needed this time away. Time to think about her future and try to reconnect with who she'd been before marrying Bradford.

Early the next morning, she made a list of everything needing attention, and by mid-afternoon, she was headed south in the general direction of Springfield, Missouri. Of course, she was supposed to turn off about an hour before then. She was confident her GPS would steer her onto the correct exit for the road leading to Nature's Crossing.

Secretly, Ashley hoped the Gregorys' descriptions hadn't been inflated. Back when she'd first interviewed them for one of her special event shows, Lloyd had talked mostly about their house. Dot raved about the ladies of the community, the fun monthly get-togethers, and the joy she felt just sitting on her deck in the evening. They might be as old as her parents, but they were as dear to her as her two forever friends from college, Tracie and Linda.

Cruise control set, all she had to do was focus on the road ahead. Truth be told, she was longing for a little laid-back friendliness on this trip. She wasn't sure what that even meant anymore. It had been a long time since she could just be herself.

Being past the rumble of city traffic, she opened the sunroof. The unseasonably warm fall wind blew inside, teased her hair. Felt good.

The memory of her and Bradford driving a rental convertible through Napa Valley on their honeymoon flitted across her thoughts. Nope...enough of that.

Besides, if she ever let herself be seriously involved with another man, he'd be the kind who worked nine-to-five. Home by six. Then told her everything about his day and allowed her to share hers in return. No business trips. No fancy boats. No fast cars. And no secrets of any kind.

She flipped on the radio and let herself enjoy the passing scenery. Every time a slow song came on, she flipped to another station. Upbeat rhythms, that's what she needed. Something to make the miles disappear.

An hour into the drive, her phone rang with Dot Gregory's caller ID.

"Hello," Ashley said. "I should be there in just a couple more hours."

"That's wonderful. Lloyd and I are so glad you've finally taken us up on a visit."

"Me, too. The past few days have been hectic, to say the least. I'll fill you in once I arrive."

"That's why we're calling." Dot paused. "Here, let me put you on speakerphone."

"What's wrong, Dot? What's going on?"

"We just got a phone call from Lloyd's brother in St. Louis. His mother's been rushed to the hospital. Fell on the steps, and well..." A slight tremble in her mile-a-minute words said she was worried. "Anyhow, we need to head that way for a few days."

"You do whatever you need to do. I fully understand." Ashley's mind buzzed with what she should do next. Where she should go. "Don't worry about me, I'll just head on down to Branson and Table Rock Lake for a few days."

"You'll do no such thing," Lloyd chimed in. "We've already got everything lined up for you to stop at Red's Corner Market and stay with the owners, Janie and Patrick Horton. They're transplants from the East Coast. Been here almost a year. Nice people."

"I can't do that," Ashley said.

"Why not?"

“Because...” She tried to think of a comeback. A way around the situation. Nothing came to mind. Absolutely nothing.

Dot gently sighed. “If you’d rather, you can come on to our house. We’ll just leave the key under the flowerpot. But...well...”

“Truth is, I’ve been looking forward to showing you around the place. Giving you all the highlights of what we’ve done. You know I bragged a lot on that show of yours...” Lloyd’s tone held a bit of pride coupled with wanting to see if she’d feel the same way about the place they loved. “Now I’d like to see your first reaction in person. Understand?”

Ashley completely understood. That’s how she always felt when her family and friends paid a visit. Always wanting to make sure everything was perfect. Needing their reaction to confirm she’d succeeded.

“Okay, you two have convinced me. Look out, Red’s Corner Market. Here I come.”

“Great. I’ll text you their photo,” Dot said. “You can’t help but recognize Patrick. He always wears a red baseball cap.”

They all talked a few minutes more, then hung up so the Gregorlys could head to St. Louis. Ashley laughed to herself. The three of them would be friends passing in the night on Interstate 44.

She took the next exit that listed places for food and gas. Time to refuel both herself and the car. Seeing that she’d gotten a late start, a late lunch sounded like what she needed. She’d given up on arriving before dark, so this would make a good break from the highway. After eating and browsing around the restaurant’s gift shop, she felt refreshed as she walked back to the SUV. A good long shower was going to be in order once she arrived.

After a couple more hours of driving, the GPS instructed her to exit the highway. She was met with a road detour and steady rain. Darkening clouds and strong wind greeted her as well.

Slowing and trying to stay between the lines on the winding two-lane road to Nature’s

Crossing, she couldn't calculate how far she'd driven since the turnoff. Now a full-blown storm pulsated harder with every second. Before the detour, Ashley knew exactly where she was and how to get where she was going. Now she wasn't so sure about the GPS.

"Where the heck am I? It can't be this hard to find Nature's Crossing." The Jeep didn't answer. But her fear adrenaline answered with a swift kick. Then, out of nowhere, a sign reading "Welcome to Nature's Crossing" greeted her from the side of the road.

A little way farther, Ashley turned into a gravel parking lot at the crossroads and stopped in front of a small grocery. The area was covered in what she'd call a foggy London night. In fact, nothing showed this to be Red's Corner Market. Almost looked like it was closed.

Parking a spot away from a black BMW SUV, she flipped the visor down, opened the mirror, and wiped away any sign of smudged mascara beneath her eyes. A quick swipe of lipstick and a finger-comb of her hair completed her arrival. If this was the wrong place, she could at least get directions. If this was the right place, she wanted to look halfway presentable. Nothing like a good first impression.

She checked the photo Dot had texted her, then opened the driver's side door and stepped out. Immediately, her feet sank in a puddle of muddy water. A cold stream of wetness oozed into her loafers, surrounded her toes, and drenched her designer socks. The hem of her jeans glided on top of the puddle like a skater on slick ice, soaking the liquid upward.

"Well, that sucks." She stepped out of the puddle, shaking each foot as if that would get rid of the mess and make everything better. Not happening.

She slammed the SUV door closed and trudged to the front door of the grocery, never sure if the next step would be solid or maybe a drop off to oblivion. At least the holes weren't as deep as the city potholes she'd encountered last winter.

One dimmer-than-dim light lit the concrete pad in front of the entrance. A quaint doormat of orange and brown leaves, plus a prickly wipe-mud-here porcupine smiled up from the left.

Happiness whirred to life, along with contentment and calm. Even with all the mud and yuck and potholes, she still hoped this was the right place.

A soft ding sounded when Ashley pushed open the front door. Unsure if the lights were out or they used low-wattage bulbs, she ventured cautiously. "Hello? Anyone here?"

"Come on in." From the shadows, a lady with long hair called out. "Storm zapped the lights right near the end. They should be back on any second. The generator kicked in, so we've got a little power. That's why it's so dim in here."

Tentative, Ashley moved forward until something jumped on her shoulder. She spun with surprise. The squish and bunch of wet socks in her shoes threw her off balance, and her ankle turned. With all stability lost, she grabbed in the dimness at what appeared to be one of the store's shelves. It gave way. Amid the sound of crashing cans, she fell to the floor as every light in the place popped on brighter than bright.

A man in a dark leather jacket with his back to her spun around, shoving one hand in his pocket as he held the other at arm's length in front of him like a shield. Quickly, his intense stare zeroed in on her. A second later, he blew out a cheek-puffing sigh and raised his hands in a what-happened gesture.

She could only imagine how she looked sprawled on the floor.

"What fell, Janie?" an unseen man shouted from somewhere.

"My gosh. Are you okay?" Janie darted toward her, tiptoeing through the maze of cans.

Stunned, Ashley sat dumbfounded on the floor. Elbows scraped, legs tangled, hair tousled, and any chance of making a good first impression completely lost. Besides the cans on the floor, there was also what had probably been samples of candy corn and peanuts scattered about. Frustrated, she tried to push herself up. But her hand slid across honey dripping from the lid of a crushed SueBee honey bear container and she plopped back on the floor.

"Ouch." Gingerly, she tilted to the side, then grabbed a can she'd landed on, from

beneath her bottom. “That’s going to leave a bruise.”

Fighting to hold back a laugh, the man in the leather jacket stepped closer and held out his hands. “Here, let’s get you up.”

His six-foot frame looked custom made for his broad shoulders, and the smooth sound of his voice reassured her she’d be okay. The quiet power of his confident swagger, coupled with his sexy stubble, made her wish there was more to this encounter than her embarrassing fall.

Pausing, he slightly squinted, then smiled. “Ashley? Ashley Lanovan?”

Laying her hands in his, her insides twitched at his warmth. “Mark? Mark Garmund?”