

## Chapter 4

Penelope Weatherspoon pulls her sporty red Jaguar into the Ringo's driveway. The curtains are drawn and the house is shut up tight but she knows Dahlia is in there. She hasn't heard a peep from her in over a week and worried, today she did something she normally would never do. She got in her car and came over unannounced.

Dahlia hears the front door bell. Peeking out from the shuttered bedroom window she sees her best friend below on the steps. The breeze off Lake Michigan several blocks to the east picks up the hem of Penelope's floral print sundress and swirls it all around her.

Dahlia's not surprised to see her. Penelope wouldn't let her go MIA for too long. But she's going to be nosy and start asking questions and there's too much Dahlia isn't ready to talk about. Especially not with her hot-tempered, let's-go-kick-some-ass best friend.

Penelope looks up suddenly. She shades her eyes and spots Dahlia in the window. She shouts, "I see you Dee! Let me in!"

Dahlia looks in the mirror over her dressing table and shutters at the sight of herself. She could take a moment to change out of the coffee-stained housecoat she's worn the last three days and nights. But why? She can't do anything about the bags under her eyes or the weary lines that seem to have sprung up in her face overnight.

She takes her time descending the stairs as Penelope rings the bell again. Slowly unlocking the heavy front door, Dahlia opens it just a few inches and pokes her head out.

"Hey Penny," she said. "You should've called."

"I did. I've been calling you for a whole week. Why aren't you answering the phone?"

Dahlia shrugs. "I just don't want to talk. I've been sleeping a lot. I'm so tired."

Penelope steps closer to the door. "Aren't you going to let me in?"

Dahlia shakes her head. "The house is a mess, Penny. And I'm a mess. This isn't a good time—"

Penelope shoves against the door and forces her way inside. “Girl please,” she says. “This is *me*.”

Taking in as much as she can on her way to the kitchen, Penelope looks to her right into the den where the desk is messy and piled up with paper, empty wine glasses and Deer Park plastic water bottles. She looks left into the living room, perpetually untouched, the black lacquered baby grand piano sitting undisturbed, just a platform mostly for framed family pictures. She continues down the great hall passed the dining room with its’ dark blue walls, elaborate chandelier and custom wall shelving, under-lit to highlight the ceramic pottery and sculptured pieces collected during their travels. In the kitchen, renovated six years ago, french blue cabinetry lend a coolness against dark granite countertops and stainless steel appliances.

On the granite-topped island Penelope empties the contents of the Burger King bag she carries, stopping on the way over for Whoppers, fries, and two large chocolate shakes. BK has always been Dahlia’s favorite fast food place.

“I know you’re not eating,” Penelope said. “And you look like shit. Are you feeling okay?”

“I feel the way I look,” Dahlia bites into the Whopper and in record time she devours half the sandwich. She was hungry and didn’t know it.

Penelope pretends not to notice her friend’s famished state. “So how are the kids?” she asks. “Is Maya back in Cali?”

Dahlia wipes her mouth and nods. “Yeah. And RJ is home in Atlanta.”

“How are they doing?”

“Okay I guess. Adjusting. I talk to them both almost every night.”

“Have you heard from my goddaughter at all?”

Dahlia looks at Penelope and rolls her eyes. “You know I haven’t.”

Penelope shrugs. “Well I thought things might be different between you now. With Richard gone. Davey’s the only one here.”

“Richard was the one to keep up with her,” Dahlia said. “I just can’t. I’m tired of being blamed for all of her mistakes and bad choices.”

Penelope nods. “I hear you. What have you got to put in these milkshakes?”

As Dahlia heads to the wet bar off the dining room Penelope looks around the kitchen and into the family room. Things appear as neat and tidy as ever. Dahlia keeps an impeccable house. But it's strangely silent. There's no music playing and the television is dark. It feels spooky in the middle of the day. Penelope can only imagine what it's like at night and wonders how Dahlia can bear to be here all alone. She would be terrified.

Dahlia returns with a fifth of scotch, a fifth of bourbon and a bottle of Kahlua liqueur.

"Take your pick," she says.

Penelope grabs her hands. "Listen. I threw some clothes in a bag. It's out in the car. I can stay here with you for a few days if you want."

"No," Dahlia pulls away from her. "No, no, no. It's okay. Really."

"Are you sure? Maybe it isn't a good idea—"

"It's okay. I'll be fine."

"Alright," Penelope pours a portion of the chocolate shake into a glass and adds a few splashes of Kahlua. She takes a sip through her straw and nods. Just right for one o'clock in the afternoon.

She looks at Dahlia. "So what are you gonna do, girlie? You selling this joint? Or staying put?"

"Are you insane?" Dahlia shakes her head. "I'll never sell my house."

"Girl. You could get a veritable fortune for this villa!"

"I know that. But I'm not selling my house, Penny. Hell no."

Penelope raises her hands in surrender. "It's just a thought, Dee."

They sit quietly, eating French fries, sipping their doctored shakes, and watching the squirrels and birds through the glass doors leading out to the bricked terrace. Dahlia hopes that Penelope takes her silence as a hint and leaves soon. She just doesn't feel like being around anyone. But Penelope seems content to sit right there with her and toss out mundane thoughts—*"how about Lisa Bonet and Jason Momoa?"*—just to hang around. Dahlia feels how hard she's trying and her resolve not to talk begins to melt. After all, Penelope loves her.

"You think you might feel like going to the Jazz Festival in Detroit next weekend?" Penelope asks. "We can drive up on Friday and be back Sunday night."

Dahlia shakes her head. "I'm not up for anything like that," she said.

Penelope sighs. She knew that wasn't going to happen even before she got all the words out. Adding another splash of Kahlua, she stirs her drink and feels Dahlia's eyes on her. Looking over at her friend, she cocks her head suspiciously.

"What?"

Dahlia covers her mouth with her hands, as if trying to hold the words in but can't. "I've got something to tell you," she says finally. "But you've got to promise me. You won't lose your fucking mind. And you won't tell a soul."

Penelope peers over her big horn-rimmed glasses. "Okay."