

SHE'S NOT THERE

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ZAFFRE



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For Hayden and Skylar

ONE

The Present

It was barely eight A.M. and the phone was already ringing. Caroline could make out the distinctive three-ring chime that signaled a long-distance call even with the bathroom door closed and the shower running. She chose to ignore it, deciding it was probably a telemarketer or the press. Either alternative was odious, but given a choice between the two, Caroline would have opted for the telemarketer. Telemarketers were only after your money. The press wanted your blood.

Even after all this time.

Fifteen years tomorrow.

She buried her head under the shower's hot spray, the lather of her shampoo oozing across her closed eyes and down her cheeks. That couldn't be right. How could fifteen years of seemingly endless days and sleepless nights have passed by so quickly? At the very least, she would have thought public curiosity in her would have waned by now. But if anything, such interest had actually increased with each successive anniversary. Reporters had been calling for weeks, some

from as far away as Australia and Japan: What was her life like now? Were there any new leads? Any new men? Another suicide, perhaps? Did she still harbor hopes of seeing her daughter again? Did the police still consider her a suspect in the child's disappearance?

Except Samantha would no longer be a child. Barely two when she'd vanished without a trace from her crib at an upscale Mexican resort while, according to the press, *her parents cavorted with friends at a nearby restaurant*, her daughter would be seventeen now.

Assuming she was still alive.

So, in answer to some of their questions: there were no new leads; she would never give up hope; she no longer gave a hoot what the police thought about her; and her life would be a lot better if the vultures of the press would leave her the hell alone.

Her head bowed, water dripping from her nose and chin, Caroline reached up to turn off the shower taps, satisfied that the phone's intrusive ringing had finally stopped. She understood it was just a temporary respite. Whoever had called would call again. They always did.

Stepping onto the heated white-and-gray marble floor of her bathroom, she wrapped herself in her white terry-cloth bathrobe and swiped at the layer of steam that coated the large mirror above the double sink with the palm of her hand. A forty-six-year-old woman with wet brown hair and tired green eyes stared back at her, a far cry from the "beautiful" and "reserved" young woman "with haunted eyes" that the newspapers had described at the time of Samantha's disappearance, somehow managing to make the words "beautiful" and "reserved" ugly and accusatory. Around the ten-year mark, "beautiful" became "striking" and "reserved" morphed into "remote." And last year, a reporter had demoted her further, referring to her as "a still attractive middle-aged woman." Damning her with faint praise, but damning her nonetheless.

Whatever. She was used to it.

Caroline rubbed her scalp vigorously with a thick white towel, watching her new haircut fall limply around her chin. The hair-

dresser had promised the bob would result in a more youthful appearance, but he hadn't reckoned on the stubborn fineness of Caroline's hair, which refused to do anything other than just lie there. Caroline took a deep breath, deciding that tomorrow's press clippings would probably describe her as "the *once* attractive mother of missing child Samantha Shipley."

Did it even matter what she looked like? Would she be any less guilty—of neglect, of bad parenting, of *murder*—in the court of public opinion because she was less attractive than she'd been at the time of her daughter's disappearance? Then, she'd been excoriated in the press for everything from the cut of her cheekbones to the shortness of her skirts, from the shine of her shoulder-length hair to the sheen of her lipstick. Even the sincerity of her tears had been called into question, one tabloid commenting that at one press conference, her mascara had remained "curiously undisturbed."

Her husband had received only a tiny fraction of the vitriol that had come Caroline's way. As handsome as Hunter was, there was a blandness about his good looks that made him less of a target. While Caroline's natural shyness had the unfortunate tendency to come across as aloof, Hunter's more outgoing personality had made him seem both accessible and open. He was portrayed as a father "barely holding himself together" while "clinging tight to his older daughter, Michelle, a cherub-cheeked child of five," his wife standing "ramrod straight beside them, separate and apart."

No mention of the fact that it had been at Hunter's insistence that they went out that night, even after the babysitter they'd hired failed to show. No mention of the fact that he'd left Mexico to return to his law practice in San Diego barely a week after Samantha's disappearance. No mention of the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back," the final betrayal that had doomed their marriage once and for all.

Except that had been her fault, too.

"Everything, my fault," Caroline said to her reflection, withdrawing her hair dryer from the drawer underneath the sink and point-

ing it at her head like a gun. She flicked the “on” switch, shooting a blast of hot air directly into her ear.

The ringing started almost immediately. It took a second for Caroline to realize it was the phone. One long ring, followed by two shorter ones, indicating another long-distance call. “Go away,” she shouted toward her bedroom. Then, “Oh, hell.” She turned off the hair dryer and marched into the bedroom, grabbing the phone from the nightstand beside her king-size bed, careful not to so much as glance at the morning newspaper lying atop the crumpled sheets. “Hello.”

Silence, followed by a busy signal.

“Great.” She returned the phone to its charger, her eyes pulled inexorably toward the newspaper’s front page. There, next to the yearly rehashing of every awful fact and sordid innuendo that had been printed over the last fifteen years, the rewording of every salacious detail—“Adultery!” “Suicide!” “True Confessions!”—was a large photograph of two-year-old Samantha, smiling up at her from beside an artist’s sketch of what her daughter might look like today. Similar sketches had been plastered all over the Internet for the past two weeks. Caroline sank to the bed, her legs too weak to sustain her. The phone rang again and she lunged for it, picking it up before it could complete its first ring. “Please. Just leave me alone,” she said.

“I take it you’ve seen the morning paper,” the familiar voice said. The voice belonged to Peggy Banack, director of the Marigold Hospice, a twelve-bed facility for the terminally ill in the heart of San Diego. Peggy had been Caroline’s best friend for the last thirty years and her only friend for the last fifteen.

“Hard to miss.” Again Caroline struggled not to look at the front page.

“Asshole writes the same thing every year. Are you all right?”

Caroline shrugged. “I guess. Where are you?”

“At work.”

Of course, Caroline thought. Where else would Peggy be at eight o’clock on a Monday morning?

"Listen, I hate to bother you with this," Peggy said, "especially now . . ."

"What is it?"

"I was just wondering . . . Has Michelle left yet?"

"Michelle's at her father's. She's been staying there a lot since the baby . . ." Caroline took a deep breath to keep from gagging. "Was she supposed to work this morning?"

"She's probably on her way."

Caroline nodded, punching in the numbers for Michelle's cell as soon as she said goodbye to Peggy. Surely even someone as head-strong and self-destructive as her daughter wouldn't be foolish enough to skip out on her court-mandated community service.

"Hi, it's Micki," her daughter's voice announced in tones so breathy that Caroline barely recognized her. "Leave a message."

Not even a "please," Caroline thought, bristling at the nickname "Micki" and wondering if that was the reason her daughter had taken to using it. "Michelle," she said pointedly, "Peggy just called. Apparently you're late for your shift. Where are you?" She hung up the phone, took a deep breath, then called Hunter's landline, determined not to be negative. Maybe her daughter's alarm clock had failed to go off. Maybe her bus was running late. Maybe she was, right this minute, walking through the doors of the hospice.

Or maybe she's sleeping off another late night of partying, intruded the uninvited voice of reality. Maybe she'd had another few too many before getting behind the wheel of her car, ignoring both her recent arrest for driving under the influence and the suspension of her license. Maybe the police had pulled her over, effectively scuttling the deal her father had worked out with the assistant district attorney, a deal that allowed her to avoid jail time in exchange for several hundred hours of community service. "Damn it, Michelle. Can you really be that irresponsible?" Caroline realized only as she spoke that someone was already on the other end of the line.

"Caroline?" her ex-husband asked.

"Hunter," Caroline said in return, his name teetering uncomfortably on her tongue. "How are you?"

"Okay. You?"

"Hanging in."

"Have you seen the morning paper?"

"Yes."

"Not an easy time of year," he said, always good at stating the obvious.

"No." *Although you seem to be managing rather well*, she thought. A young wife, a two-year-old son, a new baby girl to replace the one he'd lost. "Is Michelle there?"

"I believe she's helping Diana with the baby."

As if on cue, an infant's frantic wails raced toward the receiver. Caroline closed her eyes, trying not to picture this latest addition to Hunter's family. "Peggy called. Michelle's supposed to be at the hospice."

"Really? I thought she was going in this afternoon. Hold on a minute. Micki," Hunter called loudly. "It's probably just a misunderstanding."

"Probably," Caroline repeated without conviction.

"What did you think of the sketch?" Hunter surprised her by asking.

Caroline felt her breath freeze in her lungs, amazed that her former husband could manage to sound so matter-of-fact, as if he was referring to an abstract work of art and not a picture of their missing child. "I—It's—" she stammered, her eyes darting between the photograph and the drawing. "They've given her your jaw."

Hunter made a sound halfway between a laugh and a sigh. "That's funny. Diana said the same thing."

Oh, God, Caroline thought.

"What's up?" Caroline heard Michelle ask her father.

"It's your mother," Hunter said, his voice retreating as he handed Michelle the phone. "Apparently you're supposed to be at the hospice."

"I'm going in this afternoon," Michelle told her mother, the breathy whisper of her voice mail nowhere in evidence.

"You can't just go in whenever you feel like it," Caroline said.

"Really? That's not how it works?"

"Michelle . . ."

"Relax, Mother. I switched shifts with another girl."

"Well, she hasn't shown up."

"She will. Don't worry. Anything else?"

"You should probably call Peggy, let her know . . ."

"Thanks. I'll do that."

"Michelle . . ."

"Yeah?"

"I was thinking, maybe we could go out for dinner tonight . . ."

"Can't. Have plans with my friend Emma."

"Emma?" Caroline repeated, trying to disguise her disappointment. "Have I met her?"

"Only half a dozen times."

"Really? I don't remember . . ."

"That's because you never remember any of my friends."

"That's not true."

"Sure it is. Anyway, gotta go. Talk to you later."

The line went dead in Caroline's hand. She dropped the phone to the bed, watching it disappear amid the rumpled white sheets. "Damn it." Was Michelle right? Her daughter had always had a lot of friends, although none of them seemed to stick around for very long, making it hard to keep track. Something else to feel guilty about.

She checked the clock, noting it was closing in on eight-thirty. She had to be in school in half an hour. She pushed herself to her feet, already exhausted by the thought of twenty-three less-than-eager students slouched behind their desks, glazed eyes staring up at her, their dislike for the subject obvious and unequivocal.

How could they not love math? she wondered. There was something so glorious, so pure, so true, about mathematics. Her father

had been a math teacher and had passed his passion for it down to her. It was about more than just solving puzzles and finding solutions. In an irrational world so full of ambiguity, so fraught with happenstance, she'd basked in the absoluteness of it, taken comfort in the fact there was no room for either interpretation or equivocation, that there was always only *one* right answer and its rightness could be *proved*. Another sign, Michelle would undoubtedly argue, and had on more than one occasion, that mathematics bore absolutely no relationship to real life.

Caroline returned to the bathroom and finished drying her hair. Then she put on the navy skirt and white silk blouse she'd laid out the night before. "Don't you have anything else to wear?" Michelle had once asked.

"Don't you?" Caroline had countered, indicating her daughter's standard uniform of skinny jeans and oversized T-shirt. Like many young women of her generation, Michelle was an ardent follower of the latest trends in fashion, fad diets, and exercise regimens. "Everything in moderation" was a concept as foreign to her as algebra.

"Okay," Caroline said to herself. "Time to get moving." She was already running late. She said a silent prayer there'd still be a pot of coffee brewing in the staff room. She could tolerate a lot of things, but a day without coffee wasn't one of them.

The phone started ringing just as she was heading out the door. The first ring was immediately followed by two shorter ones, indicating yet another long-distance call, likely the same person who'd phoned earlier. "Don't answer it," Caroline said, this time out loud. But she was already walking toward the kitchen, pulled toward the sound as if by a magnet. She picked the phone up in the middle of its fourth ring. "Hello?"

Silence.

"Hello?"

The sound of breathing.

Great, Caroline thought. *Just what I need—an obscene caller. Long*

distance, no less. "I'm going to hang up now," she announced, lowering the phone.

"Wait."

She brought the phone back to her ear. "Did you say something?"

Silence.

"Okay. I'm hanging up now."

"No. Please."

The voice belonged to a young girl, possibly a child. There was an urgency to her voice, something at once strange and familiar that made Caroline stay on the line. "Who is this?"

Another silence.

"Look. I really don't have time for this . . ."

"Is this the home of Caroline Shipley?" the girl asked.

"Yes."

"Are you Caroline Shipley?" she continued.

"Are you a reporter?"

"No."

"Who are you?"

"Are you Caroline Shipley?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

Yet another silence.

"Who is this?" Caroline repeated. "What do you want? I'm hanging up . . ."

"My name is Lili."

Caroline mentally raced through the class lists of all her students, past and present, trying to match a face to the name, but she came up empty. Could this be another one of Michelle's friends she didn't remember? "What can I do for you, Lili?"

"I probably shouldn't be calling . . ."

"What do you want?" Why was she still on the phone, for heaven's sake? Why didn't she just hang up?

"I think . . ."

"Yes?"

"I've been looking at the sketches on the Internet." Lili paused. "You know . . . of your daughter."

Caroline lowered her head. *Here it comes*, she thought. It happened every year at this time. Five years ago, a man had called from Florida, claiming his new neighbor's daughter bore a suspicious resemblance to recent sketches of Samantha. Caroline immediately took off for Miami, missing all three of Michelle's performances in her high school's production of *Oliver!*, only to have her hopes dashed when the man's suspicions proved groundless. The following year a woman reported seeing Samantha waiting in line at a Starbucks in Tacoma, Washington. Another wasted trip followed. And now, with the widespread release of the most recent sketches in the papers, on the Internet . . . "Lili . . .," she began.

"That's just it," the girl interrupted as once again Caroline felt her knees go weak and her breath turn to ice in her chest. "I don't think Lili is my name." Another silence. "I think my real name is Samantha. I think I'm your daughter."

TWO

Fifteen Years Ago

“Are we there yet?” Michelle whined from the backseat of the late-model white Lexus. She tugged on her seat belt and kicked at Caroline’s back.

“Please don’t do that, sweetheart,” Caroline said, swiveling around in the passenger seat to face her scowling five-year-old. Next to Michelle, Samantha slept peacefully in her toddler seat. And there in a nutshell, Caroline thought, eyes darting between her children, was the difference between her two girls: one daughter a fidgety little mouthful of childish clichés; the other a perfect little Sleeping Beauty. Caroline had always disdained parents who favored one child over another—her own mother being a prime example—but she had to admit that it was occasionally harder than she’d anticipated not to do just that.

“I’m tired of driving.”

“I know, sweetheart. We’ll be there soon.”

“I want some juice.”

Caroline glanced toward the driver's seat. Her husband shook his head without taking his eyes off the road. Caroline's shoulders slumped. She understood Hunter didn't want to risk getting juice all over the buttery leather seats of his new car, but she also knew it meant another twenty minutes of pleading and kicking. "We'll be there soon, sweetie. You can have some juice then."

"I want it now."

"Look at the ocean," Hunter said in an effort to distract her. "Look how beautiful—"

"I don't want to look at the ocean. I want some juice." Michelle's voice was getting louder. Caroline knew the child was working her way up to a full-blown tantrum, that it was only a matter of seconds before there would be an eruption of seismic proportions. Again she glanced at Hunter.

"If we give in now . . .," he whispered.

Caroline let out a deep breath and stared out the side window, knowing he was right and deciding to concentrate on the spectacular, unblemished view of the ocean running alongside the well-maintained toll road. Perhaps Michelle would follow her example.

"I'm thirsty," Michelle said, quickly scuttling that hope. Then a full octave higher, her voice trembling with the threat of tears. "I'm thirsty."

"Hang on, sweetie," Hunter said. "We'll be there soon."

There was Rosarito Beach and the Grand Laguna Resort, a luxury hotel and spa complex that Hunter had selected as the perfect place to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. Located between the Pacific Ocean and the foothills of Baja's Gold Coast, Rosarito was only thirty miles south of San Diego, and its proximity to the U.S.-Mexican border made it a popular tourist spot for Southern Californians, providing them with the opportunity to visit a foreign country and experience a different culture without the inconvenience of having to travel very far.

Seventeen miles of stunning ocean road led into the main urban district of Rosarito, a four-mile stretch of beach consisting of condos,

gift shops, restaurants, and fabulous resort hotels. They'd selected the Grand Laguna over the others because not only did its website promise romantic settings and breathtaking sunsets but it also boasted of a daily afternoon program for children under the age of ten. The hotel also provided an evening babysitting service, which meant that Caroline and Hunter could have some much-needed time for themselves. Her husband had been increasingly distracted of late, mainly because the law firm in which he'd been hoping to be named partner had recently merged with another firm, throwing his status into limbo. Caroline knew this was another reason that Hunter had been so keen on Rosarito. If work summoned, he could be back at his desk in a matter of hours.

The trip had started out well enough. Samantha had fallen asleep almost as soon as the car was out of the driveway, and Michelle had seemed content playing with her new Wonder Woman doll. Unfortunately, fifteen minutes into the drive, an ill-advised attempt to get the doll to fly had sent Wonder Woman crashing to the floor, where she disappeared under the front seat, unleashing Michelle's first flood of tears. Then heavy traffic along Interstate Highway 5 coupled with a delay at the San Ysidro border crossing at Tijuana had stretched the thirty-mile drive into a ninety-minute ordeal. Caroline wondered if she should have listened to Hunter when he'd suggested leaving the girls at home for the week. But that would have meant entrusting them to her mother, something Caroline would never do. Her mother had made enough of a mess with her own children.

Caroline pictured her brother, Steve, two years her junior, a handsome man with sandy brown hair, a killer smile, and gold-flecked hazel eyes. His easy charm had made him their mother's pride and joy. But what he had in charm, he lacked in ambition, and he'd spent most of his adult life shedding careers as regularly as a snake sheds its skin. A year ago he'd gone into real estate, and much to the surprise of everyone—except, of course, his mother, in whose eyes he could do no wrong—he seemed to be prospering. Maybe he'd finally found his niche.

"I'm thirrrrrsty," Michelle wailed, the word threatening to stretch into eternity.

"Sweetheart, please. You'll wake the baby."

"She's not a baby."

"She's asleep . . ."

"And I'm thirsty."

"Okay, that's enough," Hunter snapped, spinning around in his seat and waving his index finger in the air. "Listen to your mother and stop this nonsense right now."

Michelle's response was immediate and complete hysteria. Her shrieks filled the car, bouncing off the tinted windows and pummeling Samantha awake. Now two children were screaming.

"Still think kids were a good idea?" Hunter asked with a smile. "Maybe your brother is right after all."

Caroline said nothing. Hunter was well aware that her brother and his wife, Becky, had been trying unsuccessfully for years to have a family of their own. Their failure to do so was a constant source of tension between them, a situation Caroline's mother took great pains to exploit, chiding Becky regularly for not providing her with more grandchildren and causing unnecessary friction between her daughter and her daughter-in-law.

Divide and conquer, Caroline thought. Words her mother lived by. What else was new?

"How much longer?" Caroline asked.

"We should be there soon. Hang in there."

Caroline leaned her head against the side window and closed her eyes, her daughters' cries piercing her ears like overlapping sirens. Not exactly an auspicious start to their vacation. *Oh, well*, she decided. *It can only get better.*

They were there, waiting.

At first Caroline thought that she must have fallen asleep in the few minutes between closing her eyes and their arrival at the mag-

nificent Grand Laguna Resort Hotel, and that she had to be dreaming. But after sitting up straight and lowering her window she realized that what she was seeing was, in fact, very real, that there were indeed six people standing outside the main entrance of the hotel, waving in her direction and laughing, their familiar faces looking pleased and self-satisfied. "What's going on?" she asked Hunter as a valet in a crisp white-and-gold uniform stepped forward to open her car door.

"Welcome to the Grand Laguna," the valet said, his words all but disappearing into the chorus of "Surprise!" that was rushing toward her.

"Happy anniversary," said Hunter, the smile on his lips spreading to his soft brown eyes. He bent forward to kiss her.

"I don't understand."

He kissed her again. "I thought you might enjoy having some family and friends along to celebrate our anniversary."

"Hey, you two," Caroline's brother, Steve, called out. "Get a room, for God's sake."

"Good idea," Hunter said, laughing as he exited the car. He was quickly surrounded by the three waiting men.

"Isn't this the most absolutely beautiful place you've ever seen?" Steve's wife, Becky, asked, rushing forward.

Caroline pushed herself out of the car's front seat, taking a quick look at the ten-story coral-colored horseshoe-shaped building framed by blue skies and palm trees. She had to admit it was every bit as magnificent as she'd been led to expect.

"You're looking a little overwhelmed," her friend Peggy whispered, coming up beside her and drawing her into an embrace, her curly brown hair tickling the side of Caroline's nose. At approximately five feet six inches and one hundred and twenty-five pounds, the two women were almost the same height and weight and fit together comfortably.

"I'm flabbergasted." Caroline turned toward her husband. "How did you manage this?"

"Blame your brother. It was his idea."

"Couldn't very well let you celebrate ten years of wedded bliss without us," Steve said with a laugh.

Caroline looked from one smiling face to the next: her brother and his wife; old friends Peggy and Fletcher Banack; new friends Jerrod and Rain Bolton. The truth was she'd been looking forward to having her husband all to herself for the week. It had been a long time since they'd had the luxury of intimate dinners for two, time to kick back and relax, to reconnect with each other. But the welcoming committee's collective delight was as contagious as it was obvious, and Caroline's ambivalence quickly melted away.

"Mommy! Mommy! Get me out of here."

"Coming, sweetheart."

"Allow me." Peggy opened the back door and lifted Michelle out of the car. "Whoa. You're getting to be such a big girl."

"I want some juice," Michelle said.

Becky had already scooted around to the other side of the car and removed Samantha from her car seat, and was cradling the two-year-old in her arms while smothering the top of her head with kisses. "Hi, there, beautiful girl. How's my little angel?"

"She's not beautiful and she's not an angel," Michelle protested.

Samantha stretched her arms toward her mother.

"Oh, can't your auntie hold you for a few minutes?" Reluctantly, Becky handed Samantha over to her mother, then stepped back, tucking her short dark hair behind her ears. Caroline thought she looked tired behind her smile, and wondered if she and Steve had been fighting again.

"What took you so long?" Rain asked as the valet removed the luggage from the trunk. "We've been waiting over an hour. I'm positively melting in this heat."

"Well, melting or not, you look great."

Rain smiled, a wide smile that revealed just the right number of perfect teeth, and tossed her wavy honey-blond hair over the left shoulder of her floral print caftan. Her eyes were blue, her lipstick

red, her bare arms tanned and toned. A former model, she would have been beautiful even without the ton of makeup she always wore. Caroline marveled, not for the first time, that Rain had chosen a man as mousy as Jerrod for a mate. Shorter than his wife by several inches and looking a decade older than his forty years, Jerrod was as nondescript as Rain was striking. They made an interesting couple.

The group approached the tall glass doors that opened into the flower-filled, air-conditioned lobby. Samantha was happily ensconced in her mother's arms while Michelle was glued to her right thigh, pulling down so hard on her white blouse that Caroline feared she might rip it. "Did you all drive down together?" she asked.

"Steve and Becky came in their car," Peggy explained. "We drove down with Rain and Jerrod."

"Is your name Rain?" Michelle asked.

Rain laughed, shaking her blond mane. "It is. My mother was very dramatic. And probably more than a little depressed, if you think about it."

"I think it's a silly name," Michelle said.

"Michelle," Caroline cautioned as they approached the front desk. "Don't be rude."

"I have to pee," the child announced.

"Shit," said Hunter.

"Mommy," Michelle said, "Daddy said a bad word."

Caroline's eyes drifted across the lobby's Spanish-style decor toward the courtyard situated between the two huge wings of the hotel.

"Wait till you see this place. There's an enormous pool and the most gorgeous garden restaurant. Plus a kiddie pool, and of course, the ocean . . ." Becky waved her hands in its general direction.

"And the rooms are so beautiful," Peggy added.

"Are we all on the same floor?"

Rain scoffed. "Not even the same wing. You guys are on this side." She pointed to her right. "The rest of us are all the way over there." She spun to her left.

“Mommy, I have to pee.”

“I know, sweetie. Can you hold it for a few more minutes?”

“Don’t forget to sign Michelle up for the kids’ club,” Steve said pointedly.

“What’s a kids’ club?” Michelle asked.

“Oh, you’re gonna have such a good time,” Becky enthused. “Every afternoon you do arts and crafts or search for buried treasure or go hunting for crabs . . .”

“I don’t want to hunt for crabs.”

“Well, then, you can swim or build sand castles or play games with the other kids.”

“I don’t want to play with other kids. I want to play with Mommy.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” Caroline said. “We’ll have lots of time to play.”

“Is Samantha going to the kids’ club?” Michelle asked.

“No, sweetheart. She’s too little.”

“She’s not little. She’s big.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Hunter said as the receptionist handed him the keycards to their room.

“Suite 612,” the young woman said, dark eyes sparkling.

“Oh, you have a suite,” Becky said, a hint of envy in her voice. “Can’t wait to see it.”

“Thanks for making the rest of us look bad,” Fletcher joked to Hunter as everyone crowded into the waiting elevator.

“There’s too many people in here,” Michelle complained loudly.

Caroline couldn’t help smiling. She’d been thinking the same thing.

The theme from *Star Wars* escaped from someone’s pocket to fill the small space.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Becky said, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling as Steve extricated his cell phone from his jeans. “Again?”

“Hello, Mother,” Steve said, holding the phone to his ear with

one hand while lifting his other hand into the air, as if to say, *What can I do?*

"She just called an hour ago," Becky announced to the group.

"Yes, they just got here. Did you want to speak to Caroline? No? Okay. Yeah, I'm sure she'll call you later." He looked to Caroline for confirmation. Caroline shot him a look that said, *Thanks a lot*. "What? Yes, I know it's dangerous. Believe me, I have no intention of parasailing."

"Bless her little black heart," Becky said. "The woman never stops."

"No. Not interested in horseback riding on the beach either. You never know what those horses have been drinking. No, I'm not making fun of you. I totally understand your concern. Yeah, okay. Talk to you later. Love you, too. Bye." Steve returned the phone to his pocket. "What can I tell you?" he said with a laugh. "She's just looking out for her little boy."

"Does Grandma Mary have a black heart?" Michelle asked.

"No, darling," Caroline said. "Of course not."

"We'll have to wait for the autopsy to find out for sure," Hunter said.

"You must be kidding," Becky scoffed. "She'll outlive us all."

"Nice talk, you guys," Steve said. "This is Caroline's and my mother you're talking about. Show a little respect."

Becky's snort of derision filled the small elevator.

"Not exactly what I had in mind," he said.

"Sixth floor," Fletcher announced, to Caroline's great relief. "Everybody out."

"So, what do you think?" Hunter asked Caroline after everyone had finally cleared out of their two-bedroom suite.

Holding Samantha in her arms, Caroline cut across the brightly furnished living room to the window overlooking the courtyard and

stared down at the garden restaurant directly below. Bright red umbrellas shaded tables covered with white linen. Flowering coral and white shrubs grew at appropriate intervals. An enormous amoeba-shaped pool was situated off to one side, surrounded by red-and-white-striped lounge chairs. Everything was literally a stone's throw away. The world at her fingertips, Caroline thought, turning back toward her husband, taking in the room's bright yellow walls, the red velvet sofa and red-and-gold wing chair. "It's beautiful. Everything. You did good." She walked around the dark wood coffee table into his waiting embrace.

"Were you really surprised or were you just pretending?"

"Are you kidding? I was absolutely shocked."

"Yeah? Well, I just might have a few more surprises up my sleeve, Mrs. Shipley." He nibbled the side of her ear.

"Mommy," Michelle called from the bathroom. "Mommy, I'm finished. Come wipe me."

Caroline lowered her head to his shoulder.

"Isn't she old enough to do that herself?" Hunter asked as Caroline handed Samantha over to him and walked toward the bathroom.

"So, what do you think?" Caroline asked her daughter, repeating the question Hunter had asked her just minutes ago, as she led Michelle into the child's yellow-and-white bedroom. A twin-size bed, covered with a bright red, white, and gold print quilt, was positioned against one wall. A crib, covered with an identical but smaller quilt had been wedged against the opposite wall, a window between the two.

"I don't like it."

Why am I not surprised? Caroline wondered. "What don't you like, sweetie?"

"I want my own room."

"Come on. It'll be fun sharing a room with your sister."

"I want to sleep in your room."

The phone rang. *Thank God*, Caroline thought, grateful for the interruption. Even talking to her mother would be better than this.

"That was Rain," Hunter said, popping his head into the room seconds later. "She made reservations in the garden restaurant for eight o'clock tonight."

"Assuming we can get a sitter."

"Already taken care of."

Caroline looked from the smiling toddler in her husband's arms to the pouting youngster at her side, then back at Hunter. "My hero," she said.