

FOREVER FOUND

by
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PROLOGUE

The two little girls were deep in concentration, looking through magazines in the family room of the large home. They sat right next to each other, arms and legs touching, Keri turning a page and Dana taking it from her at the midpoint. Their feet didn't come close to reaching the floor.

Keri, the elder by three days of their six years, said, "I like this one. It's not all gooey with that lace stuff. My grandmother wears that and it tickles when I kiss her."

"You'd wear something like that? Can't brides wear pants? That looks stupid." Dana had decided she didn't like dresses at all and hated the few times she'd had to wear one.

"You think I'd look dumb in my wedding dress?" Keri's large blue eyes reflected hurt. "Scooter, that's mean!"

Quickly regrouping, Dana amended, "No! It wouldn't look dumb if *you* wore it. It...it would look dumb if *I* wore it. You know I hate dresses."

They returned to the magazine.

"I know! Let's have a wedding! I'll be the bride and you can be the...the...groom!" Keri's eyes were dancing now. She started bouncing up and down on the couch.

Dana wasn't sure. "Well, I don't know. Aren't boys the only ones who get to be grooms?"

Keri screwed up her face in thought. "Eww. That couldn't be right. You should be able to marry who you want, right?"

"And married people have to kiss and stuff. If I have to kiss a boy, I'll barf." Dana mimicked getting sick on the magazine.

Undaunted, Keri asked, “But you could kiss me, right?”

Dana blushed. “Well, yeah, course I could kiss you. I love you. Silly.”

They resumed their page turning, but a moment later Dana grabbed the magazine and threw it on the floor. She seized Keri’s hands and the words came out all in a tumble. “MyKeri, will you marry me? Then we could live together and everything forever! I could even stand the kissing part! Please?”

Keri threw her arms around her best friend and yelled, “Yes! That’s what we’ll do!” She pulled back, looking intently in Dana’s green eyes. “Are you sure, Scooter? We have to ask our parents if it’s okay, you know.”

Dana thought about it. She wasn’t looking forward to telling her dad. Solemnly, she pushed back the lock of coal black hair that had fallen over her eyes. “I love you, MyKeri. There couldn’t ever be anyone I could love more than you.” Her father would just have to understand.

Just then they heard Keri’s mother calling from downstairs. “Girls, come on down for chocolate chip cookies. I just got them out of the oven!”

Proposal forgotten, the two took off like a shot out the door, giggling and scuffling as they raced through the large house on their way to the kitchen.

“I get the first cookie!” Keri squealed as she rounded a corner and streaked down the hall, Dana hot on her heels.

“No way! Whoever gets there first, that’s the rule!” Dana’s longer legs pulled even and started to gain distance.

“Wait! My house!” When that didn’t work, Keri squealed, “My Moms!” She immediately regretted her words when Dana stopped short and turned around, an injured look on her face. Hastily, she said, “I’m sorry, Scooter, I didn’t mean it. I promise. Moms is yours, too.”

A deeper feminine voice behind them said, “Okay, you two.” They turned to see Carolyn Flemons smiling at them. She motioned toward the kitchen and put her hands on Dana’s shoulders to give her a gentle squeeze. “You’ll share the cookies and me. Let’s go.”

Once they were sitting at the table, each with a chocolate chip cookie and a glass of milk, all seemed forgotten. About halfway through the second cookie, Dana put the delicious treat down and wiped her

mouth on her sleeve, neglecting the paper napkin in her lap. She turned to Keri's mother, who was at the table with them, drinking a cup of coffee and reading the paper.

"Mrs. Moms?"

Carolyn Flemons paused between sips of coffee. "Yes, Scooter?"

Sitting up straighter, Dana asked, "Can MyKeri and I get married?"

The cup seemed suspended in air; both Keri and Dana watched in fascination as it dropped to the table, breaking and soaking their cookies. When it hit, everyone jumped to their feet and ran around trying to find paper towels, the garbage can, a whisk broom. The activity kept them all busy for a few minutes, but eventually they returned to the table and Carolyn asked, "I'm sorry, Scooter, what were you asking?"

Decidedly more nervous than when she asked the first time, Dana glanced at Keri for reassurance, then tried again. "Can I get married to MyKeri?"

"Well..." Carolyn talked to the wall above Dana's head, trying not to sound as disconcerted as she felt. "Usually just a man and woman get married. A boy and girl. But you can always be best friends, right?" When she finally lowered her gaze to her daughter and almost-daughter, she saw only disappointment. Trying again, she added, "Besides, you wouldn't want to get married until you were grown up. That's a long time from now."

"But I love MyKeri!" Dana said, "I'll never love anyone else like her, I know it."

"Momma, please?" Keri begged. "We talked about it and that's what we want. Please?"

Carolyn sat back in her chair. "Look, I'll tell you what. If, when you grow up, you still want to get married, then you can." The girls squealed their delight and hugged each other. "But!" They got quiet immediately. "You have to be at least twenty years old and really have thought about it, okay?"

Keri's eyes became very round. "Twenty *years*? That's older than you are! Momma!"

Carolyn kept her face schooled to neutral. "No, Keri, in fact I am *older* than twenty, but that's how old I was when I met your father. You still have to agree, both of you."

Dana asked, "What about Mr. Flemons? Will he say yes?"

With two sets of beseeching eyes on her, Carolyn finally smiled. "I'll take care of him. You two just get to be twenty years old, then we'll talk about it."

Keri exclaimed, "Momma! Where's the Polabear camera? We can take a picture!"

"I'll get it and take two pictures, one for each of you."

Carolyn went to a cupboard and pulled out the instant camera, dutifully taking two pictures of the little girls, chocolate smeared on their joyful faces, arms around each other's shoulders. After they watched the pictures form on the paper, they celebrated by another round of cookies.

The girls were so lost in excitement and sugar buzz they didn't hear the doorbell ring. Their chatter only stopped when they heard voices being raised.

Dana put a hand on Keri to quiet her. "Shh. Listen, that's my dad."

An angry male voice said, "Where is she? We're leaving."

They heard Carolyn Flemons's voice but couldn't make out what she said.

"No! I'm taking her now. Dana? Get in here! We're leaving!"

Dana said, "I gotta go. He sounds mad."

"Why? Are you in trouble?" A look of worry was on Keri's face.

Eyes never leaving the doorway, Dana said, "Dunno. Since my mom left us he's mad all the time."

They heard heavy footfalls coming toward the kitchen. Dana quickly took one of the photographs, carefully placing it in the back pocket of her pants.

Carolyn's voice was angry when she said, "Sean! Let me drop her off in an hour. You've been drinking, it's too dangerous! Stay here if you want, I'll make fresh coffee."

He wheeled on her. "Listen, you bitch! I'm taking *my* daughter and we're leaving. I'm moving us so far away you'll never see us again. You can ask your asshole of a husband all about it." He took Dana roughly by the arm and snarled, "C'mon, and shut up."

As she was forced from the room, Dana called back to Keri, "I'll see you at school tomorrow."

"The hell you will," Sean Ryan growled, and kept dragging her behind him.

Keri screamed, “Scooter! No!” She ran after them and caught Dana’s hand. “You can’t take her! She’s my friend!”

Dana’s father raised his arm as if to strike Keri, and Carolyn’s voice cut through the chaos. “Don’t you dare touch her!” He lowered his arm and waited stiffly as she pried Keri’s hand from Dana’s and held the screaming, kicking Keri tightly to her. Tears brimmed in her eyes. “You go with your dad, Scooter. It’ll be all right. We’ll straighten this out. It’s okay.”

Dana looked up at her father and knew it would not be all right. She refused to walk willingly, so he dragged her out to the car. Keri was hysterical, sobbing and yelling for her to come back.

“I’ll call you,” Dana yelled as her father threw her in the front seat. “I’ll write every day! I promise!”

Sean Ryan told her to shut up, got behind the wheel, and started the engine, cursing the whole time. The tires squealed as he roared down the street.

Breaking away from her mother, Keri ran to the curb to see Dana craning out the window, looking back at her. They disappeared around the corner and out of her life.

CHAPTER ONE

Dana slowly made her way down the carpeted hallway toward the large conference room. Her attorney, the one who'd magically appeared at her hospital bedside when she regained consciousness two weeks earlier, had picked her up at her apartment in Cow Hollow. He hustled into the meeting room ahead of her and was setting out his papers, probably handing out his card to the big guns. *Officious little beast*. He was practically salivating when Mike Flemons's law firm contacted Dana and wanted to meet.

Dana was in pain. She'd only been using crutches for a week, so her hands and armpits were killing her. When she'd discharged herself from the hospital, she'd refused to use metal canes, afraid they looked too permanent. Told she would always have a limp, she was determined to not only walk normally, but play soccer again. Deep inside, the fear of losing her career was festering, and the constant reminder of the crutches and every nerve in her body didn't help her mood. She kept moving.

Her doctor had advised against her leaving the hospital, but after four weeks, Dana couldn't stand it any longer. She'd also been advised not to live by herself, yet she had no choice. She knew she could manage. She'd discussed this meeting with her doctor, who seemed to think it was too soon. It had only been a month since the accident, and Dana was too vulnerable, physically and emotionally. The physician had wanted to refer her to a grief counselor to deal with her losses before she tried to make important decisions about her life.

Dana liked Dr. Showalter, but ignored her. There was one reason

she was here: MyKeri. As horrible as the Flemons family had been to her father, as responsible as they were for her family's misery and for her current situation, she still needed to see MyKeri. To meet the woman she had held in her heart since they had drooled over the same toys together as infants. No amount of raving about the horrible Flemons family by her father could erase the secret part of her that still loved MyKeri.

Dana had been ready to let her lawyer handle everything, as he had suggested. She had listlessly thumbed through the thick legal document he sent to her, shock and medication making concentration difficult. But then she had seen a list of who would be at the meeting. If Keri's presence had been held out as a carrot, she was the starving rabbit. It didn't even occur to her to ask why Keri would attend. But, deep down, she hoped Keri would be there because she, too, needed to see her childhood companion.

Pain shot through her leg when she came down on it instead of putting her weight on the crutches. Dana swore under her breath and stilled until she could breathe again. A thin sheen of sweat popped out on her forehead and upper lip. A few more steps and she'd be at the door, then inside, and there would be MyKeri. She had no idea what to expect. Rationally, she knew not to expect anything but an apology and money. Lots of money, according to her lawyer, Jacob Simon of Wells, Jenkins, and Wells.

With each step the accident came vividly to mind. They were returning from one of her soccer matches in San Jose, the first one her father had consented to attend. Someone driving a Flemons-owned vehicle had swerved or drifted—she had no memory of it—into their northbound lane, causing Sean Ryan to overcorrect and slam into a sound wall on Interstate 280. And that was that. All of her hard work to reach the pro level, gone. Along with her father.

Yet here she was, clinging to some idiotic notion that Keri Flemons would still be MyKeri. That she would fly into her arms, never to be separated again. She was embarrassed and ashamed of her own thoughts. *Let's just get this over with.*

The door swung open as she was about to reach for it, and a familiar face registered surprise, quickly screened with a smile.

"Shelley?" Dana vaguely remembered Mike Flemons's secretary from when she was a kid. She'd aged. Dana guessed twenty years would do that.

“Yes. Hello, Dana.” Shelley’s eyes were filled with compassion and concern.

She had always been nice to her, Dana recalled, and even now she was thoughtful. She showed Dana to a seat and helped her get settled, making sure she had a glass of water. Then, giving her a surreptitious pat on the back, she went to the opposite side of the long table and sat down next to Mike Flemons. The chair on the other side of him was empty.

Dana thought about the quickly concealed shock on Shelley’s face. She had seen it before. A few teammates had visited in the hospital. The scrapes, cuts, and bruises that peppered her face were purple and yellow now, but the stitches weren’t out in some places, and she’d lost weight. More importantly, she’d lost muscle mass, something that was very depressing to an athlete. She made it a point to avoid mirrors. The full-length cast on her leg was cumbersome, and she hurt everywhere most of the time. But her mind was numb and that was fine.

She focused on one thing: where was MyKeri? Aside from Shelley, the others present were men. She recognized Mike Flemons, but the rest just registered as expensive suits. Flemons looked exactly like she remembered him—not a tall man, but solidly built with thick white hair and dark blue eyes. She’d puzzled over that as a child and had once asked MyKeri why his hair was white when he didn’t look like a granddad.

MyKeri had said, “Daddy says he has maturely white hair, because he’s so smart.”

She adored him, and Dana had always thought he was nice, but over time that had changed. Her father had spent twenty years giving her every reason to hate Mike Flemons. He was the man responsible for all that befell Sean Ryan—the loss of his wife, the countless job changes, his drinking. It was all Mike Flemons’s fault. Had he treated her father fairly, their lives would have been very different, her childhood would not have been so hard.

Dana turned her head at the sound of a woman’s voice coming from an office connected to the conference room. The speech pattern was rapid and excited, like that of a teenager telling a story about something that happened at school that day.

Mike Flemons cleared his throat and scowled. He rose from his chair and quickly walked to the door and opened it, saying a few short words Dana couldn’t hear.

A female voice petulantly replied, “What? Okay! I’ll call you back.”

Then Flemons stood back to make way for his daughter as she strode into the room and plopped down in a vacant chair next to his. She had yet to acknowledge any of the people present.

Dana stared at her. She was a knockout. Blond hair fell in soft curls around her hunched shoulders. Dressed in tight jeans and cashmere sweater that clung in all the right places, she had a perfect, quite feminine, figure. When she finally looked up, the large blue eyes that matched her father’s for color were cool and appraising, but nonetheless stunning, set in an oval face with a flawless complexion and full lips.

Keri’s gaze finally settled on Dana and faltered for a moment, then dropped to her lap. She seemed to concentrate on something in her hands.

Hearing her name, Dana turned to Mike Flemons, who said, “I just wanted to express our condolences on your father’s death. I know I speak for Keri, too, when I say how sad we are for these tragic circumstances.”

“Thanks.” It was all Dana could manage. Why was Keri even here? Was she really being used as bait? Suddenly Dana felt foolish and embarrassed.

She heard a theatrical sigh and caught Keri pointedly checking the time on her expensive-looking watch.

A distinguished-looking man with a neatly barbered beard and shining bald head started to talk. “We, meaning the Flemons family, will cover all of your medical expenses, of course. That includes rehabilitation fees and compensation for your salary as a member of the soccer team, plus an additional sum equal to five years of your salary.”

Jacob Simon, her attorney, interrupted. “That sounds generous at first blush, but you know that women in pro soccer don’t make much money. Ms. Ryan has always had to work another job, too. Then there’s pain and suffering. My client lost her father as well as her career.”

Dana was only vaguely aware of the dickering that continued around her. She couldn’t take her eyes off MyKeri. Her thick blond hair was streaked with white by the sun and surrounded her face. Although Keri hadn’t looked up again, Dana saw the same long eyelashes she remembered from childhood. Keri’s nose was no longer an upturned child’s nose. It was straight, perfectly setting off her full sensuous mouth. Dana wondered if she still had the tiny mole just below her

left ear, the one that matched her mother's. The one she always called her "beauty mark." And when Keri unconsciously used her tongue to moisten her lips, Dana reacted as though she had been physically touched.

But Keri had not raised her head since she came into the room except to pointedly stare at her watch. From the subtle movements of her upper arms Dana guessed she was either playing a game on her phone or text messaging. Keri sighed again and gave an eye-roll in the direction of the attorneys, paying no attention to anyone else.

Dana wondered what the hell she was doing that was so important she could not even pretend an interest in the proceedings. Ignoring the pain in her legs, she struggled to sit up taller and asked, "What are you doing?"

Keri appeared oblivious to the question, as did everyone else.

Raising the volume, Dana demanded, "I said what are you doing?" Suddenly the room was silent.

Keri's head jerked up, her expression one of surprise. "Are you talking to me?"

Dana felt her face start to flush. "Yes. What are you doing?"

Keri squirmed slightly, then folded her arms defensively over her chest. "I had to send a message to...someone. I didn't want to interrupt the meeting."

Mike Flemons admonished, "Keri, this is important."

"Yes, well, my cell is so *slow* at sending text, that's why it seemed too long. Guess I'll have to get a new one. Sorry."

Dana didn't think she sounded one bit sorry.

The bald lawyer, the lead dog, smoothly intervened. "Anyway, all we need is your signature on these forms, releasing the Flemons family from any responsibility for further costs, beyond what we've discussed." He pushed the papers in her direction, but her attorney intercepted them.

As he looked them over, Dana couldn't take her eyes off Keri, who was glaring at her, lips set in a thin line, a mocking smile.

"Why are you here?" Dana asked her coldly.

Again, all murmuring ceased. She could almost feel the Flemons contingent closing ranks. Their silence was not about surprise or well-meaning politeness. It was a calculated condemnation of her temerity. Who was she to put Mike Flemons's daughter on the spot—to draw attention to the bad manners of his spoiled darling?

Dana's skin prickled and her belly churned. These people didn't give a damn about her. All they wanted was her silence. They wanted her to disappear. They were paid to make sure that nothing and no one dragged the Flemons name through the mud. If they couldn't do it legally, she wondered what other means they'd be willing to sink to. She had no illusions. Her father had told her exactly how ruthless this family and their hired guns could be.

Keri's eyes widened, and she glanced at her father and the lead attorney. "She doesn't know?"

"Know what?" Dana tried to control her growing frustration. "How many times do I have to ask the same question?"

The lead attorney's deep voice intoned, "Ms. Flemons was behind the wheel on the night of the accident. All of that was in the police report." He couldn't have been more solicitous. He deserved an acting award.

Turning on her own lawyer, Dana rasped, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Simon sputtered, "I thought someone in your fam... I mean... You were sent a copy of everything." Perhaps realizing her confusion, he amended, "I can't see why it's relevant. Do you two know each other?"

"We *used* to know each other." Keri's voice, cold and brittle, cut through the tension. "In fact, when we were *children* we promised to be best friends. But Ms. Ryan seems to have forgotten that."

Dana whirled around in her chair. Staring in disbelief, she roared, "*Forgot?*" She struggled to a standing position and leaned heavily on the conference table. "Just who the hell do you think you are? Have you ever worked for anything in your worthless, insignificant life? Have you ever *wanted* for anything?"

She was vaguely aware of some male voices trying to calm her down, but all she could see was resentment in Keri's eyes. Taunting her. Validating everything her father had said.

Dana stood to her full height, and although she teetered precariously, she silenced those around her. "I get it. You came here with your pack of wolves to take care of a little problem. Some nobody you used to know might cause the Flemons clan some bad publicity. Might want some of your precious money for having her life ruined. I guess you've had the final say, haven't you? Your family turns me out, you kill my father and maim me so that I'll never play professionally again! How

inconvenient that I lived. Why don't you ask your daddy for his gun and shoot me—get it over with now.”

Keri shrank back in the chair and Mike Flemons was instantly standing behind her, one hand protectively on his daughter's shoulder. “Dana, that's enough! Remember, your father had been drinking. We're being more than generous in giving you this settlement.”

Dana couldn't believe what she was hearing. “Giving me? She killed my father! I don't even know where my own mother is! I have nothing! And you're *giving* me?”

Suddenly all the attorneys were on their feet arguing with each other and with Simon. But Dana could only see Keri.

Keri suddenly slammed her hand down on the table, and everyone shut up. She stood and leaned so that she and Dana were inches apart. Dana thought she saw remorse, but it was gone before it was there.

“She's right. I owe her an apology. I'm sorry for the accident, Ms. Ryan. It might have been avoided if your father's reflexes were better, but alcohol slows reflexes.” Keri glanced sideways at her father. “Daddy, pay her triple what we offered. That ought to help ease the pain.”

With a sweet smile at Dana she sat down, a smug look on her face.

Dana was speechless. Keri was buying her off. Wanting her to go away. She wondered how long she had been using money to take the place of a conscience.

After a moment, she quietly asked, “Where's the release?”

It was immediately in front of her, with pen. Knowing that if she sat down, she might not be able to get up again, Dana leaned awkwardly on the table as she read the agreement. After scratching out a passage or two, she initialed everything and signed on the line provided, then pushed the document across the table to Keri and her father.

“You'll cover my medical and rehab and pay my attorney,” she told Mike Flemons, then cutting to Keri, added, “Other than that, you can take your money and shove it.”

Grabbing her crutches, she struggled to get situated, aware of everyone's eyes on her. The pain was agonizing but she didn't care. Her attorney started to rise.

“No. Stay and make sure they agree to everything. I'll call a cab.” Allowing herself one last look at Keri, she said bitterly, “All these years, I thought maybe you still...remembered...Silly me.”

It took a moment to negotiate the door, but she was able to get into the hall without asking for help. She knew that any jostling of her precarious hold on her crutches would cause her to collapse. Panting from the effort of walking, sweat trickling down her back, she vowed to get to her apartment before breaking down.

With each painful step toward the end of the hallway, she felt she was being watched. Awkwardly, she turned and saw the blue eyes of her childhood friend, just before the conference room door closed.



Keri returned to her seat at the conference table after watching the tall, thin woman hobble to the elevators. She'd had to fight the urge to help her. Weird.

Shaking a vague uneasiness from her mind, she picked up her cell and dialed her grad school friend Marci. She had cut off their earlier conversation because of her father and didn't even get to text message her more than a couple of times during the embarrassing meeting.

Turning her back on the men still discussing the settlement, she said, "Marci, hey. Sorry about that. When Daddy calls, I have to perform. Now, tell me more about Ms. Loser from Saturday night."

She guffawed into the phone as Marci continued her tale of dating woe. Marci was always good for a distraction. The truth was, Keri felt uncomfortable about the meeting and was still upset over the accident. She had been saddened to learn that someone had died that night. It had all happened so fast, she hadn't known what to say to the police so she'd told them she couldn't remember anything. Her recollection now was that she had drifted slightly into the lane to her right and quickly corrected back to her own lane. But the older model car next to her new BMW-5 series had suddenly swerved and crashed into the sound wall. It was horrible. She and her friends had pulled to a halt and run back to help. Someone called 911. Then the police and ambulances and fire trucks arrived. Soon after that, her father was there with their attorney.

Her friend Joey wouldn't let her get too close to the crashed car, saying it was leaking gas. She found out later it was really because the people inside were so messed up. A few days after that her father told her who had been in the car. Sean Ryan and his daughter Dana. *Scooter*. Talk about a voice from the past.

Dana's father had alcohol in his blood at the time of the accident,

and Keri hated to admit it, but she felt better knowing that. She was sorry for Dana, but Daddy had promised he'd make sure she didn't have to worry about bills. Really, she thought it was handled. Then last week her father had told her the lawyers wanted her to apologize to Dana Ryan and get her to take a settlement and not sue the very deep family pockets. Dana had hired an attorney; didn't they all?

Keri supposed she could have refused, but Daddy was mad enough as it was. She'd totaled her other car two months before the accident and had gotten a reckless driving citation. The truth was that she'd had an argument with her date at a party the night of the accident and decided to leave early. Anyone who needed a ride had to leave with her. She was pissed and maybe driving too fast. Everyone was talking and laughing, and she'd turned up the car stereo to drown them out.

But the details didn't matter; the accident was not her fault. Sean Ryan was a drunk driver, and that was all the police had needed to know. She resented having to even be at the damned meeting, and she certainly wasn't going to play nice just to please her father. She knew he wanted her to talk to his minions like they mattered, but it was obvious they thought she was a spoiled brat so what was the point? They were paid a ton of money to do what they did.

She was still irritated that he'd made her end her call to Marci so abruptly just so she could sit there while the lawyers fought with each other. He always treated her like a child at times like this. She should have just refused, Keri thought, glancing disdainfully over her shoulder at the men. They were so full of themselves now, clapping each other on the shoulder and pouring drinks.

She supposed she'd agreed to show up partly to placate Daddy, and maybe because she had some curiosity about Dana Ryan. She'd also felt a little guilty, which was crazy, because it wasn't her fault Mr. Ryan had lost control of his car, and she resented having to behave like it was.

She'd been so peeved, she hadn't trusted herself to look up when she first came into the meeting room. She knew exactly what they were all thinking. She'd even heard one of those suits saying something about "making that brat come out of this squeaky clean." Jerk. She had tried to avoid looking at Dana as long as she could, and she'd had to force herself to not stare when she finally had to say something to her. Dana's short-cropped dark hair was patchy in places, and her face was a blotch of bruises, scrapes, and cuts. Keri knew she'd suffered a bad

leg injury. She'd heard the rescue personnel almost had to amputate to get her out of the car.

Those green eyes were still the same, and Keri had caught herself falling into them momentarily, but she knew better than to be sucked in to some delusion of the past. This wasn't Scooter. This was some money-grubber, just like half of her girlfriends. Hell, just like *all* of her girlfriends. Besides, Scooter had waltzed out the door and never contacted her again. They were twenty-six years old now. No way was she being nice to this person; Keri didn't care how banged up she was.

She could not believe it when she was in the middle of text messaging Marci about how boring the meeting was and Dana started talking to her. The woman had deliberately made her feel uncomfortable. Pinned to her chair by those accusing jade eyes, Keri had no clue how to respond. What did Dana expect from her—wasn't an apology enough? If she'd known how bitter Dana was, she would have told the attorneys to go fuck themselves and not shown up for the meeting at all. Why should she be a punching bag for a woman who obviously needed professional help to deal with her issues?

Maybe she could have handled Dana's bizarre accusations more tactfully, but she wasn't used to being ambushed. All she'd done was react to being unfairly attacked. How was she supposed to know that nobody had told Dana who was driving the car? No one had prepared her for that little bombshell. Keri flinched all over again, thinking about the shouting and the mean things Dana said. It was not her fault things had gotten so ugly. She had no intention of backing down from a woman she didn't even know, except as a childhood playmate. If there was one thing she'd learned from her father, it was that the best defense is a good offense.

Anyway, she'd offered the pitiful woman more money than she would ever see in her life under most circumstances. Even now, she could not believe that Dana Ryan had thrown almost two million dollars back in her face. No one had ever looked at Keri with such undisguised contempt. And her eyes, the raw pain she'd seen in them, almost like Keri had hit her. For some reason that look was the worst part of a really unpleasant afternoon.

Keri had been unable to prevent herself from peeping out the door to watch Dana leave. It was almost as if she'd needed to see her face one more time so she could—what?—substitute that image with something more neutral? Dana must have sensed her presence because

suddenly they were looking at each other and time stood still. For a crazy few seconds, Keri had wanted to go after her, then the elevator door opened. The moment disappeared and so did Dana. Just like she did twenty years ago.

“Keri? Are you still there?” Marci sounded put out.

“Yeah. Look, hold on a minute, would you.” Keri tried to pay attention to her father’s lead attorney. The guy seemed to be congratulating himself, as if the financially positive outcome was his doing.

“Well, that went better than we could have ever hoped for,” he said, shaking hands with the other attorneys. He thanked her like it was an afterthought, adding, “Your offer certainly seemed to be the deciding factor, Ms. Flemons. Very intuitive of you to guess how she’d respond. You should study law.”

It wasn’t even worthy of a reply. Refusing to look at her father, Keri stood and grabbed her backpack, phone to her ear. Mumbling a goodbye to everyone, she escaped out the door.

“Sorry. I had to say good-bye to Daddy,” she sighed as she walked down the hall.

“Did you win?” Marci asked.

“Yeah. It was no big deal. Let’s go out tonight, okay? I could use some fresh blood.”

“Want to go to that new place south of Market? I hear it’s hot! I think it’s called ‘Crush.’”

“Yeah, let’s go there. I feel like I’ve screwed every girl at Cal Berkeley. Maybe graduate school where I went to undergraduate was a bad idea...”

Marci made a rude comment, and Keri laughed harshly and stabbed the button for the elevator. She’d done her good deed for the day; now it was time to party. She was restless and she only knew one cure for it—she was going to fuck her brains out tonight.

As the elevator descended Keri leaned back and closed her eyes. *Fuck my brains out. Always works.* For some reason, it didn’t seem appealing today. *Oh, well.* The door opened and she slung her backpack over her shoulder, making her way through the reception lobby.