

Chapter 1

Without looking, Kimberley Heritage reached into the fridge and plucked a lone grape from its bag, her beady eyes holding Dan's gaze the entire time. The grape remained perilously suspended in air as her slender, manicured fingers turned it around and around in front of her lips. Teasing. Toying with her prey. She finally popped it into her mouth.

"Shrimp," she said.

"Don't you dare say that Kim," said Dan as he peered into a cabinet that was perpetually stocked with gin.

Kim plucked out another grape and repeated the routine. She felt its pulpy innards burst in between her teeth and couldn't help but smirk.

"Shrimp."

Dan slammed a glass down on the counter and gave himself a healthy pour. "I can't wait to tell Peter about this."

"I'm sure you can't. You've always liked having our therapists fight your battles for you."

"Just to recap." Dan swirled the gin in his cup. "I asked you whether you believe in our son or not, and your response is *shrimp*?"

"Your point?"

"It's the safe word we use in bed for fuck's sake. I don't want to even tangentially associate my kid with that."

Kim shrugged. "Well we haven't used that word in a long time, so I thought it was fair game."

"You don't want to answer because you don't believe in him."

"Remember what Peter said, test assumptions."

“OK, I *assume* you don’t want to answer because you don’t believe in him.”

“I don’t want to answer because I want to protect him.”

“From what?”

“From this conversation. God, you are oblivious.” She stomped her foot and looked towards the staircase. “Ryan! Stop listening and go to your room!” The ceiling creaked as a pair of feet pattered across it. Kim stared her husband down. “Be thankful I didn’t let you say anything else.”

Dan collapsed into a nearby chair and loosened his belt. Over the years he’d developed a slight paunch that she knew bothered him far more than it ever bothered her. He took a swig of gin. “I just think that getting involved in a sport will help him develop some confidence.”

“I’m not sure what convinced you of that, was it the extra-strength prescription glasses or his penchant for picking flowers in the outfield?”

Dan rolled his eyes. “The point is that he’ll learn. It’s a process.”

Kim took a seat at the table opposite Dan and stared out the window. Her hydrangeas had finally reached full bloom and were doing an excellent job of obscuring the back fence from view. They were her favorite type of flower based mostly on the fact that they were purple, and purple was her favorite color based mostly on the fact that it was the color of royalty. She hated their fenced yard for a similar reason. Royalty didn’t have white picket fences, they would never dream of boxing themselves up in such a crude manner.

“I think you’re trying to get Ryan to be something he’s not,” Kim said, still admiring her hydrangeas.

“He’s twelve years old, nobody knows who they are at that age.”

“You’re right, they don’t.” Kim turned her attention back to Dan. “But their mothers usually do.”

“The key word there being *usually*.” Dan nodded his head towards a window at the front of the kitchen. A gold 1999 Cadillac Deville was rolling into the driveway.

“Of course she would be back already. I swear my mom has a misery radar hidden up her ass,” said Kim as she bolted out of her chair and back into the kitchen. She started to fill the sink with soap water, dishes clattering as she plunked what she could inside.

“It’s ok if the kitchen is dirty. This is our house, you know,” said Dan.

“You don’t understand.”

“Oh, I think I do.”

Always itching to get the last word in, Kim opened her mouth to fire back but thought better of it as the mud room door swung open. Her daughter Kayla breezed through the kitchen and towards the stairs without a word, immersed in whatever was playing through her headphones. Dan waved sarcastically at the back of Kayla’s head as an older woman’s raspy voice called out from the mud room.

“You will not believe the day I’ve had.”

“Hi Mom,” said Kim, wiping the kitchen counter down.

Kim’s mother Diane bustled into view, looking like a dolled up piece of leather rawhide and smelling of menthols. She paced around the kitchen. “So I was at Nordstrom Rack trying to find some new heels for that gala I was telling you both about-”

“You mean the Rotary Club Luncheon,” said Dan.

“Oh hush Daniel it’s a *gala*, just look up the definition if you don’t believe me. Anyways, there I was trying to decide between a Kate Spade

pump or these cute little Anne Kleins with the black strap, and guess who I see.”

“Maggie Connors,” said Kim.

“Maggie Connors! Can you believe it?” Diane fetched a glass from the cupboard and gave a thorough inspection before filling it with water.

“Well of course I wasn’t just going to go up and say hi to her, not after what happened at bowling last Friday. So I play it cool, I’m doing my own thing, ultimately I decide you know what? Let’s go with the Anne Kleins. I don’t want to overdress for this gala, you know?”

“Naturally,” said Dan.

“Right? So I put the Kate Spades back, I turn around to leave, and guess who’s standing right in front of me.”

“Maggie Connors,” said Kim.

“Maggie. Connors. I was mortified. I mean what do you even say in a situation like that?”

“Hello,” said Dan.

“Daniel, hush! So I’m keeping calm, trying to be civil, and I just give her a smile and say hello. See Daniel, I’m not as stupid as you think I am, I know how to say hello. Anyways, we get to chit chatting and it’s good and I think maybe I was overreacting about the whole thing. And then do you know what she does?”

“What’s that?” asked Kim, leaning on the counter for dear life.

“She picks up the Kate Spades I had just put back and decides to buy them without even trying one on. The audacity!”

“But Mom, you didn’t want the Kate Spades anyways.”

Diane threw her hands in the air. “She doesn’t know that! She probably thought I couldn’t afford them and was trying to embarrass me!”

“Well, half of that’s true,” said Dan, causing Kim to bite her lip in a desperate attempt not to smile.

“Daniel, enough! Always with the comments, you’re just like Kim’s father used to be, you know that? Good riddance.” Diane finally relaxed a little and turned to Kim. “Anyways darling, how was your day?”

“It was good, I just-”

“This kitchen is a mess, were you too busy to clean?”

“Yeah, didn’t get around to it yet.”

“Well you should have enough peace and quiet tonight to do a full scrub down, I don’t think Kayla’s gonna be coming out of her room any time soon.”

“Why’s that?” asked Dan.

“Oh who knows, something about a boy I think.” Diane started down the basement stairs towards her room. “It’s probably just a phase. Nobody knows who they are at that age.”

Once she was out of sight, Dan raised his eyebrows and slowly slid a large kitchen knife over to Kim. It was the first time she had laughed all week.