

CHAPTER ONE

In Which a Link is Formed

Only one mile remained before Andrew would know at last if the man he was about to meet would either shelter him or discard him forever.

He would give anything to get a glimpse forward in time, to determine if this charade was worth the trouble. It mattered little that he had spent his entire life waiting for this moment, that he had wished since a child that this event would occur at any point in his future. What mattered now was that he might not get the chance he was hoping to have— to win the ultimate of life's lotteries. This was not how he wanted things to go.

His mother hadn't looked at, nor spoken to him for a while now, and the only reminder he received that she was still in the car with him was when she changed radio stations. Andrew hoped this debacle weighed on her conscience as much as it did on his self-esteem, and his desperation had him almost wishing for a car accident. He might end up disabled, but his mother would get what was coming to her.

It may have been too late to pry her mind of any thoughts whatsoever on the matter, but Andrew had to know what she was thinking. After all, she was leaving him forever, and whether or not that was for the best, he wondered if she had any parting words for him.

“Did you call him?”

His mother took a brief look at him, returned her focus to the road, then shifted her posture upright. Her dazzling scarlet hair fell across her shoulders as she shrugged in apathy. “No. I didn’t.”

That was something he had already assumed. If one was the type to show up late for doctor’s appointments, they were hardly reliable enough to phone someone before visiting. “Why the hell not?”

She looked in the rear view mirror, changed lanes, then leaned back. She passed a scornful look to her teenaged son, whose eyes were protected by long strands of dark hair. “Why should I? He hasn’t called *me* in years.”

His ears must have deceived him. She couldn’t possibly consider that a validated excuse. No rational human being would. “That’s a little beside the point, isn’t it?”

“Andrew, hush. All right?” Ah, yes. She always had to be the right one, didn’t she? Andrew seized the one opportunity he might have to put his foot down.

“What are you going to do, Mom? Just drive up to the door and drop me off?”

“Of course not. I’ll make sure he’s home.”

“You couldn’t make sure by calling?”

She sighed— a sound he was well acquainted with. “Andrew, we’ve discussed this.”

“We have? Well, someone forgot to let me know.”

When they came to a rolling stop at a solid red light, she turned her volcanic eyes toward his thin face, which was curtained by draping follicles. It was a miracle he could manage to see anything through them. “Don’t start. We’re almost there, then we’ll be out of each other’s hair.”

“We don’t know that for sure, because someone didn’t make a phone call,” Andrew muttered. She heard him, and he knew she did, but her only reaction was to speed up the vehicle and increase the radio’s already-blaring volume. She wouldn’t give him the benefit of an explanation, nor would she allow him to question her actions, no matter how senseless they were.

The glare of the sun peeking from behind the ashen November clouds stung Andrew’s eyes as he looked out his window at the green sign welcoming them to the borough of Queens. He thought that when he left Staten Island once and for all, he would never miss it, and never look back. Even if his previous dwelling was broken in many ways, it was still a place he had lived in all of his life. Saying goodbye to many

of his personal belongings would be the toughest challenge of all that was about to face him.

He wasn't ready for this. He thought he would be when waking up that morning, knowing that the slight chance of leaving his mother for the rest of his life was approaching, but the mere thought of his dreams coming to a crashing halt when struck when the blunt end of reality was all too terrifying. This man might not be the one he hoped and imagined. Time was running out, and there was no going back. This was it.

The road his mother turned onto was one leading into a wealthy neighborhood, one where each of the houses were grand in value, fancy in design and decoration, mountainous in scale, and many of them had more than one garage. A forest of pines and oaks surrounded them, and countless trees and bushes separated each of the yards. His mother dropped the car's speed to a crawl as she checked the addresses, reading them aloud as she passed them.

She slowed more when she spied the address she was looking for: seventy-eight fifty-three Mancante Street. At first glance, the only visible part of the residence was the stretching driveway, which trailed deep through a canopy of trees with branches that could touch the low-hanging clouds. The driveway was more than just a small, paved road, but an infinite journey from the street to the house. At least, it felt that way to Andrew. The longer he had to wait, the more painful the ordeal became.

Finally, a towering structure came into view— a two-story opulent luxury home, built from sandy multi-colored stones, the exterior design modern in architecture. The driveway ended in a roundabout where a small garden of roses bloomed in the center. Through the tall vertical windows, Andrew could see a shimmering chandelier hanging from the ceiling. It might have been the biggest house Andrew had ever been in the vicinity of, or worthy of laying eyes on.

Even his mother, who spent many agonizing moments prattling incessantly, was breathless at the sight. “Holy shit,” she whispered. She rummaged around in her purse after parking, and pulled out a sheet of folded printer paper, which she used to confirm the address they were now sitting in the very front yard of. “It’s the right house,” she said in mystified disbelief.

“Are you sure?” Andrew asked, shaking.

“Yes. Unless...” She muttered something else, mentioned a guy’s name that Andrew wasn’t familiar with. “No. He wouldn’t trick me like

that.”

“Mom,” he choked. “This guy is obviously loaded. I don’t think he’s going to want me. Look at me.” His black T-shirt— faded, over-washed, and blotted with small holes— was at least three years old, and his jeans, which he had owned for four years, was the only pair he had that wasn’t ripped in several places. Even his jacket, which was slightly frayed at the cuffs, hadn’t been replaced since he purchased it in eighth grade. His wardrobe was in dire need of an update, but he’d consider himself lucky whenever his mother could afford to do so.

“Don’t be such a baby, Andrew. We’re already here.” She opened her door, her mini skirt, which was a bit too “mini,” catching in a breeze as she left the vehicle.

Andrew froze in place like a well-carved ice sculpture. He didn’t bother unhooking his seatbelt buckle, assuming that it was only a matter of time that he’d be heading back to the house. Whatever laid in wait on the other side of that heavy oak front door, Andrew didn’t want to get closer than a yard away from it. What would the house’s owner say when his mother told him the truth? How would he react? At this point, he didn’t want to find out. Any result was bound to be a negative one.

His mother, on the other hand, had fewer doubts and overflowing eagerness. Unlike Andrew, she was now optimistic at the outcome of their visit. When she saw that her son hadn’t left the car, she beckoned him over with a girlish wave, her acrylic ruby nails sparkling.

Andrew didn’t come as she commanded, but rather sank low out of sight where he was safe from probing eyes. She would have to confront the man of the house without him. The situation was humiliating enough. He pulled his long hair further over his eyes than it already was, shielding them so that he wouldn’t have to see what would happen next.

Andrew’s mother went on to the oversized front door without him, to his relief, and rang the bell. Even from where he sat in the car, he could hear its tone, as if an actual collection of church bells were kept in the attic of the home, waiting to ring whenever someone pressed the button.

She fixed her shirt and hair while she waited, checking her reflection in one of the outstretched windows. She waved her skirt down a few times, then stuck one leg out to the side while putting a hand on her hip. She rolled her eyes afterward, hoping the house’s owner would soon answer the door.

The first time the doorbell rang, Kevin hadn't heard it. His busy mind was reeling, his fingers rolling across his keyboard at lightning speed. He only had one paragraph left of his first draft, a few sentences away from completing his rough work. Then he could take a cigarette break, his fifth one in the past thirty minutes.

He came to a pause at the final sentence, his mind going blank. He had been hit with writer's block before, but when coming up with a good enough conclusion, he always managed to get stuck. Endings were important to Kevin, as they were to his many readers. It had to wrap everything up perfectly, and to do so in one sentence was still a challenge to him, even after many years of honing his craft.

His pack of menthols were calling him, begging him to be smoked away. He tried his best to restrain himself, to take it easy and to learn to smoke less each day. This was an even greater feat than coming up with a viable ending to a story. He always had an excuse at the ready whenever he got the slightest bit of courage to toss them all into the garbage.

I might be able to think better if I smoke, he convinced himself.

His fingers hadn't yet touched the pack that rested on his desk when he heard his doorbell go off not once, but three times in a row. Kevin left his leather chair, grabbing his cigarettes on the way out of his office, and jogged down the extensive hallway, his socks sliding on the wooden floors. Whoever that was, they had better needed something important from him, and not a cup of sugar, either. He had enough trouble thinking as it was without unnecessary distractions.

He wheezed when he reached the door, hearing the doorbell ring two more times. He jerked it open after pulling his dangling dark hair back with his palm and stared at his visitor, his quizzical cobalt irises shadowed by his crunched brow. At any other time, Kevin was a professional weaver of words, but now, he could not find a single one that properly expressed his confusion.

"Kevin," sighed Andrew's mother, who now wore a forced smile.

Kevin required a moment of quiet thought when presented with the sight of the woman on his front step. He didn't get many visitors, but of everyone that could have rang his doorbell that afternoon, he didn't expect someone he had last seen in high school. "Star?"

Star batted her eyelashes. "It's been a long time." That, Kevin had to admit, was understatement.

Kevin glanced from her to the vehicle in his driveway. He noticed someone sitting in the passenger seat, a young man with his head tucked down and hair in his face. Bewildered, he looked back at Star, attempting to contemplate the proceedings unfolding before him. “What are you doing here?”

She clicked her tongue, and her green eyes rounded. “Kevin! We haven’t seen each other in forever and that’s the first thing you say to me?”

He once again looked at the individual in the car, who seemed to not only hide from him, but the entire world. “What else do you want me to say?”

“How about ‘hello’? What about ‘how are you’? I remember you being a lot nicer than this.”

“Well, as you said, it’s been a long time.” He stepped out of his house and shut the door behind him. Now was a good time to light up that cigarette, which he promptly did. “The last time we spoke was when you dumped me. I sort of figured that would conclude our communications.” He took a drag, and Star licked her upper lip as she watched him puff. “So this must be pretty important.”

She kicked at a shallow puddle with the heel of her shoe. “It is. It’s very important.”

Gripping his cigarette between his fingers, Kevin turned his head as he exhaled. “You mind telling me how you found my address?”

“A little birdie told me.”

More like your little cousin told you, Kevin thought, perturbed. “This birdie didn’t give you my phone number?” He parked the cigarette back between his lips, the cherry lighting up as he inhaled.

“He did. I just didn’t bother calling. I thought this would be better dealt with in person.”

“What would?”

“I’m getting to that.” She took a deep breath, her heavy chest expanding. She picked underneath her protracted, painted nails, her eyes rising to the cloudy skies. “Kevin... when we dated, I thought you were kind of weird.”

A pause followed her admission, one that Kevin was ultimately confounded by. “Okay?” Smoke wisped from his nostrils. “You came all this way to tell me that?”

“I’m not finished.” She sighed, tossing some red hair over her shoulder. “I liked it. You were different. And different is... nice.”

He wanted her to get to the point, and fast. The sound of married

couples arguing about their sexual shortcomings in public wasn't half as awkward as the conversation he was now having. "Thank you, Star," he mumbled.

"And it didn't matter that you weren't as popular as me, or my girl friends. They told me not to go out with you, but I did it anyway, and I'm glad I did."

He rubbed the fatigue out of his eyes with a circling thumb and forefinger. "Is this going somewhere?"

"Yes, yes, I promise." In their brief silence, the resonance of citrus-tinted leaves falling and clicking onto the pavement was like an oceanic roar. Kevin continued to gawk at her in wonderment, lost in his own unorganized thoughts. "I wanted to say, before anything else, that I'm sorry." Kevin opened his mouth, but she cut him off before he could speak. "I'm sorry about David. It wasn't personal, and I didn't do it to spite you. We were just a better match for each other."

"It's okay," he groaned. How much longer would he have to endure this? "Forget about it. I haven't thought about it, not for a long time. I don't know why you are."

"This is part of my point, Kevin, so just keep quiet for a minute, okay?" Kevin did go quiet, but not without a glare of admonition.

"As you can probably already tell," she continued, "I didn't come alone. I brought someone with me. This will be the first time the two of you meet, and I... I've been preparing for this for so long. I wish I would have done it sooner, but, this is just the way things turned out."

"What are you talking about?"

"After you and I separated, and David and I started seeing each other, I got sick. I assumed I caught a bug that was going around, so I didn't put much thought into it, not until I ended up gaining several pounds. I did a home test, and it was positive."

Kevin hadn't noticed that he had allowed his cigarette to burn all the way down to the filter, but once he caught a whiff of the putrid smell, he dropped it onto the damp pavement. He wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his hand before muttering, "Positive for what?"

"Pregnancy."

She didn't just say that word. He couldn't have heard her correctly. If he *had* heard her correctly, that meant her visit was related to the news she had just revealed, which not only would make no sense, but would prove the existence of miracles. If she really had been there to tell him that the two of them had a child, that would mean she had

been keeping it from him this entire time, and no one was that insane.

There was nothing that Kevin could say, or do, that would calm his nerves at this point. Even another cigarette wouldn't do the job. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Star's smile returned, and her eyes stopped fluttering. "You're a father."