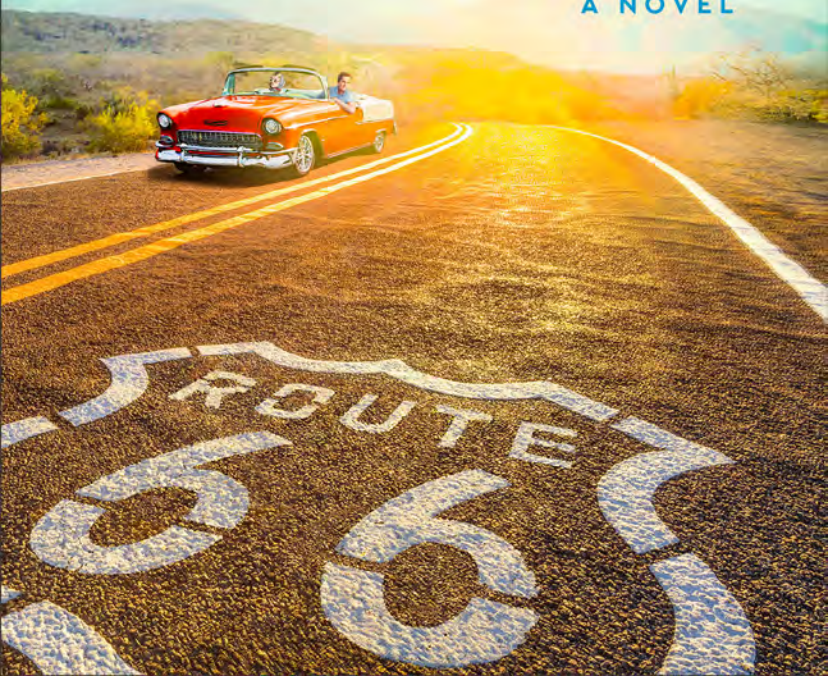


JANINE ROSCHE

*The Road
before Us*

A NOVEL



“In *The Road before Us*, Rosche takes you on a nostalgic trip down Route 66, artfully weaving together the broken pasts of charming and nuanced characters who will have you rooting for their redemption from the get-go. This dual-time journey along the Mother Road is not to be missed.”

Amanda Cox, Christy Award–winning author of
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“Janine Rosche takes readers on an unforgettable ride complete with twists and turns that make this book into a beautiful journey. This novel is a soundtrack for the history of Route 66. Rosche’s writing draws readers into her characters’ lives, leaving them invested in the outcome of each one. I’ll be thinking about this book for a long time to come. Thank you for taking me on this trip.”

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“Janine Rosche gets to the heart of family, friendship, and love once more in *The Road before Us*. She takes us on not only a literal journey down Route 66—which comes alive through the pages—but a figurative one of belonging and overcoming one’s past.”

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“Janine Rosche has an incredible way with words! In *The Road Before Us*, she’s crafted real and relatable characters I couldn’t help but love. This is a road trip you don’t want to miss. I call shotgun!”

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and *Summer in the Spotlight*

Books by Janine Rosche

With Every Memory

The Road before Us

The Road before Us

A NOVEL

JANINE ROSCHE


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On page 236, the lyrics to the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth” by Folliot S. Pierpoint (1864) are in the public domain.

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For Mom and Dad

Thanks to Route 66,
you found each other once.
I pray you'll find each other again,
this time on streets paved with gold.

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever
I choose.

Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road"

Prologue

Miles from any high-rise, the generations-old asphalt crumbles beneath the soles of my borrowed boots, and I wish my story would fall through the hot cracks of Route 66 along with it.

Ahead of me, a sports car ignores the twenty-five-miles-an-hour speed limit through town. Before he's able to get a one-of-a-kind Jade Jessup hood ornament, I step off the road into the brush. The sound of the engine rumbles up my spine as it passes. This trip was supposed to help, not compound, my troubles. Only now do I hear "Take It Easy" by the Eagles blaring from the speakers. When the tires squeal, I pivot to look back at the Tecoma Springs Motel where the car whips into the same spot I parked in yesterday, only yards from my room. Will the Newtons let me stay gratis until everything gets sorted out? Even the kindest people have their limits.

The town of Tecoma is merely a rest stop on Route 66, otherwise undiscernible and undesirable for lingering, not like the tourist traps we've grown used to seeing. Perhaps that's why Dad chose it decades ago. One can hide here.

I pass the sole lamppost, which sits in the geographical center of town. Considering the amount of aged adhesive crisscrossing its pole, it likely still serves as Tecoma's news central. It was at

that post that I learned I was a missing child. Where the seams in my world ripped apart for the first time.

Another vehicle approaches from behind me. A glance over my shoulder reveals an older model Chevy 1500 creeping at my walking pace. A man—check that, a boy—wearing an ASU ball cap practically hangs out his driver window. His left hand slaps the door panel, and he rolls his bottom lip between his teeth. “Hey, baby, where are you going?”

Swatting my hand in his direction like he is a pesky mosquito, I focus on the roadside bar up ahead, the scene of last night’s crime, or at least one of last night’s crimes. What Tecoma lacks in entertainment, it makes up for in criminal activity.

“Aw, don’t be like that,” he went on. “It’s too hot for a girl like you to be out here. You’ll melt the asphalt.”

I take a deep pull of Arizona air and shift my focus away from the road. The side entrance of the bar is propped open. Or should I say side exit? After all, that’s the door the short man with a big attitude barreled out from last night with a bloody nose and, likely, a solid case of regret. I rub the tender place on my arm where he grabbed me so violently. Glynda, the bar owner, steps through the door now, carrying a large black floor mat. She promptly smacks it against the place’s brick wall, releasing a cloud of Arizona dirt into the air.

The truck’s engine revs to my right. “This AC feels real nice in here. I have some other ideas of what else might feel real nice if you’re up for it.”

Glynda looks up from her task and, upon seeing me, glares in a way that would intimidate Medusa.

My twenty-nine-year-old self pulls my shoulders back, lifts my chin high, and latches my sights on the western horizon, where the famous road vanishes behind hills and buttes. Yet my eight-year-old self, with whom I’ve only just begun to reconcile, yearns to stick out my tongue at Glynda. I could just as easily blame her for what happened to my father that August

day twenty-one years ago. Glynda was a grown woman when she did what she did. I was a little girl—a foolish, desperate-for-love little girl who made one haunting mistake. That fact is inescapable, no matter how many miles I’ve driven—from Chicago to Santa Monica and beyond.

“Come on, baby,” College Boy drones on. “You’re not a tease, are you?”

I pause, my gaze shifting between the livid bar owner and this bum. I saunter—at least I think I’m sauntering, never done it before—to the front bumper.

“Well, all right,” the guy says, shifting the truck into Park.

“Is this a ’92?” Carefully, I reach between the grille and the hood, searching for the latch.

“Uh, yeah. Why? What are you doing?”

I lift the hood with one hand and disconnect the coil wire from the distributor cap. The engine stutters and dies, and I let the hood slam closed.

“What’d you do to my truck?” he yells while scrambling from the driver’s seat.

With my best softball pitch, I send the wire into the desert flora. Ignoring the litany of sexist slurs he lets loose, I resume my trek to the last building in sight. With each step, my nausea increases, but I have no choice in this matter.

I aim the toes of Sandy’s boots in the direction of the small jail that looks to be more tourist attraction than serious confinement. But I have no doubt those bars and locks are as real as the small cactus rising through the crack in the road. To think I was a split second away from landing there myself. But Bridger.

Always Bridger.

Before I can take hold of the knob, the old door lurches open with a groan, revealing an older man with as jolly a face as Santa Claus and a beard just as long.

“Well, well, well. Mighty Miss Jade. I heard you’d come back to visit us. Been a long time.” The light from the singular bulb

reflects off the too-shiny, blushed skin on his round cheeks and even rounder nose.

Familiarity, along with a striking resemblance to his deputy son, make a peek at his name tag unnecessary. “Sheriff Samson, hello.”

“How’re you doing? Folks ’round here wonder about you all the time.”

“I’m . . . okay.” There’s no sense in sugarcoating it. “I’m here to see—”

“Me. She’s here to see me.” Bridger’s voice holds more gravel than normal, and it scrapes over me like sandpaper.

My eyes move from Sheriff Samson to the direction of Bridger’s voice. I push the door farther open until a cell comes into view. No. Two cells, sharing a wall of bars. In the nearest one, Bridger’s lengthy form stretches across the concrete from one end to the other in one of his yoga poses. A shiver courses over my skin when I see his nose brushing the floor that probably hasn’t seen a mop in some time. “How is she?” he asks me.

“Good. The hospital’s going to keep her for one more night, but that’s simply for observation.”

The sound of his exhale carries over to me.

“Bridge? Are you okay?” A foolish question, if I’ve ever asked one.

“Peachy,” he says, straightening his arms and lifting his hips upward until he achieves a downward dog position, although he looks less like a dog and more like a grizzly.

“Gotta say, this is the first time I seen someone do that in there.” Sheriff Samson laughs heartily. “Been doing it all afternoon though.”

“He’s a unique one, all right,” I say. “I’m here to post bail.”

Bridger’s attention cuts to me. Beneath a heavier than usual brow, his dark eyes are rimmed by red. Even if he was able to fit on the narrow, thinly cushioned cot, he couldn’t have gotten

much sleep. At once, he looks away and drops his knees to the concrete. “How’d you get money for that?”

“It’s not important. All you need to know is I’m getting you out of here.” I slide the bank envelope out of the back pocket of the Daisy Dukes I would never be caught wearing if I had any other real choice—which I do not—and hand it to the sheriff. As the man takes to counting the money that would likely cover this jail’s entire operating cost for the month, I approach the cell with the enthusiasm of an accused witch to a pyre. I grip the bars, waiting for Bridger to look at me the way he did not so long ago.

He stands but never quite reaches his full six-foot-five height before sitting on the edge of the cot. As he scrubs his hands over his face and then back through his wavy shoulder-length locks, the dull ache that has plagued me since Chicago stretches across my chest and sinks into my bones. Finally, his gaze meets mine.

I lean my forehead against the clammy steel and mouth, “I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” he says. And in his eyes, I see that somewhere, some part of him still cares about me.

“Twelve hundred,” Sheriff Samson says. “It’s all there. Pardon, Miss Jade.” After I step aside, the sheriff fits the key into the door lock and turns it until the click releases my long-held breath. “Mr. Rosenblum, I’ll grab your belongings and then you’re free to go. And take that yogi stuff with you, will ya, big fella? If I tried any of them poses, I’d never get back up.”

Bridger pulls a blanket off the cot as he stands. He folds it with care and hands it to Sheriff Samson. “Thank you for the extra blanket, Gill.”

“It’s not every day we have a celebrity in here.”

“You’d have done it for anyone.” Bridger claps his hand on the sheriff’s shoulder, and before I can think too long on any of it, I make my exit.

When I walk outside, the Arizona sun sinks deep into my

skin like it somehow missed the flipping of the calendar page to September. College Boy's truck remains trapped in Route 66's westbound lane with its owner out in the dirt, kicking the brush and cacti in search of the coil. He doesn't see me. Probably good, lest Bridger decide to defend my honor again. I don't have another twelve hundred dollars to spare.

"I guess I should thank you," Bridger says, sidling up to me as I stare down the highway—close but not as close as he would've been even yesterday.

"You know it's the least I could do. Bridger, I'm so sorry—"

"Jade, you don't have to do this."

"But I do. Now we're stuck in the middle of nowhere without a car, without clothes, without—"

Bridger steps in front of me. "There will be time to figure things out. For now, only one thing matters."

I nod and force myself to swallow the tumbleweed that seems to have wedged in my throat. "Benny."

Chapter 1

One Year Earlier Jade

As I near the intersection of Adams and Lamar, I maneuver around tourists posing for a photo in front of Chicago’s “Route 66 Begins” sign. April through October I’ve grown used to the crowd of twentysomething wanderers, retired road warriors, and international adventure-seekers amassing on this sidewalk. A couple in their matching leather jackets and windblown hair hold a neatly groomed bichon frise between them for their picture, kissing each side of the dog’s muzzle as a young bohemian woman counts to three.

Later in the day, a smaller group will congregate here—the eastbound crowd, a travel-weary yet appreciative bunch who have been living out of their cars for the past twenty-five hundred miles and have finally reached the end of their journey. They’re quieter, and the smiles they sport in their pictures seem more contemplative than the excited westbounders just starting their drive. I can never help but wonder if they found what they were looking for.

With my focus over my left shoulder, something plows into

my right, and I toddle on my heels before a hand grips my elbow, steadying me.

“Watch it, jerk.” Gregory glares at a man wearing a cowboy hat who never pays him or me any mind. “Promise me we won’t be like these people on our honeymoon. Blocking traffic and running into people so they can get the perfect picture. A picture, I might add, that can easily be photoshopped without ever having to go to the place.” He deftly withdraws his phone from his pocket and snaps a selfie of us before I can plaster on my usual smile. “There. Now give me five minutes, and I can put you and me in front of the Parthenon before we even get to Greece.”

I survey his face for meaning. He’s been busy since he and his father bought out Mendenhall Wealth Management’s Chicago branch. In just two years, they’ve succeeded where others have not, yet my fiancé always makes time to enjoy his newfound wealth with me at his side. With our wedding only two weeks away, he isn’t about to change that now, is he? “That takes the fun out of it,” I tell him as my gaze flickers back to the ambitious travelers. “The idea is to say ‘I was here, standing in the same place others have once stood, twenty, forty, one hundred years ago.’ It connects us to places, to people, to the past. It’s romantic, I think.”

Gregory laughs. “You? Thinking something’s romantic? That’s rich. I tell you what. Just for that, I won’t call the city and ask them to move the sign out of the Loop.”

“Call the city? Why would you even consider that? They aren’t doing anything wrong.”

“But they’re a nuisance. I heard this isn’t even the original place where Route 66 began. It’s symbolic. Which means the sign can go anywhere, and the tourists will follow and not block the entrance to our office anymore. Maybe they’ll take the homeless with them.”

I follow his line of sight, squinting as the morning sun reflects

off the windows of the coffee shop that Gregory has deemed his own. A man dressed in all black—an interesting choice for August—hunches on the ground, his head so low, the dark tendrils of his hair cover his face. After living in downtown Chicago for the last two years, I’m no longer surprised at the homelessness. But I haven’t become calloused to it the way Gregory has, so I nudge him. Even though he rolls his eyes, he releases my arm, reaches into his pants pocket, and withdraws two bills from his wallet. A twenty and a hundred. I point to the larger bill. Gregory grins before crumpling the bigger bill and dropping it into the lidless cup sitting on the bistro table next to the man. “Get yourself a haircut, will ya?”

“Gregory!” My toes curl inside my shoes, and I’m not sure if I’m embarrassed or disgusted. “What’s gotten into you? Insulting a stranger?”

Only then does the man lift his chin. When we lock eyes, dread seeps inside me. Not a stranger. Before I can untangle the thoughts going through my head, Gregory presses his hand against the small of my back and pushes me toward the entrance of Hyrem & Hyrem Financial.

“I’m grabbing coffee,” Gregory says. “I’ll see you up there.”

My fiancé disappears inside the shop but I pause. What can I possibly say after insulting this man who is most certainly not homeless? That fact is made clear as he gives a final tug to the shoestrings of his combat boot that was probably made by Alexander McQueen, Christian Louboutin, or some other shoe designer who caters to the Los Angeles crowd. He stands and for a moment I can imagine how David might have felt seeing Goliath for the first time. Then the man’s gaze moves from me to the coffee cup at his side. I scuttle past a few more people as well as the door attendant of my office building.

At the bank of elevators, I press the up button three times in rapid succession, then feign a casual stance as I wait. Although my reflection looks good in the mirrored doors of the center

elevator, I comb my straightened hair anyway. Finally, the doors part in front of me. Coolly, I stride into the elevator, press the number 12, and settle myself against the back wall. *Close*, I will the doors.

And they do . . . until a large hand, its bronze color far deeper than my Casper-light skin, juts between them, daring them to shut completely. But as I imagine most people would when confronted with a force stronger than them, the doors surrender, opening wide so the man whose hair has inspired at least one Instagram fan account can enter. His scrutinous gaze travels down to my toes and back up to my face. Then he holds out the coffee cup. Its silky liquid washes over the floating hundred-dollar bill in a gentle wave. “Can you hold this?”

Without permission from my brain, my hand folds around the warm cup. “Twelfth floor?” I ask in a meeker voice than normal. Of course he’s heading up to the same floor as me because, according to my scheduling app, he’s here to accompany my first client of the day.

Instead of answering me, he bends over, placing his palms on the inlaid marble of the elevator floor. Then he kicks up his legs and freezes in a perfectly balanced handstand.

I tilt my head. “What are you doing?”

“It’s a great workout.” His voice isn’t even strained. Good for him. Gymnastics is certainly a healthier hobby for him than the last one I witnessed back in Los Angeles.

The doors close and as we rise, I become more aware of the downward force pressing through my legs. I sneak a peek at his forearms as they hold his body weight plus the additional pressure. Yep. Much healthier. We stop on the fifth floor to let in a tan-suited man who only takes his eyes off his phone to press the button for floor 7, never acknowledging me or the acrobat in our company.

We ride in silence to the seventh floor, then the twelfth. Finally, a ding signals our arrival.

“This is us.” I wince at my wording. *Us* isn’t a thing. I made sure of that during our first meeting as well. Does he even remember? Goodness knows he wasn’t all there that day. Still, I straddle the gap at the threshold to keep the doors from closing before the man can right himself.

He does. With a shake of his head, his hair falls behind his shoulders. He stops in front of me, and a scent wafts past my nose—the sweet soapy smell of a hair salon mixed with the California surf.

“Serious question,” he says. “Do I look homeless?”

“No.” But it sounds more like a question than an answer. “I’m sorry about that.”

“This T-shirt used to belong to Mick Jagger. I bought it at auction for eighty-three hundred dollars.”

My focus falls to the solid black cotton stretching across his shoulders until the fabric appears gray. In a *Who Wore It Best?* comparison between the man before me and Mick Jagger, there was no question.

I narrow my eyes, knowing whose bank account paid for that one. “Really?”

He gleams. “Not really. It came in a pack. Six for eighteen. Plus, I had a coupon.”

The elevator door bumps my backside. He reaches over my shoulder and pushes the door back into its pocket for another ten seconds or so. “My name’s Bridger.”

“I know.” As I take in the man before me, I recall his face when it was bloated, his eyes when they were bloodshot. Of course, he wouldn’t remember meeting me. “I’m Jade Jessup. I met you at Mr. and Mrs. Alderidge’s home years ago.”

“Oh.” He looks away. Just as his cheeks bloom a rosier shade, he takes his coffee cup back, and with his free hand, motions me into the hall. “After you.”

His voice curls around me, its graveled texture grating my nerves, though not in a bad way. I don’t often pay attention

to celebrity culture, but Bridger Rosenblum was at one time ubiquitous. Gossip rags, social media, even my local radio station kept me up to date on what young Hollywood was up to circa 2010.

While I was working to get into an excellent business school for my undergrad, this guy was riding around with the who's who of actresses, pop stars, and heiresses. Although that was then, when he had short hair and the wardrobe of the *Twilight* cast.

Back then, I didn't waste time thinking about him. I had my own problems.

Who was I to care how and with whom someone spent their time? It wasn't my money he was blowing through. It was Berenice and Paul Alderidge's money. America's favorite classic Hollywood couple had taken the wild teenager in as their foster child, despite the wide age gap.

But ever since the Alderidges put their fortune in my hands, I care a great deal about how he spends their money. "I'm sorry your coffee is ruined. I can send for another one."

"Nah, it's not ruined." He brings the cup to his lips. Instantly, my mind jumps to every germ surface Gregory's hand may have touched prior to passing Bridger that money, and my stomach heaves. Bridger lowers the spoiled coffee as his boisterous laugh turns every head in the office our way. "Jade Jessup, I get the feeling you need more laughter in your life."

I have to work to keep my face from showing the offense I've taken. "You say that like you know me."

"You say that like you know you." His retort stops me in my place as he heads toward the lady seated in the chair outside my office.

Berenice Alderidge, although petite in size, is large in presence. Nicknamed Hollywood's Swiss Miss, she is instantly recognizable with the same barrel-curved bob she's sported since her first movie role in the fifties. Understandably, at eighty-

eight, her hair is now white instead of blond, thin instead of full, and frames pale, wrinkled skin with faint age spots instead of sun-kissed freckles. Yet she still smiles as brightly as ever, even after losing her husband last summer.

“Miss Benny, how are you?”

“I’m feeling quite old with all this Miss Benny business.” She reaches for me, and I clasp her hand in both of mine. “It’s Benny. Simply Benny. Don’t you dare go back to saying Mrs. Alderidge either. It took ages to break that habit of yours. I won’t live long enough to do it again.” She motions toward the man at her side. “You probably remember my Bridger?”

“Yes, I do. And we took the same elevator.”

Her attention flashes to him. “You didn’t do the handstand trick, did you? She has a fiancé, honey. No need to impress her.”

He shrugs. “I don’t see a ring.”

“Um, Gregory wanted stones added to it before the wedding.”

“When is that?” he asks. One thing that hasn’t changed since he sobered up? The intensity of his stare. It still unfurls me more than it should.

“Twelve days. Why?”

“Just curious. Not that it matters to me.” He plays it off coolly with a heavy sigh. “I’m celibate now.”

I somehow choke on my own saliva and begin to cough.

“Jade, don’t pay him any mind. I merely brought him for the muscle. Now, Bridger dear, could you help me up?”

While I attempt to get back any air of professionalism, Bridger quicksteps to Benny, offering his arm as she rises from the seat.

Was she this frail the last time we met face-to-face? No, but it has been some time since then. Before the pandemic, when Paul had been all the “muscle” she needed.

After I unlock my office door, I hold it open so Bridger can escort her to the chairs by my desk.

Benny's focus falls to his coffee cup as she lowers herself into the seat. "What is that in there?"

"What? This?" He reaches two thick fingers into his cup and withdraws a slimy bill, liquid dripping from Benjamin Franklin's face.

"Oh, honey." Benny forages in her purse, then pulls out a travel pack of tissues. My face beams hotter and hotter with every second it takes her to unfold the Kleenex and wrap the cash inside. "Didn't I get you a new wallet for your birthday?"

"My bad, Benny. I forgot." Bridger's dark eyes pinch with humor.

I take my place behind my desk. Angling my knees toward my computer screen, I turn away from his antics and log into my firm's system where I can see the Alderidge's entire portfolio, from their savings to their IRAs and 401(K)s. "Benny, what can I do to help you today?"

Her smile drops, and she begins to wring her hands. "Well, uh . . ."

My stomach sinks a bit, and I quickly scan the numbers in each account. No problem there. The totals are even higher than I expected them to be. "Whatever it is, you can tell me. I'm here to make your money work for you."

"I'm getting older, and my health isn't what it once was."

Bridger frowns as the sobering reality of her words thickens the air in my office.

"I've been praying a lot lately about what kind of legacy I want Paul and I to leave behind. I'd like to withdraw money from the market."

"All right. There was no need to come all the way out to Chicago to do that. A simple transfer to your bank account—"

"I need to withdraw a great deal of money. Enough that it may require adjustments to our portfolio. I don't want you to think I don't appreciate your hard work."

I wave my hand and offer what I hope is a reassuring smile.

“The reason I became a money manager is to help people like you and Paul achieve your financial goals. From the looks of it, you’ve met those goals and then some. So, what would you like to do?”

“There are five charities that are dear to my family. I want to donate ten million dollars to each one.”

“That’s amazing.” My heart swells. How many forms had Paul and Benny’s shared generosity taken in my years knowing them? Financially, sure. After all, we first met at a fundraiser for the Joliet Children’s Home. And although they were being honored for their years of dedicated giving, they treated me like I was the most important person in the room. With each call and visit since, they have been exceedingly generous with their kindness, their words, and their affection—all things I’ve treasured more than words can say.

Still, unease seeps through my veins. The Alderidge account is by far Hyrem & Hyrem’s largest. Not only that but Gregory and his father have often dropped the Alderidge name to land dozens of other high-roller accounts over the past two years. What if the others get wind that Benny is pulling most of her funds? Even if the reasoning is pure, it could spark panic in this touchy financial climate. Will others follow suit?

“I should be able to sell enough shares well above where you bought them so you’ll still have substantial holdings with us,” I say. “Let me type up the sales order and send it over to our broker.”

Bridger offers Benny a forced smile, then returns his focus to my hands as they type on the keyboard. I hit send, then quickly write up an email explaining the decision to my almost-father-in-law, Walter, in case he gives me trouble again. Lately, he’s been on edge whenever I send him an order.

“Are you staying in town long?” I ask Benny, filling time until Walter’s confirmation comes through.

“Two more days. The Rialto Square Theater is playing *Casablanca* tomorrow. Bridger has never been to the place where

Paul and I used to work. He's agreed to let me give him a tour before the picture starts."

I relax back in my chair and cross one ankle over the other. "In Joliet? I knew that place had history, but I didn't know it had so much significance for your family."

Bridger's brow hikes mischievously. "Come with us."

I blink several times. "I'll have to ask Gregory if he'd like to go." My desk phone rings, and I welcome the break in conversation. "Jade Jessup," I answer.

"Change her mind." Walter's harsh tone chills me.

I sit up straight and swivel my chair away from Benny and Bridger. "Excuse me?" Through the window, the cityscape yields to sky and quickly encroaching clouds.

"You have to change her mind. Get her to sell fewer shares."

"Why is that, exactly?"

"You think you're such a hotshot when it comes to dealing with these idiots. Prove that you can be a valuable asset to this company and to this family."

Idiots. Walter, I've learned, doesn't reserve that term for people with a low intelligence quotient, not that anyone should be called such a name. The man calls everyone an idiot simply for not being him. What's the saying? It's Walter's world. I'm just living in it? Or should I say marrying into it? Which is fine, only because Gregory promised he'll never become his father. I glance at Bridger who is finger-combing the long hair Gregory mocked. I grit my teeth.

As the pit in my stomach grows, I search the computer screen for some clue, any clue that would explain Walter's response. "I don't understand why—"

A click is followed by a dial tone. I fight off a sneer, opting for a pursed grin instead. Benny isn't just any "idiot" client. She's always regarded me with dignity, despite knowing my past. And Paul, before he died, seemed to recognize something in me. While everyone else sees a successful financial whiz, Paul

Alderidge seemed to see the lost and lonely eight-year-old girl I've tried so hard to bury.

"Got it," I say to the dead phone line. "Sure. Give me a minute." I hang up and log out of the computer before turning to Benny and Bridger. "Walter Hyrem is working on selling those shares right now. Would you like something while you wait? Water? Coffee with or without money floating in it?"

They exchange glances, then shake their heads in unison. While I take my leave, possible explanations for Walter's angry words swirl in my mind. I pull my office door closed behind me, catching Bridger's eye just before I do. In the hallway, I hear only the shrill whistle of wind outside. Where the hall ends in a floor-to-ceiling view of Millennium Park, darkness looms. I cover the distance to Walter's office quickly, stepping as softly as possible, until I hear hushed voices on the opposite side of the door. I strain to make out the words, but I'm failing, so I try the handle. Locked. I knock instead.

"Walter, what's going on?" I call out. Faintly, a siren whines on the street below, and my worry spreads to the travelers out there, exposed in the swift-moving storm. I can't think of them now. My focus needs to be on my clients. They're counting on me.

The lock clicks. The moment the door gives way a smidge, I push it wide only to find Gregory blocking my path into his father's office. His eyes, normally hazel, are near black, and his skin has a pale, waxy appearance.

"Gregory?" I take his hand, wincing at its icy feel. My fiancé's bottom lip quivers a touch, and he sets his jaw crookedly to still it. Then, saying nothing, Gregory shuts the door in my face.