

ONE

*Thea*

*Hudson Valley, Minnesota*

Thea Kelley stood just inside the apartment and felt the emptiness of it surround her. The rooms were as stripped clean as a carcass long on the side of a road, and for a moment she didn't want to enter that space, didn't want to face what she knew to be true, but the woman with the keys had already marched on ahead, leaving Thea no choice but to follow.

"Well, this is it. Such as it is." The woman—she'd introduced herself as Norma Henson—stood in the center of the room, hands on her ample hips. "Your cousin was here the day before yesterday and took out a couple of boxes he said were for him. I thought that was strange, but figured it wasn't my place to stop him."

Thea set her suitcase down just inside the door. "No, that's fine. When I spoke to Ray I told him to take what he wanted."

With a sniff of disapproval, Norma crossed her arms, looking for all the world like a judgmental troll. She had at least ten years on Thea, and eyes that seemed to take in everything from behind wire-rimmed glasses. "Well, someone could have informed me. I didn't know what to think about it."

Thea looked away, not liking this woman and the way she seemed so sure of herself, so proprietary in her ability to make Thea feel like an intruder. The living room

contained a plump sofa, its cushions sun-faded but clean, and a few other pieces of furniture, most of which sported the scars of longtime use. The beige carpet was worn, and in the center of the room squatted a scratched, bronze-hinged trunk.

Though the essentials remained, the rooms were devoid of any personal touches. There were no pictures on the walls, though nails protruded, no bric-a-brac anywhere. Besides the living room there was an open kitchen area, a bathroom and a generous bedroom; plenty of space for one person, even two, though no one had ever lived here with Sophie so far as Thea knew. This bareness, and the smell of disinfectant, had stripped the rooms of any memory of the former occupant. Her Aunt Sophie had always seemed larger than life, filling whatever space she happened to be in with generous laughter and a boisterous personality, and Thea had expected the apartment to retain some of that indomitable spirit. She was disappointed. It was like being in a museum, with a similar sense of aged detachment.

In the three days since Sophie Everett's death Thea had felt anesthetized, but now the protective numbness dissolved, and sorrow choked her for the first time since she'd received the news. More than anything else had, the oppressive silence of the apartment drove home the fact of a life ended too early. She turned away from Norma and, head down, slipped her lightweight jacket from her shoulders and draped it across her suitcase.

"If you want to save yourself the realtor's commission, I'd make you an offer," Norma said. "I've been running things for the past few years anyhow, I might as well buy it."

Thea turned to look at the other woman. "Buy what?"

"The bar. The building." Norma spoke slowly, as though addressing a less-than-bright child. "From what I hear it's a buyer's market right now, but we should be able to come to a price. Since the place was given to you, whatever you get for it will be profit. Of course it needs a lot of work," she hastened to add, "so I wouldn't expect it to be too pricey."

The building Norma was talking about was the two-story brick structure that Sophie had owned for more than two decades. Located in the heart of downtown Hudson Valley, it was a hundred years old and looked sturdy enough to stand a hundred more. The bottom half contained the Twilight Lounge, the bar Sophie had opened in the mid eighties, and the top half held this apartment.

Thea had no idea what the value of the property might be, but, as Norma had so helpfully pointed out, it was all profit. Sophie had left the building, and the business, to Thea in her will.

"I don't know yet what I'm going to do," Thea said. "It's not like I have to decide right this minute."

She went to the trunk in the middle of the room and lifted the lid. Inside was an assortment of items—manila envelopes, some small, flat boxes, zippered baggies, a few books. Here, at last, was the heart of Sophie Everett, not gone after all, just stored neatly in an old black trunk.

Norma came up beside her and stood on her toes to get a look, but Thea let the lid drop down again.

"I'll just hang out here for awhile," she said. "Probably look through these things."

Norma hesitated, then shrugged. "I'll talk to you later then." She turned and headed for the door.

"Norma?"

The other woman stopped.

Thea held out her hand. "I need the keys."

Norma looked down at the ring of keys still in her hand. "Well, the bar keys are on here, too. I need them to open and close every day."

"I'll make sure you get copies." Thea stood by the trunk. Late afternoon sunlight slanted in through the windows, dust motes swirling in the air. She waited.

Finally, with a pinched smile, Norma stepped forward and dropped the keys in Thea's hand. "They're yours now, I guess. But don't forget, I'll need to lock up tonight after closing." She all but wagged a scolding finger at Thea.

"I won't forget," Thea said. Her fingers curled over the ring of keys. They felt good in her hand, a small victory won.

Norma trudged from the apartment, leaving the door open as she went. Her shoes made indignant little clicks on the tile floor of the hallway outside, then down the stairs.

With the keys now safely in her possession, Thea looked at them in wonder. Sophie, surely with the best of intentions, had left her to decide the fate of this building, as well as that of the business it contained and the people employed there. Thea's return plane ticket home was for late Monday. That gave her less than three days to decide what she wanted to do about it all. She probably would sell, but knew she'd be better off going through a realtor despite Norma's attempt to circumvent that route. Pure profit or not,

there was no reason not to get the best price for the property, and a realtor could advise her on that.

After closing the apartment door Thea returned to the trunk, sizing it up. She pushed it closer to the sofa and sat, then again raised the lid. She lifted a shirt-sized box from the top of the pile. When she shifted her weight on the sofa, little puffs of dust rose to tickle her nose. Thea sneezed. Her eyes watered, maybe from the dust, maybe not. Her Aunt Sophie was gone, and Thea was left with the guilty knowledge that for the past few years she'd let time slip by with fewer and fewer letters or phone calls passing between them.

Even after she'd known of the cancer.

Holding the box, she felt the weight of it on her knees. She was wearing a white blouse, black skirt and pantyhose—her traveling outfit—and she kicked off her black heels to wiggle her toes. She lifted the top from the box, and found in it a number of plastic zip baggies, each of which appeared to contain mostly photographs. Each baggie was marked with a date and, in some cases, a brief description: Xmas 1998; Trip to San Diego 1982; George's Family. Thea set the box aside. She reached into the trunk again and came up with a flat, vinyl-bound book. The dark red cover was faded like old blood, and there was gold-leaf print in the lower right-hand corner. Hudson Valley High School 1963.

She let the yearbook fall open and saw a black-and-white image of her Aunt Sophie, perhaps seventeen years old, smiling radiantly back at her.

And, for the first time in three days, Thea gave in to the tears.