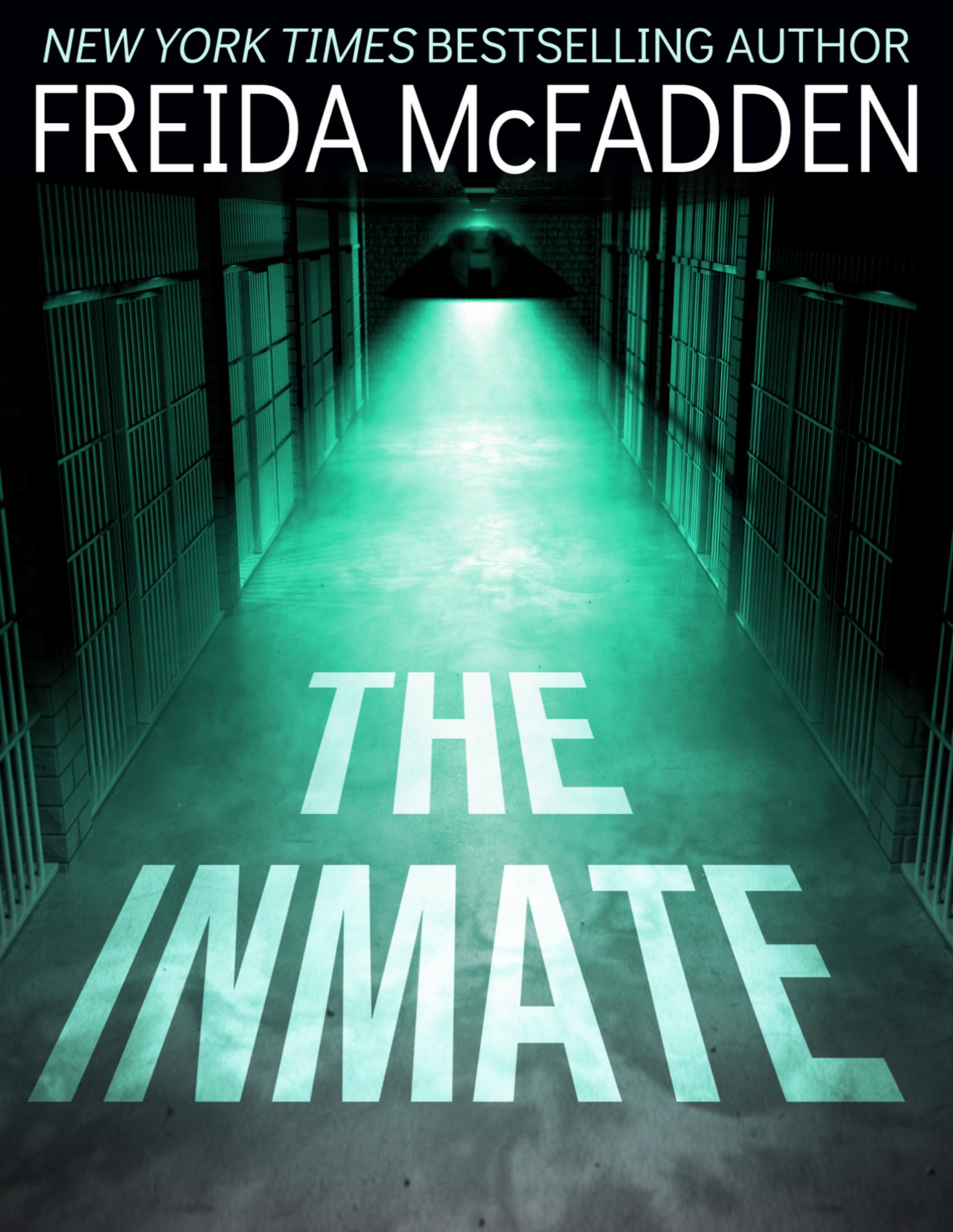


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
FREIDA McFADDEN

A perspective view of a prison hallway with metal bars on both sides. A bright light emanates from the end of the hallway, creating a strong lens flare effect. The floor is polished and reflects the light.

**THE
INMATE**

The Inmate

a novel by
FREIDA MCFADDEN

The Inmate

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CHAPTER 1

PRESENT DAY

As the prison doors slam shut behind me, I question every decision I've ever made in my life.

This is not where I want to be right now. At *all*. Who wants to be in a maximum-security penitentiary? I'm going to wager nobody wants that. If you are within these walls, you may have made some poor life choices along the way.

I sure have.

"Name?"

A woman in a blue correctional officer's uniform is looking up at me from behind the glass partition just inside the entrance to the prison. Her eyes are dull and glassy, and she looks like she doesn't want to be here any more than I do.

"Brooke Sullivan." I clear my throat. "I'm supposed to meet with Dorothy Kuntz?"

The woman looks down at a clipboard of papers in front of her. She scans the list, not acknowledging that she heard me or that she knows anything about why I'm here. I glance behind me into the small waiting area, which is empty except for a wrinkled old man sitting in one of the plastic chairs, reading a newspaper like he's sitting on the bus. Like there isn't a barbed wire fence surrounding us, dotted with hulking guard towers.

After what feels like several minutes, a buzzing sound echoes through the room—loud enough that I jump and take a step back. A door to my right with the red vertical bars slowly slides open, revealing a long, dimly lit hallway.

I stare down the hallway, my feet frozen to the floor. "Should... should I go in?"

The woman looks up at me with her dull eyes. “Yes—go. You pass through the security check down the hall.”

She nods in the direction of the dark hallway, and a chill goes through me as I walk tentatively through the barred door, which slides closed again and locks with a resounding thud. I’ve never been here before. My job interview was over the phone, and the warden was so desperate to hire me, he didn’t even feel compelled to meet me first—my resume and letters of recommendation were enough. I signed a one-year contract and faxed it over last week.

And now I’m here. For the next year of my life.

This is a mistake. I never should have come here.

I look behind me, at the red metal bars that have already slammed shut. It’s not too late. Even though I signed a contract, I’m sure I could get out of it. I could still turn around and leave this place. Unlike the residents of this prison, I don’t have to be here.

I didn’t want this job. I wanted any other job but this one. But I applied to every single job within a sixty-minute commute of the town of Raker in upstate New York, and this prison was the only place that called me back for an interview. It was my last choice, and I felt lucky to get it.

So I keep walking.

There’s a man at the security check-in all the way down the hall, guarding a second barred door. He’s in his forties with a short, military-style haircut and wearing the same crisp blue uniform as the dead-eyed woman at the front desk. I looked down at the ID badge clipped to his breast pocket: Correctional Officer Steven Benton.

“Hi!” I say, in a voice that I realize is a little too chirpy, but I can’t help myself. “My name is Brooke Sullivan, and it’s my first day working here.”

Benton’s expression doesn’t shift as his dark eyes rake over me. I squirm as I rethink all the fashion choices I made this morning. Working in a men’s maximum-security prison, I figured it was better not to dress in a way that might be construed as suggestive. So I’m wearing a pair of boot-cut black dress pants, paired with a black button-up long-sleeved shirt. It’s almost eighty degrees out, one of the last hot days of the summer, and I’m regretting all the black, but it seemed like the way to call the least attention to myself. My dark hair is pinned back in a simple ponytail. The only makeup I have on is some concealer to hide the dark circles under my eyes, and a scrap of lipstick that’s almost the same color as my lips.

“Next time,” he says, “no high heels.”

“Oh!” I look down at my black pumps. Nobody gave me any guidance whatsoever on the dress code, much less the *shoe* code. “Well, they’re not very high. And they’re *chunky*—not sharp or anything. I really don’t think...”

My protests die on my lips as Benton stares at me. No high heels. Got it.

Benton runs my purse through a metal detector, and then I walk through a much larger one myself. I make a nervous joke about how it feels like I’m at the airport, but I’m getting the sense that this guy doesn’t like jokes too much. Next time, no high heels, no jokes.

“I’m supposed to meet Dorothy Kuntz,” I tell him. “She’s a nurse here.”

Benton grunts. “You a nurse too?”

“Nurse practitioner,” I correct him. “I’m going to be working at the clinic here.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “Good luck with that.”

I’m not sure what that means exactly.

Benton presses a button, and again, that ear-shattering buzzing sound goes off, just before the second set of barred doors slides open. He directs me down a hallway to the medical ward of the prison. There’s a strange chemical smell in the hallway, and the fluorescent lights overhead keep flickering. With every step I take, I’m terrified that some prisoner will appear out of nowhere and bludgeon me to death with one of my high-heeled shoes.

When I turn left at the end of the hallway, a woman is waiting for me. She is roughly in her sixties, with close-cropped gray hair and a sturdy build—there’s something vaguely familiar about her, but I can’t put my finger on what it is. Unlike the guards, she’s dressed in a pair of navy blue scrubs. Like everyone else I’ve met so far at this prison, she isn’t smiling. I wonder if it’s against the rules here. I should check my contract. *Employees may be terminated for smiling.*

“Brooke Sullivan?” she asks in a clipped voice that’s deeper than I would have expected.

“That’s right. You’re Dorothy?”

Much like the guard at the front, she looks me up and down. And much like him, she looks utterly disappointed by what she sees. “No high heels,”

she tells me.

“I know. I—”

“If you know, why did you wear them?”

“I mean...” My face burns. “I know *now*.”

She reluctantly accepts this answer and decides not to force me to spend my orientation barefoot. She waves a hand, and I obediently trot after her down the hallway. The whole outside of the medical ward has the same chemical smell as the rest of the prison and the same flickering fluorescent lights. There’s a set of plastic chairs lined up against the wall, but they’re empty. She wrenches open the door of one of the rooms.

“This will be your exam room,” she tells me.

I peer inside. The room is about half the size of the ones at the urgent care clinic where I used to work in Queens. But other than that, it looks the same. An examining table in the center of the room, a stool for me to sit on, and a small desk.

“Will I have an office?” I ask.

Dorothy shakes her head. “No, but you’ve got a perfectly good desk in there. Don’t you see it?”

So I’m supposed to document with the patients looking over my shoulder? “What about a computer?”

“Medical records are all on paper.”

I am stunned to hear that. I’ve never worked in a place with paper medical records. I didn’t even know it was allowed anymore. But I suppose the rules are a little different in prison.

She points to a room next to the examining room. “That’s the records room. Your ID badge will open it up. We’ll get you one of those before you leave.”

She holds her ID badge up to the scanner on the wall and there’s a loud click. She throws open the door to reveal a small dusty room filled with file cabinets. Tons and tons of file cabinets. This is going to be agony.

“Is there a doctor here supervising?” I ask.

She hesitates. “Dr. Wittenburg covers about half a dozen prisons. You won’t see him much, but he’s available by phone.”

That makes me uneasy. At the urgent care, I was never alone. But I suppose the issues there were more acute than what I’ll see here. At least, that’s what I’m hoping.

Our next stop on the tour is the supply room. It's about the same as the room at the urgent care clinic, but of course, smaller—also with ID badge access. There are bandages, suture materials, and various bins and tubes and chemicals.

"Only I can dispense medications," Dorothy tells me. "You write the order and I'll dispense the medication to the patient. If there's something we don't have, we can put it on order."

I rub my sweaty hands against my black dress pants. "Right, okay."

Dorothy gives me a long look. "I know you're anxious working in a maximum-security prison, but you have to know that a lot of these men will be grateful for your care. As long as you're professional, you won't have any problems."

"Right..."

"Do *not* share any personal information." Her lips set into a straight line. "Do *not* tell them where you live. Don't tell them *anything* about your life. Don't put up any photos. Do you have children?"

"I have a son."

Dorothy regards me in surprise. She expected me to say no. Most people are surprised when I tell them I have a child. Even though I'm twenty-eight, I look much younger. Although I feel a lot older.

I look like I'm in college, and I feel like I'm fifty. Story of my life.

"Well," Dorothy says, "don't talk about your kid. Keep it professional. Always. I don't know what you're used to in your old job, but these men are not your friends. These are criminals who have committed extremely serious offenses, and a lot of them are here for life."

"I know." Boy, do I know.

"And most of all..." Dorothy's icy blue eyes bore into me. "You need to remember that while most of these men will see you for legitimate reasons, some of them are here to get drugs. We have a small quantity of narcotics in the pharmacy, but those are reserved for rare occasions. Do not let these men trick you into prescribing narcotics for them to abuse or sell."

"Of course..."

"Also," she adds, "never accept any sort of payment in exchange for narcotics. If anyone makes an offer like that to you, you come straight to me."

I suck in a breath. "I would *never* do that."

Dorothy gives me a pointed look. “Yes, well, that’s what the last one said. Now she’s gonna end up in a place like this herself.”

For a moment, I am speechless. When the warden interviewed me, I had asked about the last person working here, and he said that she had left for “personal reasons.” He didn’t happen to mention that she was arrested for selling narcotics to prisoners.

It’s sobering to think that the last person who had this job before me is now incarcerated. I’ve heard that once you’re in the prison system, it’s hard to get out of it. Maybe the same is true for people who work here.

Dorothy notices the look on my face and her expression softens just the tiniest bit. “Don’t worry,” she says. “It’s not as scary as you think. Really, it’s just like any other medical job. You see patients, you make them better, then you send them back to their lives.”

“Yes...” I rub the back of my neck. “I was just wondering... Am I going to be responsible for seeing *all* the prisoners in the penitentiary? Like, do I just cover a segment or...?”

Her lips curl. “No, you’re it, girly. You’re seeing everyone. Any problem with that?”

“No, not at all,” I say.

But that’s a lie.

The real reason I was reluctant to take this job isn’t that I’m scared a prisoner will murder me with my own shoe. It’s because of one of the inmates in this prison. Someone I knew a long time ago, who I am not eager to see ever again.

But I can’t tell that to Dorothy. I can’t reveal to her that the man who was my very first boyfriend is an inmate at Raker Maximum Security Penitentiary, currently serving life without the possibility of parole.

And I’m the one who put him here.

CHAPTER 2

When I pull onto the street of my parents' house in my old blue Toyota, I've got a laminated ID badge for Raker Penitentiary in my handbag. Dorothy gave me an ominous warning about not letting it fall into the wrong hands, but based on my access privileges, I'm pretty sure the only thing somebody could do with it is steal some Band-Aids and use the employee toilet. Still, I'll guard it with my life.

Despite the sour note on which I left town over a decade ago, I loved growing up in Raker. It's a beautiful town, with trees on every corner, picturesque old houses, and neighbors who won't automatically avert their eyes when they pass you on the street like in Queens. And when you look at the sky at night, you can make out the individual constellations, instead of just a few random dots of light that are probably just airplanes.

This is exactly the sort of place where a child should grow up. This is exactly what my little family needed.

I park outside the two-car garage, which is a holdover to the old days, when my parents would park in the garage and I had to park outside or on the street. Old habits die hard. I still think of this as their house, even though it's not anymore. It's mine—all mine.

After all, they're both dead now.

When I unlock the front door, the sound of the TV wafts into the foyer, along with the smell of cooking meat. I close my eyes and for a moment, I let myself fantasize about some alternate universe in which I'm coming home to my family and my partner is in the kitchen, cooking dinner.

But of course, it's nothing but a fantasy. There's never been a partner in my life who has been around enough to cook dinner. I'm beginning to wonder if there ever will be. The delicious smell is courtesy of the babysitter, who was kind enough to get dinner started.

"Hello?" I call out. "I'm home!"

I wait for a moment, wondering if Josh will come out to greet me. There was an age when Mommy coming home was followed by the scrambling of little feet and a warm body hurling itself at my knees. Those kinds of greetings are less common now that Josh has turned ten years old. He still loves me, don't get me wrong, just not quite so *emphatically*.

Sure enough, a second later, Josh stumbles into the foyer in his bare feet. This is the last week before school starts, and he's taking advantage of it by spending ninety percent of his time on the sofa. Either watching television or playing Nintendo. I shouldn't let him do it, but soon enough, there will be school and homework and sports teams. His big thing is Little League, and that doesn't start till the spring, but when it gets closer, he'll want me to take him to the park to practice.

"Hi, Mom!"

I hold out my arms, and he falls into them, not entirely reluctantly. "Hey, kiddo. How was your day?"

"Okay."

"Did you do anything besides sit on the couch?"

He grins at me. "Why would I?"

Josh brushes his brown hair out of his eyes. He needs a haircut, which, if history is any indication, will be done in the bathroom over the sink. But he's definitely getting a haircut before school starts. Every day, the kid looks a bit more like his father, and with his hair shaggy like that, the resemblance is enough to make my chest ache.

A timer goes off in the kitchen, and I head in that direction as the smell of baking chicken intensifies. God, I miss home-cooked meals. My mother used to cook most nights, but I hadn't lived under her roof for a long time before I moved here for good last month, following her death.

I approach the kitchen just as Margie is pulling a tray out of the oven. Margie is a local grandma who is going to be watching Josh when I am working. He tried to protest that he didn't need a babysitter, but I'm not comfortable with him being alone for hours while I am forty-five minutes away—at a *prison*. Besides, Josh is only ten years old. And he's not exactly a *mature* ten.

"That smells incredible, Margie," I say.

Margie beams at me and tucks an errant strand of gray hair behind one ear. "Oh, it's nothing. Just roast chicken pieces with butter garlic sauce. And of course, rice and asparagus on the side. You can't *just* eat chicken."

Hmm, you can't? Because I am pretty sure that over the last ten years, there have been plenty of nights when Josh and I have eaten nothing but chicken. From a bucket with a smiling colonel on the side of it.

But that's in the past. Things are going to be different now. This is a fresh start for both of us.

Josh takes an overly exaggerated whiff of air. "It smells too *saucy*."

I stare at him. "What does that mean? You can't smell too much sauce."

Margie winks. "I think he's smelling the butter garlic."

He crinkles his nose. "I don't like garlic. Can't we just go to McDonald's?"

I don't quite understand how you can love somebody so much, yet so frequently want to throttle them.

"First of all," I say, "there's no McDonald's in Raker, so no, we *can't* go to McDonald's. And second, Margie made us a delicious home-cooked meal. If you don't want it, you can make your own dinner."

Margie laughs. "You sound like my daughter."

I'm hoping that's a compliment. "Thank you so much for coming today, Margie. You'll be here to meet Josh after school on Monday? The school bus is supposed to be here around three."

"It's a date!" she confirms.

I walk Margie to the door, even though she's got her own key. Just before I bid her goodbye, she hesitates, a groove between her gray eyebrows. "Listen, Brooke..."

If she tells me she's quitting, I am going to curl up in a ball and cry. She was the only available sitter even remotely in my price range, and I can barely afford her as is. "Yes...?"

"Josh seems really nervous about starting school," she says. "I know it's hard being in a new town and all, especially at his age. But he seemed even more anxious than I would expect."

"Oh..."

"I don't want to worry you, dear," she says. "I just wanted to let you know."

My heart goes out to my ten-year-old son. I can't blame him for missing McDonald's. McDonald's is familiar. Raker is not familiar, and neither is this house. In his entire life, my parents would never let us visit—they always came out to us in the city, until I told them they couldn't

anymore. This town is home for me, but to Josh, it's a town full of strangers.

And I can think of a few other reasons why he would be scared about starting school after what happened back in Queens.

"I'll take care of it," I say. "Thanks again, Margie."

I come back into the kitchen, where Josh is sitting at the kitchen table, playing with the salt and pepper shakers. He's making a little pile of salt and pepper, which I've told him repeatedly not to do, but I'm not angry about it right now. I slide into the seat across from him.

"Hey, buddy," I say. "You okay?"

Josh traces his first initial, J, in the pile of condiments on the table. "Yeah."

"Feeling nervous about school?"

He lifts one of his skinny shoulders.

"I heard the kids are really nice here," I say. "It won't be like back home."

He lifts his brown eyes. "How could you know that?"

I flinch, experiencing his pain like it's my own. Last year at school, Josh got bullied. *Badly*. I didn't even know that it was happening because he didn't talk about it at home. He just started getting quieter and quieter. I couldn't figure out why until the day he came home with a black eye.

Even with the shiner, Josh tried to deny anything was going on. He was so ashamed to tell me why the other kids were bullying him. I had no idea what happened. My son is a little on the quiet side, but there's nothing about him that stands out—I didn't have a clue what made him a target. Until I found out the name all the other kids were calling him:

Bastard.

It was a knife in my heart that the other kids were bullying him because of *me*. Because of *my* history and the fact that my son never had a father. I had some dark thoughts after that, believe me.

The school had a no-tolerance bullying policy, but apparently, that was just something they said to sound like they were doing the right thing. Nobody seemed to have any compulsion to do anything to help my son. And it didn't help that the principal had judgment in his eyes when he noted that the other kids were simply pointing out an unfortunate reality about my *situation*.

When you are a single mom who is barely keeping it together as it is, it's hard to deal with a school that pretends nothing is wrong. And a bunch of other parents twenty years older than you are and who have a lot more money. I even consulted with a lawyer, which wiped out most of my checking account, but the upshot was that they recommended moving Josh to a new school.

So after a car wreck killed both my parents at the end of the school year, I decided not to sell the house where I grew up. This was the fresh start Josh and I needed.

"You are going to make friends," I say to my son.

"Maybe," he says.

"You will," I insist. "I *promise*."

The problem with your kid getting older is they know there are some things you can't promise.

Josh doesn't look up from the little pile of salt and pepper. This time he writes an S in it for his last name. "Mom?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Now that we're living here, am I going to meet my dad?"

I almost choke on my own saliva. Wow, I did not know that thought was going through his head. As much as I have tried my best to be two parents for this kid, there have been times in Josh's life when he has seemed obsessed with who his father is. When he was five, I couldn't get him to stop talking about it. Every day he would come home with a new drawing of his father and what he imagined that father would look like. An astronaut. A police officer. A veterinarian. But he hasn't mentioned his father in a while.

"Josh," I begin.

"Because he lives here?" He raises his eyes from the table. "Right?"

Every word is like a little tiny dagger in my heart. I should've just told him that his father was dead. That would've made things so much easier. I could have made up some wonderful story about how his father was a hero who died, I don't know, trying to save a puppy from a fire. He would've been happy with that. Maybe if I told him the puppy fire story, the kids wouldn't have bullied him last year.

"Honey," I say, "your dad used to live here, but now he doesn't. Not anymore."

I can't quite read the expression on Josh's face. The other problem with your kid getting older is that they can tell when you're lying.