

Three

She opened up all the rooms, turned the heat back up, even switched on the fireplaces—all seven of them.

She bought fresh flowers, baked cookies.

The time spent on her laptop researching the best way to sell a house, and fast, had suggested cookies, flowers. And as the realtor had decreed, depersonalizing.

Keep it all neutral.

As far as she was concerned, the place was as neutral as they came. She didn't find the big house welcoming, but then she never had. Maybe with softer furnishings, warmer colors—it might have felt like a home.

But that was her sensibility, and hers didn't matter.

The sooner she unloaded the damn place, the sooner that section of the crushing debt lifted off her shoulders.

The realtor arrived armed with flowers and cookies, so Shelby figured she could have saved her time and money there. She'd brought what she called a staging team with her, and they swarmed around changing the placement of furniture, displaying more flowers, lighting candles. Shelby

had picked up a dozen scented candles, but decided she'd keep that to herself, just return them or keep them, depending on what seemed best when this was all said and done.

"The place is immaculate." The realtor beamed at Shelby, gave her a congratulatory pat on the shoulder. "Your cleaning crew did a terrific job."

Shelby thought of her midnight scrubblings and polishings, and only smiled. "I want it to show well."

"Believe me, it does. Short sales can be tricky, and will put some potential buyers off, but I'm confident we're going to get offers, good ones, and quickly."

"I hope you're right. I wanted to say, I've got someone coming in Monday morning to see about the furniture, but if anyone who comes in is interested in buying it, any of it, I'm going to price it to sell."

"That's excellent! There are so many wonderful pieces. I'll make sure we let people know."

She took a last critical look around herself, thought of the gun, the papers, the cash she'd locked in the safe in Richard's office.

Then she hefted the big bag she habitually carried.

"Callie and I are going to get out of the way. I have errands to run."

And a minivan to buy.

HER DADDY MIGHT NOT have approved that she didn't buy American, but the five-year-old Toyota she'd found through CarMax got high ratings on safety and reliability. And the price was right.

The price got better when she made herself haggle—offering cash. Real cash.

Her hands wanted to shake as she counted it out—half now, the rest when she picked the car up the next afternoon—but she bore down hard.

Maybe she had to pull over three blocks away, rest her forehead on the

wheel. She'd never in her life spent so much money in one place. Never in her life bought a car.

Now she let herself shake, but it wasn't from nerves, no, not now. It was from stunning delight.

Shelby Anne Pomeroy—because that's who she was down into it, whatever the legal papers said—had just bought a 2010 Toyota minivan in happy cherry red. By herself. On her own.

And had shaved a thousand dollars off the deal because she hadn't been afraid to ask for it.

"We're going to be fine, Callie," she said, though her daughter was deep in her *Shrek* zone. "We're going to be just fine."

She used her cell, called the leasing company and arranged for them to pick up the SUV. And bearing down again, made herself ask for a ride to pick up the minivan.

Might as well deal with the insurance while she was at it, and Callie was in her zone. She'd just consider the SUV her office, temporarily.

Once she arranged for the car insurance to be transferred, she checked the online site where she'd listed the wine for sale.

"Oh my goodness, Callie, we've got bids!"

Delighted, fascinated, she scrolled through, adding in her head, and found over a thousand dollars already bid.

"I'm going to put another twelve bottles up tonight, that's just what I'm going to do."

Since it seemed her luck was running hot, she geared herself up for the drive into Philadelphia. Even with the GPS she made three wrong turns, had her belly knotted by the traffic. But she found the fur shop, hauled the never-worn chinchilla and her daughter inside.

To her surprise, no one looked at her like she was pathetic, or made her feel small for returning the coat. And that carved away a major chunk from a credit card, knocking the principal down to not-quite-as-scary, and lowered the painful interest rate.

She'd sat frozen for too long, Shelby admitted, and treated her little

girl to a Happy Meal. Way, way too long. She'd broken the ice now, and damn it, she intended to make a flood.

She waited until she was out of the city again, gassed up the car—cursed the cold and the price of gas—then drove aimlessly for a while as Callie had fallen asleep.

Twice she drove by her own house—or the lender's house—and kept going when she counted the cars out in front. That was good, of course that was good, anyone who came to look at the house could be the one to buy it. But God, she just wanted to take Callie back, settle in, work on her accounting spreadsheet.

She stalled long enough so just the realtor waited.

"Sorry, give me one minute," Shelby said on the run. "Callie really needs to pee."

They made it—just barely. When she went back out to the great room, the realtor sat working on her tablet.

"We had a *very* successful open house. Over fifty people, and this time of year that's excellent. We had a lot of interest, and two offers."

"Offers." Stunned, Shelby set Callie down.

"Low offers, and I don't think the lender's going to accept, but it's a good start. And we have a family of four very interested. I have a good feeling about them. They're going to talk it over and get back to me."

"That's terrific."

"I also have an offer on your master bedroom suite. One of the lookers brought her sister, and while the sister isn't in the market for a house, she is for furniture. The offer's a little low, in my opinion, and she'd want it right away. Monday at the latest."

"Sold."

The realtor laughed, then blinked in surprise when she realized Shelby meant it. "Shelby, I haven't even told you her offer."

"It doesn't matter. I hate that furniture. I hate every stick of furniture in this house. Except for Callie's room," she amended, pushing at her hair as her daughter pulled out the basket of toys Shelby kept in one of the base

kitchen cabinets. "It's the only one where I picked everything out myself. She can come haul it away tonight, for all I care. There are plenty of other places to sleep in here."

"Can we sit down?"

"I'm sorry, of course. I'm sorry, Ms. Tinesdale, I'm a little wound up, is all."

"I told you to call me Donna."

"Donna. Do you want some coffee or something? I've forgotten every bit of my manners."

"Just sit. You're dealing with a lot. Frankly, I don't know how you're dealing with it all. I want to help you. That's my job. The offer for the furniture is too low. Let me make a counteroffer. There's nothing wrong with a bargain, Shelby, but I don't like feeling you're getting taken advantage of. Even though it's ugly furniture."

"Oh!" Something inside Shelby just lit up. Like vindication. "Do you think so, too? Really?"

"Just about every piece of it, except Callie's room."

Shelby let out a laugh that to her shock turned to weeping in a finger snap.

"I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry."

"Mama." Callie crawled into her lap. "Don't cry. Mama, don't cry."

"I'm all right." She clutched Callie, rocked. "I'm okay. I'm just tired."

"Mama needs a nap."

"I'm okay. I'm okay, baby. Don't worry."

"I'm going to pour you a glass of wine," Donna announced, and dug tissues from her pocket. "You sit. I saw a bottle in the fridge."

"It's kind of early."

"Not today it isn't. Now tell me," she continued as she went to get a glass. "What else do you want to sell? The art?"

"Oh my God, yes." Worn to the bone, she let Callie pat a tissue over her face. "It's on my list to see about. I don't understand paintings like all these."

“Rugs? Lamps?”

“I’ve packed up everything I want out of here, except for Callie’s room and my clothes, and a few things I need to keep around while we’re living here. I don’t want any of it, Mrs.— Donna. Even the dishes aren’t mine.”

“There’s quite a wine collection downstairs.”

“I’ve put twenty-four bottles online, this site I found. People are already bidding. I’m going to put another dozen on tonight.”

Donna angled her head, gave Shelby what Shelby thought of as an appraisal. “Aren’t you clever?”

“If I was clever, I wouldn’t be in this fix. Thank you,” she added when Donna gave her the wine.

“I don’t think that’s true, but let’s start where we are. Can you give me the name of the company you have coming in about the furniture?”

“It’s Dolby and Sons, out of Philadelphia.”

“Good. That’s good, and exactly who I’d recommend.” Sipping wine, Donna made notes on her tablet, spoke briskly. “I’ll make a counteroffer, but this buyer is going to have to come up to reality if she’s serious about the master bedroom furniture. Otherwise, Chad Dolby—that’s the oldest son, and he’s probably the one who’ll come in to give you a price—will make a fair offer. I know someone who would give you another price on your dishes, glassware, barware. And there are two art dealers I’d recommend for purchasing your art.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“It’s my job,” Donna reminded her. “And it’s a pleasure. I have a daughter just a couple years younger than you. I’d hope someone would help her out if she ever found herself in . . . this kind of fix. I noticed you’d cleaned out your husband’s closet.”

“I did. Mama’s fine, baby.” She kissed Callie’s hair. “You go ahead and play now. I took most of it into Second Chances,” she told Donna when Callie slid off her lap.

“Perfect. Macey and Cheryl are very good at what they do, and their store gets a lot of traffic.”

“Do you know everyone?”

“That’s part of the job. How about the books?”

“I packed up my books, the ones I like. Richard bought the ones left in the library. He just bought them—what was it?—in a lot.”

“And we’ll sell them the same way.” Donna nodded, tapped on her tablet. “I’m going to add that to my notes. And if it’s what you want, I’m going to put some of the contacts I have in touch with you. You can set up appointments.”

“That would be wonderful. I would appreciate that so much. It feels like I’ve been stumbling around, trying to figure out what to do with what for so long now.”

“From what I’m seeing, you’ve figured it out very well.”

“Thank you, but it helps so much to have advice and direction. You’re so nice. I don’t know why you made me so nervous.”

Now Donna laughed. “I can have that effect. Should I give the contacts your cell number or the landline?”

“Maybe you could give them both. I try to keep my cell phone with me, in a pocket, but sometimes I forget.”

“Done. These are businesspeople, and they’re looking to make a profit. But they won’t lowball you. If you think of anything else, you just let me know.” She smiled. “I really do know everybody. And, Shelby, I’m going to get you an offer on this house, a good one. It’s a beautiful space in a prime location, and the right buyer’s out there. I’ll find the right buyer.”

“I believe you will.”

And because she did, Shelby slept better that night than she had in weeks.

THE ENTIRE NEXT WEEK her head never stopped spinning. She made the deal with Dolby and Sons, shipped off wine won through the online auction house, picked up a very nice check from the consignment shop

for some of Richard's clothes—and hauled in three garment bags from her own closet.

She accepted the offer for the dishes and glassware, packed it all up—and bought a set of four colorful plastic plates, bowls, cups.

They'd make do.

Though it might have been more sensible to eke out payments, she paid off one of the credit cards in full.

One down, she thought, eleven to go.

The art—not originals, as Richard had claimed—wasn't worth as much as she'd hoped. But the quantity made up for some of that.

Every day she felt lighter. Even the storm that blew in fourteen inches of snow didn't throw her off. She bundled Callie up like an Eskimo, and together they built their first snowman.

Nothing to write home about, she thought, but she did just that, snapping pictures with her phone to send back to Tennessee.

And the adventure wore her little girl out so Callie and Fifi were tucked in by seven. That gave Shelby a long, solid evening with her spreadsheet, her bills and her to-do list.

Should she use this money here to pay off one of the smaller credit cards, just get it gone? Or should she apply that money to one of the big ones, cut the interest payment down?

As much as she wanted to say two down, ten to go, it made more sense to cut down the interest.

Carefully she made the payment online, the way she'd taught herself, logged it onto her spreadsheet.

Four hundred and eighty-six thousand, four hundred dollars down. Only two million, one hundred and eighty-four to go.

Not counting the next bill that came in from the lawyers, the accountants. But at the moment, hell, that seemed like chicken feed.

The phone rang, and seeing Donna's name on the display, she snatched it up.

Maybe.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Shelby, it’s Donna. I know it’s a little late, but I wanted to let you know we got a good offer on the house.”

“Oh! That’s such good news.”

“I think the lender’s going to approve this. You know it can take weeks, even months, but I’m going to do everything I can to push it through. It’s the family I told you about, from the first open house. They really love the house, and the location is just what they wanted. And one more thing—she hates the furniture.”

Shelby let out a laugh, lifting her face to the ceiling, cutting loose. “She really does?”

“Absolutely hates it. She told me she had to look past it, pretend it wasn’t there, to really *see* the house, the layout. He’s nervous about the short-sale aspect, but she wants it, and he’s willing to go that route. And I think if the lender counters, asking for closer to their asking price, this buyer will come up.”

“Oh my God, Donna.”

“I don’t want to get ahead of ourselves, but you should celebrate, at least a little.”

“I feel like stripping naked and dancing all over this damn house.”

“Whatever works.”

“Maybe just the dancing part. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Fingers crossed, Shelby. I’ll contact the lender first thing in the morning. You have a good night.”

“You, too. Thanks again. Bye now.”

She didn’t strip naked, but she did bring up the satellite radio. She hit with Adele, danced around the office, picked up the lyrics, let her voice loose.

She’d had ambitions once, aspirations, dreams. She’d be a singer—a star. Her voice was a gift, and she’d tended it, used it, appreciated it.

She’d met Richard through her voice, when he came into the little

club in Memphis where she was lead singer with a band they called Horizon.

Nineteen years old, she thought now. Not old enough to buy a legal beer in the club, though Ty, their drummer who'd been a little bit in love with her, used to sneak her a bottle of Corona when he could.

God, it felt good to sing again, to dance. Other than lullabies, she hadn't used her singing voice in months. She rolled through Adele, straight into Taylor Swift, then fumbled with the remote to mute the volume when her phone rang again.

Still smiling, still dancing, she answered.

"Hello."

"I'm looking for David Matherson."

"I'm sorry, you've got the wrong number."

"David Matherson," he repeated, and rattled off the phone number.

"Yes, that's this number but . . ." Something lodged in her throat. She had to clear it, grip the receiver tight. "No one by that name lives here. I'm sorry."

She hung up before he could say anything else, then hurried to the safe, carefully entered the combination.

She took the manila envelope to the desk, and with stiff and shaky fingers, opened it.

In the envelope she kept the identification she'd found in the bank box, the ones with Richard's face smiling out.

And one set of identification was in the name of David Allen Matherson.

She didn't feel like singing anymore, or dancing. For reasons she couldn't explain, she was compelled to check all the doors, check the alarm system.

Despite the waste of electricity, she left a light burning in the foyer, left the second-floor hall light on. Rather than go to her own bed, she slid in with Callie.

And lay awake a long time praying the phone didn't ring again.

. . .

THE FURNITURE COMPANY sent a crew who packed up two guest rooms, the foyer, and the dining room, where Shelby hadn't had a meal since Richard's accident. After some haggling, she'd agreed to sell the master bedroom suite to the private buyer.

She wiped out the time payment, paid off a second credit card.

Two down, ten to go.

The house felt even bigger and less friendly with so much of the furniture gone. She had a nagging itch at the base of her spine to get gone herself, but there were details yet, and they were her responsibility.

She had an appointment at one-thirty with the book buyer—made at that time so she'd have Callie down for her nap. She tied her hair back, put on the pretty aquamarine dangles her grandparents had given her for Christmas. Added some bronzer, some blush because she looked too pale. She changed the thick socks she liked to wear around the house for good black heels.

Her grandmother claimed heels might pinch the toes some, but they boosted a woman's confidence.

She jumped when the doorbell rang. The book man was a solid fifteen minutes early, time she'd counted on to put coffee and cookies out in the library.

She rushed down, hoping he didn't ring again. Callie slept light at naptime.

She opened the door to a man younger and better looking than she'd expected—which went to show, she supposed, about assumptions.

"Mr. Lauderdale, you're timely."

"Ms. Foxworth." Smoothly, he held out a hand to clasp hers.

"Come in out of the cold. I'll never get used to northern winters."

"You haven't been in the area long."

"No, just long enough to go through a winter. Let me take your coat."

“I appreciate that.”

He had a strong-looking stocky build, a square-jawed face, cool hazel eyes. Nothing, she thought, like the thin, older, bespectacled bookworm of her imagination.

“Donna—Ms. Tinesdale—said you might be interested in the books I have.” She hung the sturdy peacoat in the foyer closet. “Why don’t I take you right into the library so you can have a look?”

“You have an impressive home.”

“It’s big, anyway,” she said as she led him back, past a sitting room with a grand piano nobody played, a lounge area with a pool table she still had to sell, and to the library.

It would’ve been her favorite room, next to Callie’s, if she could have made it cozier, warmer. But for now she had the fire going, had taken down the heavy drapes—also in the to-sell pile—so the winter sun, what there was of it, could leak through the windows.

The furniture here, the leather sofa in what she thought of as lemon-pie yellow and the dark brown chairs, the too-shiny tables would all be gone by the end of the week.

She hoped the cases full of leather-bound books no one had ever read would be gone, too.

“Like I told you on the phone, I’ll be moving before much longer, so I’m inclined to sell the books. I’ve already packed up the ones I want myself, but these—well, to tell you the truth, my husband bought them because he thought they looked good in the room.”

“They look impressive, like the house.”

“I guess they do. I’m more interested in what’s in a book than how it looks in a cabinet, I guess. If you’d like to take a look at them, I can make coffee.”

He wandered over, took out a book at random. “*Faust*.”

“I read how a lot of people buy books this way, by the foot? To decorate.”

She wanted to clutch her hands together, had to order herself to relax. She should be used to this by now, she thought, it shouldn't still make her nervous.

"I guess I think it'd be nicer—more appealing to the eye, to my eye," she corrected, "if they weren't all the same. The bindings, the height. And I guess I have to say, I wouldn't be one to curl up in front of the fire and read *Faust*."

"You're not alone in that." He slipped the book back in place and turned those cool eyes on her. "Ms. Foxworth, I'm not Lauderdale. My name's Ted Privet."

"Oh, did Mr. Lauderdale send you to take a look?"

"I'm not a book dealer, I'm a private investigator. I spoke to you on the phone a couple nights ago. I asked about David Matherson."

She took a step back. Heels or not, she could and would outrun him. Get him outside, away from Callie.

"And I told you, you had the wrong number. You need to go now. I'm expecting someone any minute."

"I only need a minute." With a smile, he lifted his hands as if to show her he was harmless. "I'm just doing my job, Ms. Foxworth. I tracked David Matherson to this area, and my information . . . I've got a photo." He reached into his inside jacket pocket, holding his other hand out and up in a gesture of peace. "If you'd just take a look. Do you know this man?"

Her heart hammered. She'd let a stranger into the house. She'd gotten careless, having so many people going in and out, and she'd let him in. With her baby sleeping upstairs.

"You let me think you were someone else." She put a whip in her voice, hope it stung. "Is that how you do your job?"

"Yeah, actually. Some of the time."

"I don't much like you or your job." She snatched the photo out of his hand. Stared at it.

She'd known it would be Richard, but seeing him—the movie-star smile, the brown eyes with hints of gold—hit hard. His hair was darker, and he wore a trim goatee she thought made him look older, just like the identification from the bank box. But it was Richard.

The man in the photo had been her husband. Her husband had been a liar.

What was she?

“This is a picture of my late husband, Richard.”

“Seven months ago, this man—going by the name of David Matherson—swindled a woman in Atlanta out of fifty thousand dollars.”

“I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know any David Matherson. My husband was Richard Foxworth.”

“Two months before that, David Matherson swindled a small group of investors in Jacksonville, Florida, out of twice that. I could go back, go on, including a major burglary in Miami about five years ago. Twenty-eight million in rare stamps and jewelry.”

The swindling, after what she'd learned in the past weeks, didn't shock her. But the thievery, and the amount of it, had her stomach twisting, her head going light.

“I don't know what you're talking about. I want you to go.”

While he tucked the photo away, he kept his eyes on hers. “Matherson was most recently based out of Atlanta, where he ran real estate scams. You lived in Atlanta before coming here, didn't you?”

“Richard was a financial consultant. And he's dead. Do you understand? He died right after Christmas, so he can't answer your questions. I don't know the answers to them. You've got no business coming in here this way, lying your way in and scaring me.”

Once again, he held up his hands—but something in his eyes told Shelby he wasn't harmless at all.

“I'm not trying to scare you.”

“Well, you have. I married Richard Foxworth in Las Vegas, Nevada,

on October 18, 2010. I didn't marry anyone named David Matherson. I don't know anyone by that name."

His mouth twisted into a sneer. "You were married four years, but you claim you don't know how your husband really made his living? What he really did? Who he really was?"

"If you're trying to tell me I'm a fool, get in line. Made his living? What living?" Overcome, she threw out her arms. "This house? If I can't get it sold and fast, they'll foreclose. You want to claim Richard swindled people, stole from people? Almost thirty million dollars? Well, if it's true, whoever hired you to find him can get in line, too. I'm digging out from the three million dollars in debt he left me holding. You need to go, you go tell your client he's got the wrong man. Or if he doesn't, that man's dead. There's nothing I can do about it. If he wants to come after me for the money, well, like I said, there's a line, and it's long."

"Lady, you want me to believe you lived with him for four years but you never heard of Matherson? You don't know anything?"

Anger swallowed fear. She'd had enough. Just enough, and that temper lit her up like a flash fire. "I don't give a good damn what you believe, Mr. Privet. Not one single damn. And if you pushed your way in here expecting I'd just pull a bunch of damn stamps and jewelry out of my pocket, or hundreds of thousands in cash to send you on your way, I believe you're a stupid man as well as a rude one. Get out."

"I'm just looking for information about—"

"I don't *have* any information. I don't know anything about any of this. What I *know* is I'm stuck here in this place I don't know, with this house I don't want, because I . . ."

"Because?"

"I don't know anymore." Even the temper faded now. She was just tired. "I can't tell you what I don't know. If you have any questions, you can talk to Michael Spears or Jessica Broadway. Spears, Cannon, Fife and Hanover. They're the Philadelphia lawyers handling this mess I'm in. Now, you're going, or I'm calling the police."

"I'm going," he said, following her as she strode out and went directly to the closet for his coat.

He took out a business card, held it out to her. "You can contact me if you remember anything."

"I can't remember what I don't know." But she took the card. "If it was Richard who took your client's money, I'm sorry for it. Please don't come back here. I won't let you in a second time."

"It could be the cops at the door next time," he told her. "You keep that in mind. And keep that card."

"They don't throw you in jail for being stupid. That's my only crime."

She pulled open the door, let out a little yip at the man reaching for the doorbell.

"Ah, Mrs. Foxworth? I startled you. I'm Martin Lauderdale."

He was older, with eyes of faded blue behind wire-rimmed glasses and a trim beard of more salt than pepper.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Lauderdale. Goodbye, Mr. Privet."

"Keep that card," Privet told her, and skirting around Lauderdale, walked down the cleared front walk to a gray compact.

She knew cars—after all, her granddaddy was a mechanic, and she took careful note of this one. A Honda Civic, in gray, Florida license plates.

If she saw it in the neighborhood again, she'd call the police.

"Let me take your coat," she said to Lauderdale.

BY THE END OF THE WEEK the library and the master bedroom stood empty. She sold the pool table, the piano, Richard's workout equipment and countless odds and ends through Craigslist.

She had one of the ten remaining credit cards down so close to payoff she could taste it.

She stripped the remaining art from the walls, sold that as well, and the fancy coffeemaker, the fancy bar blender.

. . .

AND WHEN SHE WOKE UP on the morning of what should have been the first day of spring to six inches of snow and still falling, she wanted to crawl back into the Princess Fiona sleeping bag currently serving as her bed.

She was living in a damn near-empty house. Worse, her baby girl was living in a damn near-empty house, with no friends, with no one to talk to or play with but her mother.

Four and a half years before, on a simmering October evening out West, she bought a pretty blue dress—Richard had liked her in blue—spent an hour blowing out her hair because he liked it smooth, and walked down the aisle of the silly little chapel carrying a single white rose.

She'd thought it the happiest day of her life, but it hadn't been her life at all. Just an illusion, and worse, just a lie.

And every day after that, she'd done her very best to be a good wife, to learn to cook the way Richard liked, to pack up and move when Richard had the whim, to dress the way he liked. To make sure Callie was washed and fed and dressed pretty when he came home.

All that's done, she thought.

"All that's done," she murmured. "So why are we still here?"

She went into her old dressing area, where she'd started some half-hearted packing in the Louis Vuitton luggage Richard had bought her in New York to replace the duffel bag she'd stuffed with clothes when she'd run off with him.

She packed in earnest now, then breaking a hard-and-fast rule, she set Callie up with *Shrek* and cereal in the kitchen while she packed her daughter's things. Following one of her mother's hard-and-fast rules—never call anybody but the police, the fire department or a plumber before nine in the morning—she waited until nine on the dot to call Donna.

"Hi, Shelby, how are you?"

"It's snowing again."

“It’s the winter that won’t die. They’re saying we’ll get about eight inches, but it’s supposed to go up to about fifty by Saturday. Let’s hope this is the last gasp.”

“I’m not counting on it. Donna, there’s not much left in the house here but me and Callie. I want to take the TV in the kitchen, the under-the-counter one, home for my grandmother. She’d just love that. And the big flat-screen—any of them. There’s nine in this house, I counted. I just want to take one home for my daddy. I don’t know if maybe the buyers want the others? I know the deal’s not final, but we could make the sale of the TVs contingent on it. Honestly, I don’t care what they want to pay me for them.”

“I can propose that to them, of course. Let them make you an offer.”

“That would be just fine. If they don’t want them, or only want some of them, I’ll take care of it.”

Somehow, she thought, rubbing at her aching temple.

“But . . . when I get off the phone with you, I’m calling a moving company. I can’t get Callie’s furniture in the van, not with the boxes I’m taking, and the suitcases and her toys. And, Donna, I’m going to ask you for an awful big favor.”

“Of course, what can I do?”

“I need you to put one of those lockbox things on the house, and for us to do whatever the paperwork is that’s coming if this goes through, by mail or e-mail or whatever it is. I need to go home, Donna.”

Saying it, just saying it, eased the knots in her shoulders.

“I need to take Callie home. She hasn’t had a chance with all that’s going on to make a single friend her age. This house is empty. I think it always was, but now you can’t pretend it isn’t. I can’t stay here anymore. If I can get everything arranged, we’re leaving tomorrow. Saturday at the latest.”

“That’s no favor and no problem. I’ll take care of the house, don’t worry about that. You’re going to drive all that way, alone?”

“I have Callie. I’m going to cancel this landline, but I’ll have my cell if

you need to reach me. And my laptop, so I'll have e-mail. If the sale doesn't go through, you'll just show it to somebody else. But I hope it does, I hope those people who want it get it, and make a home out of it. But we have to go."

"Will you shoot me an e-mail when you get there? I'm going to worry about you a little."

"I will, and we'll be fine. I wish I'd known how nice you are sooner. That sounded stupid."

"It didn't," Donna said with a laugh. "I wish the same about you. Don't worry about anything here. If you need something done after you're home, you just let me know. You've got a friend in Philadelphia, Shelby."

"You've got one in Tennessee."

After she hung up, Shelby took a deep breath. And she made a list, a careful one, of everything that needed doing. Once she'd crossed the last thing off, she was going home.

She was taking Callie back to Rendezvous Ridge.