

Chapter One

Rows of big hair and bold makeup, sideburns, and wide lapels filled the Westview Elementary School auditorium for the Kindergarten Class of 1980 production of “The Four Seasons.” Fathers adjusted their cameras as grandparents waved and called greetings to each other, the clamor and motion adding to everyone’s excitement.

Backstage, jumpy snowflakes, trees, suns, and flowers pulled at their costumes while moms pinned, zipped, and tucked.

All except for Janie: still in her t-shirt and jeans, the five-year-old clutched the crepe orange and yellow leaves attached to her unitard and anxiously surveyed the room. She glanced at Sally with her mom, and Danny with his, then swallowed hard, her brown eyes darting back to the stage door.

Everyone has a mom, she thought. Wait, there’s Bryce. No mom!

Bryce stood stiff as a statue on the other side of several dozen writhing little bodies.

At least I’m not the only one. She took a slow deep breath.

Clipboard in hand, Ms. Mayfield, the play coordinator, rustled in. “Three minutes!” she called, tapping her pen. She peered over her glasses at the colorful scene before her.

Janie heard Sally’s mom sigh. “You’d think we were on Broadway,” she muttered, giving another tug.

The crowd of moms began to part like the Red Sea.

Janie tried to catch Bryce’s eye, to signal *we’re-in-this-together*. In that instant, however, she realized they weren’t. His

mother, who must have been making a final adjustment, sprang to her feet, thread and needle in hand. “Phew!” she gasped. “You have a *lot* of extra room in those pants there, punkin.”

Bryce turned three shades of red. He still didn’t look at Janie. Not that it would have mattered.

Janie stared at the backstage door, willing it to open.

“Let’s line up!” Ms. Mayfield bellowed. Snowflakes in shimmery chiffon with aluminum-foil crowns on their heads shuffled into place, followed by golden-yellow suns and many-petaled flowers flailing their green arms as they giggled.

“There,” declared Sally’s mom, smiling. She gave Sally’s shoulders a little shake. “Snug as a bug in a rug.” She kissed Sally on the cheek and, turning, noticed Janie. “Janie, is your mom coming?”

Fighting back tears, Janie nodded.

“Oka-a-ay,” Sally’s mom said, following the other mothers hesitantly.

Janie’s teacher spoke calmly. “Come on, my little stars. Time to line up.”

The trees took their places.

Guess I’m on my own, Janie thought. She kicked off her jeans, rolled the unitard the way she’d seen the mothers doing, struggled to stick one foot through, then tumbled over. Her eyes stung as she righted herself. She could hear giggles all around her. If only she were a real tree. A big oak that could swing its branches low to the ground and knock over . . .

“I need my trees!” Ms. Mayfield yelled.

Janie saw her teacher lead the class to the side of the stage. Yanking her costume over her tiny frame, she rushed to the end of the line. The unitard swallowed her. Its neck gaped below her collarbone, the sleeves nearly covered her tiny hands—one of

which she now raised behind her neck to grasp the unitard's leafy collar and keep it from slipping to her elbows.

Tapping a beat on the clipboard with her pen, Ms. Mayfield loudly whispered the final countdown: "Five, four, three . . ."

Janie's teacher gently nudged the first tree onto the stage. The others followed stiffly. Still offstage and last in line, Janie trudged forward. No matter what she did, her costume sagged around her. She was sure she looked more like a stump than a tree. A silly, unloved, lumpy stump at that. Maybe her teacher would step in—she must have some safety pins in that oversized jacket of hers. Shaking, Janie felt she would throw up, cry, or both. "My costume's not—"

"It's fine, dear," her teacher said. "Go on."

The curtain rose. Janie's teacher nudged her onto the stage. The audience applauded.

Onstage, the trees extended their arms to carefully space themselves and then gazed out at the full house of eager faces in front of them. All the backstage bravado disappeared. Eyes grew wide with panic. The faces in front of them continued to beam with encouragement: *look how cute, look how little*.

Stiff and expressionless, the first tree stepped forward and said her line: "Fall is here."

Tree number two followed, a little louder, "It's back to school."

"The heat is gone," shouted tree number three, to the clip of cameras.

"It's nice and cool," number four hooted, with more confidence.

"Our leaves change colors," said number five, jumping in place.

"Some red, some brown," said number six.

Number seven clapped his hands and said, “Get out your rakes!”

And number eight declared, “They fall to the ground!”

A net near the ceiling dumped colorful leaves onto the kids, who twirled with their arms outstretched, just as they had in rehearsal.

The audience laughed and cheered. The children beamed.

From the wings, Janie’s teacher and Ms. Mayfield called, “*Pssst*,” and four of the trees ran to them to grab the child-sized plastic rakes they held out.

Janie gripped the back of her droopy costume as she rushed to get her rake and return to the stage. With great relief, the other trees skipped off, leaving the rakers to do their job.

Proud parents whistled and applauded the brilliant performance.

Almost done, Janie thought, relaxing a little. *Not so bad*. Absentmindedly, she released her hold on her costume to get a better grip on her rake. The collar snagged on her fingernails and tore. Before Janie realized what had happened, the unitard had slid down to her waist. The audience gasped. In another second, it had sagged to her knees. The gasps grew louder. And then her costume plummeted to the floor of the stage.

There was silence.

Janie stared in awe out at the blinding lights, then looked down—*ugh*—at her Wonder Woman Underoos.

The audience couldn’t hold back their giggles. The giggles turned to chuckles, which escalated to belly laughs.

Janie froze, blinded by the lights, the laughs, and the terror. Her chin quivered, and tears streamed down her face.

Chapter Two

Thirty years later

Janie Parker, thirty-five years old, was sleeping in her bed. It had been just cool enough to pull out the down comforter last night, and she lay snuggled beneath it in her softest nightshirt and sweats. Early-morning Dallas sunlight streaked through the window, bringing out the highlights in her blond hair. Her face was peaceful, her dream calm. The day had yet to begin.

The first thing she felt was her husband, Greg, nuzzling her cheek with a kiss. When she opened her eyes, she saw him smiling at her, his hair still damp from the shower. At six-foot two, Greg was still what she'd call a hunk, despite the slight love handles that supported the towel around his waist. Occupational hazard, she figured. *He's a chef, after all.*

He placed a small box wrapped in dark-red paper on her pillow. "Happy Valentine's Day."

Janie smiled up at him and stretched. "Happy Valentine's Day, honey." But before the words were fully out of her mouth, her eyes grew wide and she kicked the comforter aside. Springing out of bed as she looked at the clock, she muttered, "Rassa-frassa, cuss, cuss. I'm late!" She gave Greg's shoulder a quick squeeze, then bolted out of the bedroom and down the hall to her ten-year-old daughter Kelsey's room. Janie didn't bother to knock, though she did pause to take one deep breath. Entering her daughter's room was always a little disconcerting to her.

She'd assumed Kelsey would be a girly-girl. She certainly got a girly-girl start: a lace-canopied white wrought-iron crib, pink ruffled playsuits and dresses, t-straps instead of sneakers. But no. Almost as soon as she could walk, Kelsey wanted to play ball. While the other mothers went to ballet recitals, Janie sat on

bleachers. At the mall, Kelsey scooped up blue jeans and team t-shirts, and only grudgingly agreed to wear the sweet feminine outfits that Janie brought home, hoping to change her daughter's taste in clothes. Her bedroom was a shrine to whatever sport was in season. Not a hint of pink anywhere, unless the back of the closet—where she tended to throw anything remotely feminine—counted. Shaking her head, Janie walked in.

Under the NFL bedding, Kelsey stirred.

“Rise and shine,” Janie effused, barely concealing her unspoken *hurry up, hurry up*. She jerked the curtains open and pulled a new pink Valentine sweater and matching leggings from the box she'd hidden under Kelsey's bed.

Kelsey groaned and covered her head with her pillow. Her matted brown hair peeked out from underneath it.

“Don't do this to me, Kelsey,” Janie huffed as she hunted for Kelsey's hairbrush. “I've worked too hard for this.”

“I'm not going to school today,” Kelsey whined, her voice muffled by the pillow.

“You don't get a vote.” Janie pulled her daughter into a sitting position and threw her clothes and hairbrush on the bed. “I want your hair to look cute. We're leaving in twenty.”

Janie flew past Greg as he tucked his shirt into a pair of black-and-white checkered slacks, his usual I'm-spending-a-long-day-in-the-restaurant-kitchen uniform. With almost maniacal efficiency, she was in and out of the shower in less than three minutes and had her hair and makeup done in four, before Greg could even find his car keys.

On the way to her bureau, she nearly collided with the red wagon loaded with Valentine mailboxes, mini-versions of the modern blue post-office mailbox. Each little mailbox featured a child's name, perfectly stenciled in white. Without slowing, Janie

pulled on her most fabulous pink Valentine sweater, the one with the silver heart-shaped spangles, and a rose-pink skirt, then whipped out her cellphone.

Greg watched her and sighed. “Don’t you wanna open your present?”

“Can it wait till after school?” pleaded Janie, annoyed at the diversion. She felt a twinge of guilt, but only a small one. He was her husband, after all. He should have understood. “You know how crazy my day is.”

Greg let out a baffled laugh. “Sure, let’s do it around midnight when I close the restaurant after the busiest day of the year.”

Janie raised her eyebrows, cellphone at her ear. “Sharon, Janie Parker. Did you send the final reminder to the parents?”

Greg stormed out. Not that Janie really noticed. She picked up the dark-red box and wondered what was inside, but at that moment saw that she had only ten minutes to get Kelsey her breakfast and load the mailbox-filled wagon into the car. She put the box down on her nightstand. It would just have to wait. Like Greg.

“You’re a lamb, Sharon. See you in a few.”

Janie tucked her cellphone into her pocket as Kelsey walked in. Knowing better than to bait her mother on this of all days, Kelsey had her Valentine outfit on, but her hair was a punked-out, clumpy-ponytailed disaster.

Janie shot her a look.

“You said cute,” reasoned Kelsey. “I think it’s cute.”

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Janie strutted through the halls of Parkside Elementary the way the president strode through the White House. The click of her heels on the vinyl flooring announced her arrival to one and

all. She held her head high, ready to tackle her urgent punch list. Her minions stood at the ready. In each hand she toted an extra-large plastic shopping bag, its contents spilling over.

Principal Wagner rushed toward his office, avoiding eye contact with Janie. He was polished and confident, but seemed bothered.

“Happy V-Day, Dr. Wagner!” hooted Janie. “Hope you’re ready for some yummy treats!” She was pleased to see that he took her suggestion of a red tie this morning.

“Always,” said the principal politely. With a quick nod, he closed the door.

Janie briskly approached the reception area, where the school secretary, Evelyn, was logging in to her computer. Janie flashed her a bright, enthusiastic smile.

“I’m gonna need a double shot of caffeine today, Evelyn!”

Evelyn answered with an unenthusiastic, “I’ll see what I can do.” She kept her eyes on her computer screen.

“If you could just figure out how to inject it straight into my veins . . .” Janie kept her smile in place. Clearly, Evelyn didn’t understand the importance of parental involvement to a child’s self-esteem and academic success.

Evelyn appeased her with a courtesy laugh.

Ever since Kelsey’s first day of nursery school, Janie had been Class Mom. She’d come up with the Toddler Turkey Trot for the three year olds at Thanksgiving (marshmallow turkeys with jellybean heads), the Spring into Summer bounce house event for the pre-kindergartners (so popular she repeated it for Kelsey’s kindergarten and first-grade classes). While second- and third-grade Class Mom, she’d cajoled Principal Wagner into leading the class Halloween Costume Canter, a sight that always had the parents doubled up as the children trailed him at a lope around

the schoolyard. Urged by Principal Wagner to give another mom a chance in fourth grade, she'd taken the year off. A mistake, she decided, and she made sure to grab the post before Kelsey's fifth-grade year began.

She presided over bake sales and fruit sales and flower-bulb sales, chaperoned trips to zoos and museums, and organized each year's class phone chain with a gusto that sent other Class Moms reeling. *It's my calling*, she said to herself. Valentine's Day was her favorite, however, and she always spent months thinking up a standout concept. This year she certainly had outdone herself with the personalized mailboxes that would overflow with Valentine's cards by day's end. After all, Kelsey was in fifth grade and going off to middle school next year. It was Janie's swan song, and since September she'd had one goal: to wave good-bye in June with the knowledge that she'd set the standard to which Class Moms everywhere would aspire. She imagined years of future Parkside Elementary Class Moms thinking, *What would Janie do?*

"Sharon, how are the mailboxes?" she trilled over her shoulder.

Sharon, another volunteer mom from Kelsey's class, trailed Janie. She wearily dragged the wagon stacked with the Valentine mailboxes. "No accidents yet."

Kelsey straggled behind Sharon, her backpack half off her shoulder. The punk look was gone: Her hair in two perfect pigtails, complete with pink bows to match her outfit. She practically tiptoed toward the hall that led to her classroom, cutting a quick wide swath around her mother. Sharon's daughter, Sophie, lagged behind with Kelsey. Neither wanted to hear Janie calling after them, asking them to take over wagon duty so she and Sharon could see to One More Thing.

They nodded at Joe, the school handyman, as they passed

him. He nodded back and continued to push his broom down the hall. He fixed his eyes intently on his work—the hall to the cafeteria was only a few yards away, and he'd be home free once he got there. Janie heard the *whoosh* of his passing just in time.

“What’s the status on the laminate, Joe?”

“Still on order,” he said. “Stat.”

In true Southern belle fashion, Janie knew better than to let her irritation show. She couldn't help the reflexive narrowing of her eyes, but she could, and did, keep her smile at full power. She was pretty sure Joe hadn't bothered to call the laminate company.

“I must have the wrong definition of stat,” she remarked.

“Crêpe paper's in,” said Joe. He thrust his chin toward the mailroom.

Janie's eyes grew big again. “Fantastic,” she said, giving him a thumbs up and signaling Sharon to follow her down the hall. A handful of other parent volunteers were milling about as well, each with a shopping bag of her own.

Janie and her crew entered Ms. Snyder's fifth-grade classroom. Janie glanced at the walls, pleased with the assortment of posters she'd had Ms. Snyder hang. “Don't make excuses—make improvements,” one said. “Today is a great day to learn something new,” said another. She'd used a chunk of the Media Center's supply of laminating sheets to make sure each poster would make it through the year without curling corners—Joe had better get that order going.

At the clatter of high heels and chattering mothers, Ms. Snyder turned from the Smartboard on which she'd been writing the morning's assignment. She gave them a look of encouragement, as she might have given to a student on the verge of a right answer, but not quite there. After fifteen years in elementary school classes, it was rare for Ms. Snyder to go out of

teacher mode. Whether addressing adults or children, she used the same elementary school voice: soft, slow, sweet.

“Good morning, friends.” She looked at the mailboxes. “Oh, Janie, you did a fantastic job with the Valentine boxes.”

“Enjoyed every minute,” said Janie lightly. The other mothers tittered behind her.

“What a special day this will be,” said Ms. Snyder. “Why don’t you set them on the table in the ba—”

“Great minds!” Janie cut in, beckoning to Sharon. She wanted to give Kelsey a wink, but her daughter was steadfastly ignoring her. Instead, she watched as Kelsey hung her backpack on a hook and plopped into her seat, eyes riveted on the Smartboard.

Janie and Sharon unloaded the mailboxes onto the bare tables. Good thing Janie thought to bring tablecloths and underskirts. *It isn’t as if details don’t matter.* “When may I start decorating?” asked Janie.

Ms. Snyder surveyed the array of mailboxes, streamers, balloon packs, and half-assembled mobiles looped in hearts. She took note of the helium canister one of the mothers had just wheeled in. “While we’re at recess?” she suggested. “Will forty-five minutes allow you enough time?”

Janie nodded. “Thank you. I just have a few things.”

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Flushed and sweaty from recess, Kelsey and her classmates filed into their classroom and screamed in amazement at the sight before them. What had been their classroom was now a Valentine’s Day wonderland.

A red and white balloon arch surrounded the doorway. The entire ceiling was covered with red and white heart balloons. The children jumped to grab them. Pink paper hearts hung

everywhere amid red and white streamers.

The student desks, pushed into clusters of four, formed square tables, each draped with red and white crêpe paper and dotted with red and white M&Ms.

Each table featured a cookie bouquet centerpiece with each of its giant heart-shaped treats bearing a Valentine's Day message in red, white, or pink icing: BE MINE, CUTIE, I'M YOURS, or U R COOL. The children nudged each other and giggled as they read them. They glanced from Ms. Snyder to Janie, waiting for the OK to dig in.

Janie beamed with joy as she witnessed their excitement. "Don't be shy!" she beamed.

With gleeful whoops, the students snatched their cookies. Oatmeal and raisin, chocolate chip, coconut—Janie had checked and double-checked the class's list of food allergies. No peanuts, no eggs, no dairy, not even wheat. No worries.

A few more mothers filed in with their less-than-exciting assigned items: punch, napkins, plates, and cups.

"Bless your buttons!" said Janie, fixing a bright smile on her face. Her own mother, Helen, wouldn't have exercised such tact. No, Helen thought phrases such as "bless your heart," "bless your buttons," or any other "polite" condescension sounded weak and passive. All of Helen's years as a working mom in a corporate world infiltrated with men had made her direct and tough as nails, which explained why she had never been Class Mom material.

Plain white and ten minutes late, at least Janie's helpers were here, and she knew to be grateful. And at least the cherry and mixed-fruit punches were the right color: red. Hurrying to take the items and set them on a long table, Janie remained upbeat. She opened a half-gallon of punch and began pouring it into twenty-one paper cups.

Instead of helping, the moms stared in awe at the transformed classroom. One mom, dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, shrugged her shoulder and muttered, “Last year’s was better.” She didn’t need to remind them that she’d been last year’s Class Mom.

The other moms nodded in agreement, though their faces told a different story. The kids, meanwhile, turned their attention back to the balloons, jumping and calling encouragement to the tallest among them.

Surveying her domain, Ms. Snyder decided it was time to restore order. “Friends!” said Ms. Snyder to the class. “One, two, three, eyes on me.”

Janie motioned for the kids to look at Ms. Snyder.

“One, two . . .” the class chanted in unison. “Eyes on you!”

“Let’s grab our Valentines, line up, and drop them in our friends’ mailboxes.”

Cheers arose from twenty-one eager mouths as the children gathered their stacks of Valentines from their desks and lined up.

In her rush to get in line, a shy-looking little girl dropped her stack of Valentines. They scattered on the floor. The girl grimaced in panic, then crouched to pick them up. Janie rushed to help her. The girl’s frown morphed into a hesitant smile, and Janie looked at her with warm concern.

“Let’s remember our good manners,” said Ms. Snyder, “and thank our Class Mom, Mrs. Parker, for a fantastic party!”

In unison, the class shouted, “Thank you, Mrs. Parker!”

Janie nodded at the mothers near the door. *Another job well done. Kelsey must be pleased.* She motioned to Sharon that it was time for clean up, and both women got to work.

She didn’t see the girl who turned up her nose at Kelsey and walked away. Or the boy who glared at Kelsey and sneered, “Kiss-up.”

She didn't see Kelsey point to her butt and say, "Kiss this."
And she missed the boy's best comeback: He stuck out his
tongue.

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