

# Chapter 1

The call that ends up changing everything—not only my present and future but the past, too—comes late on a Friday afternoon. At the sound of the ringtone, I shoot a glance at my phone screen, but once I see it's from a number I don't recognize, with a 914 area code, I just let the phone ring. I never pick up if I don't know who's on the other end, and sometimes even if I do. It's probably spam, anyway, some automated voice warning me I need to renew my vehicle warranty, though I haven't owned a car in over a decade.

What I know for sure is that it's not someone calling to cook up fun plans with me for the weekend.

I return my attention to the pile of items on the worktable in my tiny East Village studio, but I'm interrupted again moments later when a ping indicates that the caller's left a voice mail.

My breath catches. What if it's Deacon, the jerk I blew off after our third date a few weeks ago? During the brief period I'd known him, he'd phoned a couple of times just to chat, and since I've deleted his name and number from my contacts, it would show on my screen only as digits. But the number doesn't seem familiar, and based on how our most recent date ended, I truly doubt it's him.

I tap the voice-mail icon to play the recording, feeling nervous anyway.

"Ms. Moore, my name is Bradley Kane," a male voice says, deep, firm, and somber. "I'm an attorney in Scarsdale, New York, and it's important that I speak to you. Can you please give me a call at your earliest convenience?"

The second I hear him say "attorney," my stomach twists. There's something about that word that always sets off a rush of dread in me, like when I notice one of those K-9 unit German

shepherds at an airport and wonder if I swallowed a half-dozen cocaine-packed condoms earlier in the day without remembering it.

I tell myself to relax, that although a call from a lawyer seems ominous, I can't be in any kind of legal trouble. I've never broken the law to my knowledge, except smoking weed in college before it was legal. The only debt I'm carrying is on my credit card, which, if anything, the bank seems pleased as punch with, and I don't have a sidewalk someone could have slipped and cracked their skull on. I've also never even been to Scarsdale, a suburb north of the city, or heard of anyone named Bradley Kane.

But then my heart suddenly skitters. Could this have something to do with my recent work? For the last three years—four if I count the twelve or so months it took me to finally summon enough psychic energy simply to gather supplies—I've been making collages with all sorts of odds and ends and “found objects,” like snippets from magazines and catalogs, scraps of fabric, Polaroid photos, torn-off pieces of maps and packages, and sometimes even 3-D stuff, too. Though I've never had the specific goal of offending anyone, it's happened. A year ago, I used a book jacket as part of a piece that was exhibited in a downtown Manhattan street fair. The self-help author somehow got wind of it, wrangled my cell number from the organizers, and lit into me over the phone.

Okay, his book cover had been glued between a Polaroid of a disembodied doll's head and a gauze bandage, but I'd convinced myself that if the author ever happened to see the piece, he'd be amused by the irony. Well, he wasn't. He threatened to sue me for disparaging his book and possibly impacting sales. There was no way his sales would have been affected by my artwork, and I was pretty sure I was protected under the “fair usage” defense, which allows artists to use

copyrighted material in their work, but I couldn't afford to consult with a lawyer to be certain. So just to be on the safe side, I removed the jacket and filled in the gap with something else.

Though the revised piece ending up selling later for four hundred and seventy-five dollars, it didn't seem nearly as good as the first incarnation.

I don't have any collages on display at the moment, but several are featured on the website I just redesigned for myself. Is it possible I've inadvertently ticked someone off again, and this time they have good reason to sue?

My heart does a second skip as another possibility enters my mind. A few hours ago, I received a message from Josh Meyer, the art dealer who's giving me my first real show at his gallery on the Lower East Side, asking me to call him back when I had a moment. I've put off doing it, figuring he wants to nudge me about the piece I promised him after he decided the exhibit would look best with a tenth collage. The opening, after all, is a week from Tuesday. But maybe Josh was reaching out because he'd gotten a call about me from the same lawyer.

I pull a long breath and try the gallery instead of the law firm; Josh happens to answer the line himself.

"Hey, Skyler," he says. "Thanks for getting back to me."

"Of course. Everything okay?"

"Yes, fine, I just wanted an update on your last piece."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Right, right, thanks for checking. I'm actually staring at it right now."

"Excellent. Can I have one of my guys pick it up tomorrow?"

“*Tomorrow?*” I exclaim, feeling anxious all over again. I’ve been working hard on the piece, but I’ve also had to make time each day for the graphic design work I do to pay the bills, and at the very least I need the weekend to finish it.

“I thought you said it would be ready Saturday.”

“Sorry, I must have misunderstood. Uh, would Tuesday morning work? I can deliver it myself.”

“I know I didn’t give you much time, but that’s going to be cutting it close,” he says. I envision him grimacing on the other end of the line and running a hand through his thick brown hair. “What if we say Monday afternoon? The gallery’s closed for business then, but some of us will be here.”

My gaze flicks back to the collage in progress. I like the individual elements I’m playing with—none of which I’ve settled on yet—but so far they’re not coming together as a whole. If I have any hope of finishing the collage this weekend, it will mean begging for an extension on the graphic design job that I promised a client would be done Monday.

“Okay, I’ll drop it off at the end of the day.” I just have to pray I’ll be done.

“Great, and while I’ve got you, I wanted to mention that we’re getting a ton of RSVPs for the party. My guess is that we’ll end up with close to a hundred people.”

*Please no*, I think, as panic foams through my entire body. When Josh tracked me down six months ago saying he’d been following me on Instagram and wanted to discuss exhibiting my collages, he mentioned that there would, “of course,” be a small opening night reception. Though I loathed the idea of a party, I told myself I would have to grin and bear it. I figured there’d be thirty people tops, and most of them would be there to see the work of the photographer being featured at the same time. I never once anticipated the guest list going into triple digits.

“Um, oh. Wow. But just checking, I’m not expected to say anything, right?”

“Not if you really don’t want to. After enough people have arrived, I’ll do a welcome and talk a little about your work and Harry’s, too.”

That won’t be a problem for Josh. He grew up on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, the son of a legendary gallerist, and he’s a smooth, polished fortysomething-year-old guy, probably totally at ease in front of a crowd.

“You’ll want to say *something* when I’m done,” he adds, “but it can be short and sweet. Though maybe as we get closer, you’ll change your mind and want to say more.”

“Sure, I’ll let you know.”

But I won’t change my mind. I suffer from a form of anxiety that, for more than a decade, has left me a wreck in most social settings. Though I’m hardly what you’d call dazzling in situations with only a couple of people, I do okay; it’s when I’m in a group of five or more that everything goes to hell. My heart races uncontrollably, my head throbs with a weird fizziness, and I generally end up blushing, sweating, and stammering. The few times I’ve met with Josh, it’s only been the two of us with the gallery assistant hovering in the background, so he hasn’t a clue.

“Thanks, Josh,” I say. “Um, was there anything else?”

“Nope, that’s it. And I can’t wait to see the piece.”

I tell him goodbye and sign off. Though I’m freaked out about the new deadline for the collage and the potential size of the party, at least he hadn’t been calling to report a legal issue.

I glance at the time on my phone. It’s close to four, meaning the law office will surely be closing soon. If I don’t want this weird voice mail to eat away at me for the entire weekend, I need to return the call *now*. Steeling myself, I tap the number. A secretary or receptionist

answers with the name of the firm—something, something, Harrison, and something—and after I tell her my name, she says she'll transfer me to Bradley Kane right away. While the hold music plays, I glance out the studio window and across Second Avenue. The October sky has already darkened like a mottled bruise, and I'm suddenly ambushed by an intense sense of unease.

“Ms. Moore, thank you for returning the call,” Kane says when he picks up. “I have some information of importance to you, but for security purposes, I need you to verify your identity first.”

I exhale, feeling my tension release as I realize I have nothing to worry about—it's a scam. Like those people who claim to be calling from someplace like Social Security and are trying to trick you into revealing personal data they can use to hack into one of your accounts.

“I bet you need my iCloud password, don't you?” I say, letting the sarcasm drip from my voice.

“Pardon me?”

“How do you people even look in the mirror?”

“Ms. Moore, please, all I need is for you to do is confirm your address.”

“Oh, so now you want to break into my apartment?” I say facetiously.

“I can understand your hesitancy, and please forgive me for calling before I mailed you an official letter.”

I start to lower the phone to end the call when he tells me, “Please, it's essential that you hear this, Ms. Moore.”

I hesitate. Because if I *am* in some kind of hot water, I need to know what it is.

“Thank you,” he says when it must seem apparent to him that I’m still on the line. “Ms. Moore, a client of mine passed away recently, and the purpose of my call is to inform you that you’ve been left an inheritance by him.”

Before I can stop myself, I experience an involuntary swell of giddiness. An *inheritance*. Maybe there really is a God, and things for me are about to take a turn for the better.