

# THE AGONY





# HOUSE

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## CHAPTER ONE

Denise Farber stomped up the creaky metal ramp and stood inside the U-Haul, looking around for the lightest possible box. Her mother's handwriting offered loud hints in black marker: POTS AND PANS (no, thank you), BOOKS (forget it), and BATHROOM CABINET SUPPLIES (maybe). She pulled that last one out of a stack and shook it gently. It probably held half-full shampoo bottles, tissue boxes, and rolls of toilet paper.

The ramp squealed and groaned behind her. She looked over her shoulder. "Hey, Mike. Did you get the AC working?"

Her stepdad joined her in the truck's muggy shade. He was a beanpole of a man, with short black hair and a sunburn that somehow made him look even more unreasonably cheerful than usual. "Almost!" he replied brightly.

Denise set down the box and used the bottom of her shirt to swab her sweaty forehead. "'Almost' isn't going to cut it."

"Yeah, I know. I called a guy, and he ought to be here in an hour or two — so let's see how much of this truck we can empty before he shows up."

"Or . . ." She raised a finger and flashed him her most charming and persuasive smile. "Hear me out . . . we could wait until we have AC, and *then* unload the truck. That way, nobody dies of heatstroke."

"Come on, kiddo. It's still early, and it's not that bad. If we all work together, the job won't take long."

"So where's Mom?"

"Good question. Sally? You coming?"

"I'm right here," she declared from somewhere outside the truck. She leaned around the ramp and waved. Her hair waved too. It was



dirty blond, curly as hell, and tied up in a scarf that had no hope of containing it. “Power’s still out on the second floor, and I couldn’t fix it by fiddling with the breakers, so I don’t know what’s wrong. We’ll have to call a guy.”

“We’re gonna need a *lot* of guys,” Denise observed.

Sally ignored her. “I’ve opened all the windows, so at least we’ll catch the breeze.” Her sunglasses melted down her nose, and she pushed them back up with her thumb. “And in that box, over there” — she pointed — “the one marked OUTDOOR MISC, I packed an extension cord. One of y’all two dig it out for me, and I’ll go hook up the big square fan. It’ll be better than nothing.”

Denise shuffled over to the OUTDOOR MISC box and punched the lid until the tape gave way. She fished out a thick orange coil, then dropped it over the truck’s back bumper.

Her mother caught it before it hit the ground. “Hang in there, baby. The fun’s about to start, I promise.”

“Yeah, I just bet.” Denise turned away, back toward the boxes. She briefly daydreamed about what would happen if she stole the U-Haul’s keys out of her mother’s purse and drove the truck right back to Texas, fast as can be, before anyone could catch her. Houston was almost as hot as New Orleans this time of year, and the apartment they’d left wasn’t all *that* much better than this new house . . . but Houston was familiar. It had air-conditioning. It had Trish, and Kim, and Bonnie, and everybody else she was supposed to spend her senior year of high school with.

But it didn’t have her. Not anymore.

She quit fantasizing and retrieved the lightweight box she’d chosen in the first place — the one that was destined for a bathroom. Sighing all the way, she trudged down the ramp and through the overgrown yard, toward the new family homestead.

312 Argonne Street was all theirs. Such as it was.

Built sometime in the late-1800s, the house was three stories tall if

you counted the attic, and it wasn't very wide. It was the only building left standing on the block, surrounded by vacant lots that held overgrown grass, discarded tires, and the empty foundations of long-gone homes . . . if they held anything at all. All the flat nothingness nearby added to the impression that it had been crafted high and thin—a jumble of Victorian rooms piled up like blocks, dripping with gingerbread trim that'd gone all crumbly with rot. Once upon a time, the roof was maybe black, and the siding was maybe white. Now they were both more or less the same shade of laundry-water gray. The front porch was a ruin of peeled and bubbling paint, water damage, and missing spindles. The chimney bricks hung as loose as a first grader's teeth.

If it hadn't looked so decrepit and sad, it might've looked angry—but the Storm had washed away everything except the brittle, aching bones.

Denise stared the place down. Its front door was open, like a dare.

She adjusted her grip on the box and marched up the porch steps like she was going to the gallows, but that was an awful thing to think, wasn't it? It was only a house . . . a big, ugly house, and until she could leave for college, it was home.

Eventually, if nobody died of tetanus first, it would become the bed-and-breakfast her mom had always wanted. She was going to call it "Desa Miranda's" after her late mother-in-law, Denise's grandma who'd died when the Storm came. It'd been Grandma's idea in the first place—to take one of the big old houses that nobody loves, and bring it back to life.

Make it a destination. Put people up and feed them right, that was always Grandma Desa's big Someday Plan. Maybe she didn't plan to have it happen in what felt like a half-ruined neighborhood, scrubbed down to the studs by the Storm, but beggars couldn't be choosers. The houses that were still standing were either rugged, half-repaired survivors, or empty shells full of mold.

But this was it. This was home.

Bienvenue New Orleans.

Denise didn't remember the Storm.

She'd been a toddler when it'd hit. She didn't recall the wind or the water, and she didn't know how high the river had come when the levee failed, or how everything had smelled like death and mildew for months after the fact. For years, even. She didn't know how many days had passed before her dad's and grandmother's bodies were found, but it was at least a week. (She'd heard that much, when no one thought she was listening.)

Now at seventeen, Denise was back in the Crescent City.

She stood on the porch in front of a wide-open door, while the house inhaled and exhaled—swamp breath and rot, soaked wood and rust. Maybe somebody had died in there too. The place sure as heck looked haunted by *something*.

One grim foot in front of the other she crossed the threshold, box in arms, and stared around the foyer. Sure, the outside of the house was bad . . . but at least the inside was terrible.

According to Sally, some guy had bought the place in 2015, hoping to make a quick flip. He'd started a bunch of projects, but then ran out of money and ran out of town, leaving the bank to reclaim the property. He'd also left behind a real mess—floors half-warped and half-new, and fixtures removed for rewiring but never replaced. Ceiling medallions hung at precarious angles. The windows were missing their sills, and the remnants of old rugs had decomposed into stains. Some of the walls were open, wiring and mold exposed to the living area. Soggy plaster fell from the studs like wet cake, and strips of wallpaper curled into scrolls.

Denise sniffed and said, "*Gross.*"

"Don't be so judgmental." Mike grunted past her, hauling both the box of books, and the box with pots and pans—stacked one atop the other. He set them down with a grunt, then took the kitchenware to the



appropriate room, leaving the books behind. “When we get the place cleaned up, it’ll look great. You’ll see.”

“I believe you. Thousands wouldn’t.” Denise looked around for a bookshelf, or a table, or any reasonably flat surface apart from the conspicuously swollen floorboards.

She peered around the corner. There, she spied a dining room table set that had come with the house. It was right beneath a hole in the ceiling where a chandelier used to be. All six of its original matching chairs were stacked beside it. Beyond them, an arc of three bay windows bowed out over the yard, offering a semi-panoramic view of the empty lot across the street.

The room was a ruin like everything else, but for the moment, the table was uncluttered and dry. It could hold a few books, for now.

She didn’t want to lift the whole box, so she pulled out handfuls of paperbacks, two-fisting them all the way to the table. Some of them were her mom’s mysteries, and some were Mike’s military or science fiction favorites. But most of the books were hers — an odd assortment of true crime and biographies, plus a couple of nonfiction paperbacks about passing the bar exam. Denise was a good decade or so away from being a lawyer, but she’d found the books at a church swap meet for a quarter apiece, so what the hell, right?

Thirty minutes later, the air-conditioning guy showed up. Much to everyone’s surprise, the unit was soon running again, as loud and wheezy as the box fan and only marginally more powerful. It blew the smell of mold and dust around the first floor, stirring the abandoned wisps of curtains and taking the edge off the heat. Kind of. A little.

The AC guy said it was the best he could do, because they really needed a whole new unit. He wished them luck as he collected his postdated check that wouldn’t clear until Thursday, and then he hit the road.

By two o'clock the truck was empty — and the house contained all the stuff the old owner had left behind, and all the things the new family had brought from Texas. Once it was spread out like that, it didn't look like much. It *wasn't* much, and the house was about five times the size of their old apartment in Houston. Everything they owned would've fit into two of the bedrooms, with space to spare.

"Is that everything?" Mike asked with a wheeze. Sweat beaded up from every inch of his skin, soaking through his red Texans T-shirt and leaving a dark swath of dampness in the creases of his shorts.

"I think so," Sally said. "At this point, if there's anything left in the truck . . . Jesus. I don't care. U-Haul can have it."

Denise pushed the front door shut, sealing in the feeble draft of chilly air. "Yeah, they can have my half-drunk Coke in the cupholder."

Mike waved his hand. "No, I'll toss it out. I need to clean out the cab when I stop to fill up the tank, anyway. Speaking of, we need to return the truck before six, don't we? Why don't we go do that and you can unpack your stuff upstairs, Denise?"

"Can't I just come with? There's *real* air-conditioning in the car and I think I saw a Dairy Queen on the way . . ."

Sally smiled, but it was a tired smile. "I like Mike's idea. Especially since you haven't even picked a bedroom yet, have you? There are five in total: one down here, three on the second floor, and a big attic space that'll be a great room someday — but that one's not built out yet."

Her stepdad added, "The one down here is the master suite, and that's ours. Go pick out something on the second floor."

"So instead of five rooms to choose from, I have three. Got it."

"That's two more rooms than last time we moved. So go on, now. See what suits your fancy."

Denise strongly considered airing a list of things that suited her fancy, including such elements as air-conditioning and Dairy Queen. She could even add her old friends, her old school, and her old bedroom.