

CHAPTER 4

Monday, December 2

It was a cold, blustery day in Jackson, Mississippi. Mary-Lou Fleming was driving Katie and Cyrus to soccer practice, and she was—as per usual—kind of late. A slight woman, with natural blond hair and delicate features, she was dressed in a pair of unassuming gray sweatpants, a Saints flannel hoody and Nikes.

They were traveling westbound down West County Line Road, just east of Billy Bell, when Mary-Lou spotted the crossing lights flashing. Her children were singing Taylor Swift's "Love Story" as it played on the radio.

Little did I know . . . that you were Romeo; you were throwing pebbles. And my daddy said, 'Stay away from Juliet.' And I was crying on the staircase, begging you, 'Pleeeeee, don't go . . .'

"Oh, for God's sake," said Mary-Lou. "Can't you sing something else?"

The crossing gates chimed as the two gates descended. She pulled up to a stop. But the children were restless, implacable.

As Mary-Lou reached out to select a new station, Katie lunged across the front seat, grabbed the knob, saying, "Don't change it! I love that song. Please!"

"You're lovin' it to death."

Romeo take me somewhere we can be alone . . .

Mary-Lou groaned and looked down the tracks. *Where's that damn train?* she thought. Soccer practice had already begun. But the long lines of pine trees paralleling the rails ran clear to the vanishing point.

Katie and Cyrus started screaming in the back seat of the car. Katie, the eleven year old, was arguing with her eight year old brother about who was funnier: Sam or Carly.

"Don't make me come back there," said Mary-Lou with a scowl in the mirror. "This is your last warning."

"Or what?" Katie asked.

"I guess you don't want anything for Christmas this year, smarty-pants. I'm not getting a bonus again so that suits me just fine." Katie was her husband Tommy's child from his first marriage.

Mary-Lou reached for her cigarettes and then remembered that she didn't smoke anymore. Not for a month. Instead, she pulled out another piece of Nicorette gum from her purse.

First, she had woken up late. Tommy had already left for the day. Then, the dog had gotten into the neighbors' yard . . . again. The kids had almost missed their bus. And, to top it all off, Tommy had taken the truck and left her with his beat-up, burnt orange Camaro.

Mary-Lou hated driving stick. It always made her feel so damned nervous. And she hated the color burnt orange. Tommy's ex had selected that too.

Just then, the railroad gates started to rise and the red lights stopped flashing.

Mary-Lou looked down the tracks. *Nothing coming. That's weird.* The gates had come down for no reason. She checked once again, but both sides were clear.

So, she slipped the '95 Camaro into gear and started to creep across the tracks when the car suddenly stalled. "Shit!" she screamed.

The children in the back seat grew quiet.

"Shit, shit, shit," she exclaimed as she turned off the engine. She punched the clutch, turned the key and the car came to life, only to stall once again as she lifted her foot.

The radio blared: *So I sneak out to the garden to see you. We keep quiet 'cause we're dead if they knew. So close your eyes; escape this town for a little while . . .*

That's when she first heard the train whistle blowing.

Mary-Lou looked to the right.

A light shone down the corridor of walnut and pine. The bells on the crossing gates chimed.

"Mom," Cyrus said. "The train's coming."

“I know, I can see it,” she hissed, turning the key once again. “Buckle up.” But she’d forgotten the clutch. Nothing happened.

“Mom!”

The crossing gates started to fall. The train whistle hooted, and kept hooting and hooting.

“Mommy!” Cyrus screamed.

Mary-Lou took a deep breath, pressed the clutch, and turned the key with precision. The engine coughed, came to life. Then it roared. She slipped the car into first, grinding the gears, and carefully released the clutch. The car slowly rolled forward. She stepped on the gas—just as the crossing gate crashed through the windshield.

There was an air-sucking crash as the windshield glass shattered. It cracked like a tablet of pond ice.

Mary-Lou glanced to her right. The train was approaching just shy of track speed, over seventy. An Amtrak. Bright silver with red and blue stripes.

She jumped on the gas pedal and the gate started bending, spraying daggers of windshield glass everywhere. She kept pressing her foot to the floor. The rear tires squealed, spun and shimmied.

Romeo, take me somewhere we can be alone. I’ll be waiting; all there’s left to do is run. You’ll be the prince and I’ll be the princess. It’s a love story . . .

The rear tires smoked as Mary-Lou stomped on the gas. The taste of acrid burnt rubber choked her nose and her throat. The car shuddered and groaned but the gate was too strong. They were stuck. And, besides, it was simply too late.

The train hit the Camaro dead on. There was an ear-shattering crash as the frame of the old Chevrolet was flung up and flattened, sending all three of the passengers through the windows and window glass, up into the air.

Cyrus and Katie vanished deep in the woods, their bodies cut to pieces by branches. The spark-spewing Camaro disintegrated. But Mary-Lou flew past the train—now, just a little bit slower, jarred as it was in its passage. She hovered directly in front of the engine, only inches away. For a fraction of a second, she was conscious and flying. Until the gap finally closed.