

Live Ringer

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Chapter 1

His hands caressed the smooth skin of her firm, but fragile, neck. He could have snapped it like a winter-dried twig, but he wouldn't have derived as much pleasure from that. He wanted her to know she would die, feeling her life slip away as she looked in his eyes. He'd squeezed until she went limp and her stare became empty and fixed, continuing to squeeze until he knew for certain she was dead—and because he enjoyed it.

He had erred with another, letting her go too early. She had fought him until he pushed her over the side and waited for her to drown, which she obligingly did after thrashing around in the water like a fish trying to throw off a hook. He kept the boat out of range until eventually she sank under the sea's black surface once and then again. She never surfaced a third time, as everyone claimed. She'd been a throwaway, a non-experience, and unfortunately, the night had been too dark for him to enjoy her terror fully and her throat too bruised to emit more than a gurgle.

He glanced down at the lifeless body at his feet, her blonde tresses splayed on the deck as if across a lover's pillow. She was better than the last one, but not right somehow. Lately, none of them seemed right. He tightened his grip on the body, grimacing when he felt the dampness of fear sweat under her armpits. *Disgusting pig!* Halfway over the side, she slipped back to the deck, and he struggled not to kick her. *Stupid woman!* What a waste of his precious time!

Energy surged through him, born of frustration and fueled by anger, and he stoked it like a piece of lint wrapped around smoking kindling. She was worthless like the rest—using you, boosting your hopes, and then tossing you aside like garbage. A grim smile twisted his face as he whispered the words, “No more.” She might have gotten away with it once, maybe even more than once, but never again.

He maneuvered the body's top half over the boat's side and, panting, stepped back to catch his breath. A laugh rose in his throat and sputtered through his lips, echoing across the silent water, as he saw that she looked seasick, hanging over the boat's side with her long blonde hair trailing barely above water. He shook himself. *Back to business.*

Once he navigated through the inlet and returned the boat to its slip, the rest would be easy. Leaving the scarf tied around her throat for a festive effect, he hoisted her legs over the side and watched her glide into the water with barely a ripple. In that instant, she ceased to exist for him.

He fondled the rail of *The Floating Lady*, a sweet forty-six feet of nautical efficiency with mahogany trim and the grace of a porpoise. He smiled, disappearing below deck to retrieve his pail of cleaning supplies. Not everyone bestowed on boats like her the respect they deserved. *She* certainly hadn't, treating the boat like a floating warehouse; but he owned the boat now, and *he* knew how to treat a lady. Oh, yes, he did.

* * * * *

A chilly breeze coming off the Banana River blew Allie's hair across her face, and tears stung her eyes, as she brushed it away. The night was in its infancy, barely eight o'clock, but the sky was black as midnight, with only a sliver of moon darting out and in from behind nearly invisible clouds. Light faded early in February, making the Banana River seem almost magical, with lights winking in the middle of the river from boats anchored for the night, their occupants snugly below deck. Choppy, wind-driven waves slapped against the riverbank, and gold beacons from homes tucked in the trees shot across the water. To the east, the sky reflected the brilliant lights of Port Canaveral; and south of there, a softer glow rose above Cocoa Beach. It was all as she remembered from her last visit two years ago. *Two years?* It seemed like a lifetime. "*You're almost home, Allie,*" her aunt whispered in her ear. Allie blinked and looked around, even though she knew she was alone.

She turned back to her Jeep with reluctance, knowing she was stalling. A part of her couldn't wait to turn the key in her front door, but another part could not bear the thought of stepping across the threshold into the empty house. She felt depression settle on her, a heavy cloak as familiar as the river and black as the night around her. Not for the first time, she wished she could be more like her aunt, taking life as it came, with a laugh and a philosophical shrug of the shoulders. She could almost hear her aunt saying, "*Life is what it is, Allie. Grab what it offers you, and make the best of it.*"

Wise words, sensible words, Allie thought, as she climbed back into her travel-littered Jeep. Too bad she wasn't feeling wise or sensible. For months now, she'd been treading water, barely keeping her head above the surface. If she were honest, it was more like six years, but she wasn't feeling particularly honest, either, she realized. "*What you're feeling is sulky,*" she heard her aunt's voice say, and it was true.

The thought brought a smile to Allie's face, and she shook off her gloom. She was back where she needed to be with what life was offering her right now, and it was enough. She started the Jeep and pulled back on the highway, excited to be minutes from home, with Europe and Garrison far away and her family hundreds of miles north in Atlanta. For the first time in her thirty years, she was on her own, and she vowed not to waste another minute of her new life wallowing in self-pity. If she kept repeating them, maybe she could even make herself believe those brave words.

Allie tapped her brakes as she exited the Bee Line on to A1A. After a few miles, she turned left on Atlantic Avenue and right on Madison. Early as it was, the neighborhood had tucked itself in for the evening. Allie loved the little houses—mostly cinderblock rectangles that sprang up all over the country after World War II. They had tiny yards with more sand than grass, but Allie preferred them to her parents' three-story brick monster in Atlanta with the manicured lawn and tidy evergreen shrubs. These homes weren't large or impressive; they were... perfect.

Allie remembered her first trip down alone. She'd felt like a pioneer, and her Aunt Lou—

That's when it hit her that her aunt wasn't there and never would be there again. Lou had died of Hodgkin's disease at age fifty-eight. No hugs awaited Allie, no wry grin or caustic remarks about the dubious joys of travel.

Allie struggled to breathe, as the sense of loss crushed the breath out of her. She pulled off the road into the first driveway she came to, barely missing a mailbox, fighting the tears she hadn't allowed herself since her return. Tears were useless. She'd shed buckets of tears in the past few months and ended up with a miserable sinus infection. Crying might be a healthy outlet for some people, but for Allie, it constituted a medical risk.

Allie bit her lip hard. "*Stop it, Allie,*" she heard her aunt say. "*Stop living the what-if and start living the what-is. That's all you can do now.*" She struggled to regain control, wiping her face on her sleeve and thanking God that her mother wasn't there to see her. Backing out of her neighbor's drive, she saw the front curtain part, and she glimpsed a face at the window. *Great first impression,* Allie told herself.

She pulled up in front of her aunt's house, surprised to find the front porch light on. Did Lou have it on a timer? The house seemed forbidding. No one flung open the door in welcome or even peered out from behind the curtain, as had the curtain peeker down the street. Allie couldn't make herself move. She needed a sign, some indication that she was doing the right thing. She shifted in her seat, and pain shot up her back, born of eight long hours on the road with minimal stops. That was sign enough for her. She turned off the ignition and steeled herself for what lay ahead. Being here without her aunt seemed inherently wrong, and taking her house over, as if she had every right, felt even more wrong. Still, it came down to her or her family, and she would *not* let her mother or brother get their hands on this house. Oh, they wanted it, not for sentimental reasons, but because beachfront property represented dollars to them. Too bad. The house belonged to Allie, period. She locked the Jeep and headed toward the front door, anxious about crossing the threshold, walking into the dark living room, not knowing what to expect—

Allie squealed and dropped her keys, as something skittered across the walk, barely missing her feet. She caught sight of a fluffy tail disappearing into the bushes. Someone whistled. "Spook. Here, Spook. Come on, you damn dog. Where in the hell are you?" The woman coming around the corner stopped when she saw Allie. "Who are you?" she demanded, her eyes narrowing.

Allie took a step back. "I'm Allison Grainger, Louise Smith's niece."

The woman's eyes widened. "Oh, crap, I'm sorry. The lawyer said you'd be coming, but he didn't say when, so I didn't know...." She held out her hand. "Caroline Dial. I live down the block."

Allie shook her hand and motioned toward the bushes. "Your dog ran in there."

The woman looked confused for a moment, but then her brow cleared, and a grin spread across her face. "No, that's *your* dog. I just kept him until you got here as a favor to that attorney—"

"My dog?"

The woman nodded. "I picked him up from the boarding kennel a week ago. The lawyer said he'd pay me if I'd take care of him until you got here. The vet wanted him gone. I mean, he'd been there so long. He wasn't sick or anything, and they only have so many cages." She seemed at a loss. "Anyway, I'll help you get him in the house, but if you take him out, you'd better use a leash. He's afraid of everything. Probably saw you and—oh!" She swooped down and grabbed the ball of fur off the ground. "Got you, you little—dog."

She held the dog out to Allie, but Allie made no move to take it. Dog? No one told her a dog came with the package. "My aunt didn't own a dog."

The woman's face registered irritation. She tightened her grip, as the dog tried to squirm away. "She did have a dog. This dog. She's had it for months. I know because it's in my flowerbeds half the time." She thrust the dog into Allie's arms. "I'll send the lawyer a bill for the food and all. You'd better keep it on a leash." With that, she left without a backward glance.

Allie struggled with this new turn of events. Lou with a dog? She held the animal out in front of her. What would she do with it? She'd never owned a dog in her life. Her mother maintained that they were dirty and eaten up with disease-carrying fleas. The dog squirmed, and Allie tucked it under her arm while she unlocked the door, trying not to think about what might be crawling around on it. She stopped inside the door, unable to go any farther, putting the wiggling animal on the floor. It ran and hid behind the couch, which suited Allie fine. It could stay there for all she cared.

Allie had little experience with death, not enough to know if what she felt was normal, but her Aunt Lou's death left a yawning void in Allie's life. Every summer they would pick up where they left off, as if the rest of the year never happened. For Allie, the three seasons she spent with her parents and brother in Atlanta were something she had to get through, so she could come back here to her real home and begin to live again.

Lou's death altered everything. Once the initial shock and grief eased some, Allie found herself furious with her aunt for dying, an unreasonable—even ridiculous—reaction, but she couldn't help it. Granted, she hadn't been around much the last few years, but she'd always pictured Lou here, doing the things she always did, month after month and year after year. Her aunt was her rock, her haven, even if only in her mind, but now, the moment Allie feared most had arrived, the moment she stood in her aunt's home knowing Lou never would be there again. She'd expected pain or even fear, but she felt—welcome. It surrounded her, enveloped her like a warm blanket, and suddenly, Allie knew she could do this.

She dropped her purse on the couch and switched on a lamp. Home. From the threadbare rug to the well-worn furniture, the room radiated comfort, her aunt's subtle presence almost as satisfying as a hug. Allie smelled the special fragrance she always associated with Lou. It permeated the space, soothing her, making the miles and years drop away.

She turned around slowly, taking it in—not that there was much to take in. A tiny house, a rectangular box fashioned of painted cinderblock. The jalousie front door opened directly into a living room crowded with an ancient sofa and mismatched chair. A couple of tables. A four-shelf bookcase stood against the opposite wall, packed with her aunt's diverse collection of books: not

only best sellers, but also Jane Austen and Camus, Kipling and Plato. Aldous Huxley and Philip Wylie. Lou read them all. The living room led into a dining area, large enough for a small round table and two chairs. At the back of the space, a door led to the patio, not double sliding glass doors like so many of the newer houses, but a wood door with a solid bottom and window glass in the top. A one-person kitchen opened off to the right. One small person. During daylight hours, the window over the sink allowed plenty of light, but the room was sunk in shadow now.

The other side of the house consisted of a guest room at the front, which Allie always used during the summers, a standard five-by-eight-foot bathroom, and her aunt's bedroom at the back. What the house lacked in size, it made up for in hominess, at least in Allie's mind. Her brother Len called it a dump. He had traveled down with Allie once while their parents attended a conference in North Carolina. At ten, Allie was thrilled to be away from home. Fourteen year-old Len, however, had already adopted his trademark attitude of smug superiority. He complained that he was bored, he hated the house, the beach, the sun, the sand. Two weeks and a dozen phone calls later, Len was back in Atlanta with his parents, and Allie had Lou to herself year after year, which suited her fine. The dog was still hiding behind the sofa, which also suited her fine.

She made quick work of dragging everything from the Jeep into the house. The pile in the middle of the living room rug, a pitiable detritus collection—a few clothes, a handful of books, her laptop, and briefcase—was all she could show for thirty years of life. She'd left everything else in Brussels with Garrison, wanting nothing from that life except to leave it and him behind, preferably before she lost her sanity.

She picked up the laptop and nudged the briefcase out of the way with the toe of her shoe, a sacrilege that would have earned her a stiff reprimand from her mother, the high-pressure attorney. The briefcase, a college graduation present from her mother, went everywhere with Allie. Vivian Grainger probably hoped that if Allie carried a fancy Underwood leather briefcase, she would someday morph into an attorney like her. Allie could have told her to forget it.

Looking around, Allie saw a half-dozen framed photos of herself, one with her aunt taken only a few years ago, at various life stages scattered on the bookcase across from the door. A stack of letters rested on the table beside the sofa. When Allie recognized her own handwriting, she caught the wall for support. All the uncertainty she'd felt since learning of her aunt's death rushed back in and threatened to overwhelm her. Was it a mistake to come here so soon? Probably, but she was here, and she'd have to tough it out—somehow.

Allie squared her shoulders. Enough. She would unpack tomorrow. She turned the deadbolt on the jalousie front door and flipped off the light. After taking only a moment to wash off the road grime and slip on a nightshirt, she crawled into her usual bed in the guestroom and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * *

Allie woke hanging half off the bed, covers tangled at her feet, her nightshirt hiked up above her waist. She must have gotten hot during the night, a luxury after her years in Europe. Brussels weather was perpetually damp and cold, and February in Atlanta not much better. A leaden Georgia sky was spitting thirty-five degree rain when she left the city behind. Winter in Florida was a different world—warm days following cool nights. She relished the prospect of re-acclimating to Florida temperatures.

Allie opened one eye and jerked back. The dog peered at her, its strange flat face only inches from hers. As soon as she moved, the dog shot off the bed and ran into the living room. Probably back behind the couch, Allie thought with a groan, as she disentangled her feet from the covers. She yanked down the nightshirt, appalled she left the bedroom door open, until she remembered no one in the house would witness her lapse in decorum. The thought made her sad.

In years past, her aunt would already have been up. Allie would have awakened to the fresh smell of Dial soap and toothpaste. Then, lovely kitchen odors—frying bacon, buttered toast, and coffee—would begin to waft down the hall. The aromas of a summer morning. Instead, she smelled dust—and dog.

She examined the sheets for fleas, but didn't see any. Thank God. She still didn't know what to do with the thing. She wasn't at all sure she believed what the woman said about it being her aunt's dog. Lou never had a dog at any time within Allie's memory. On the tail of that thought came another, one that tasted acid in her mouth—how would she know if her aunt owned a dog? She hadn't visited in two years, but wasn't that something Lou would have mentioned in a letter? No, the woman probably made the story up, so she could get rid of the dog. There must be a shelter in town that took in stray animals.

Allie stopped halfway across the room and eyed the bundle of fur peeking around the corner—an odd-looking animal, longer than it was tall, with black and white hair sweeping the floor. Its corkscrew tail curled over its back, and she couldn't see its eyes for the hair hanging in its face. When she took a step forward, the dog darted back behind the couch. What was it so afraid of?

“Nice doggie,” she muttered as she headed to the bathroom. A few minutes later, she slipped on jeans and a polo shirt, twisting her hair up in a barrette from her aunt's dresser. She glanced in the mirror, then away. She looked too thin, her face pasty from too much time indoors. Maybe living at the beach would help the coloring, but after six years of virtually starving herself, it would take time to get flesh back on her bones.

Allie made her way into the kitchen. What she found there banished any lingering doubt about ownership of the dog. Dishes. A leash. On the refrigerator, she saw the pictures held in place with magnets—photos of the dog alone, with her aunt. In one, her aunt held the thing up next to her face. So, it belonged to her aunt—except it **belonged to Allie** now.

Allie heard a sound in the doorway. She turned around and sighed, spotting the hairy oval peeking around the corner. The bowls were blue with a white Casper the Ghost on each. Allie picked up a bowl. “Spook,” she read. The dog gave a little whimper. Its name must be Spook.

Fortunately, there were cans of dog food in the cabinet. Allie had no idea how much to feed it, but it didn't look like it could eat much. She dumped half a can in the smaller bowl and put it on the floor. The dog's eyes were riveted to the bowl, but it made no move to come closer. Allie nudged the dish away with her foot once, and then again. That distance must have been adequate because the dog ran to the bowl. Seconds later, the dish was empty, and the blur of hair streaked back behind the sofa.

Allie shook her head and picked up the bowl. The other she filled with water and put it around the corner in the dining room. Then, she fixed a pot of coffee. Lou's pot was the ancient glass vacuum type you put on the stove with water in the bottom and coffee grounds in the top. Good in its day, but a nightmare of inefficiency by current standards. As she switched on the burner, she heard a lapping sound. *OK*, she thought. This wasn't too hard. Give it food and water once a day. She could handle that until she figured out what to do with it.

In the living room, Allie fished around in her suitcase for her special coffee cup, one of those corny photo cups, a gift from her aunt. She remembered the day the picture was taken. She and Lou were in Merritt Island shopping when they spotted one of those tacky roadside carnivals that set up in shopping center parking lots for a few days before moving on. Allie balked at going, too sophisticated at the lofty age of sixteen to take part in such antics, but Lou parked the car and told Allie she could go or sit in the car alone and fry in the summer sun like a catfish.

They had a ball, riding all the rides—twice—including the merry-go-round. As they headed back to the car, Lou spotted one of those photo booths, the kind like a phone booth with a curtain for a door, and Allie let her aunt tease her into ducking inside. After the first flash of the camera, they'd started giggling so hard that the rest of the strip was useless, but they kept them anyway. Or Lou did, Allie surmised when she received the cup in the mail on her next birthday.

She pulled it out of the suitcase and headed back to the kitchen, where she stopped short. There was one more duty associated with the care of a dog. Spook sat at the back door, whining. The grocery shopping and all the other things she needed to do could wait, but she feared the dog could not. She fixed her coffee before picking up the leash and walking toward the dog. It must have needed to go badly, because it stood in place—albeit trembling—as Allie snapped on the leash. Grabbing her coffee, she headed out to the dunes composing her backyard.

The dog took care of business quickly, but Allie looped the leash over her wrist and made her way down the rickety wooden stairs leading to the beach. The morning was too lovely to spend inside, and the beach called to her. Out of long habit, she headed toward the Canaveral jetty. The sand felt cool under her bare feet, as she walked along at the water line, and the bottoms of her jeans were drenched within seconds. The dog padded along beside her, leaving dainty paw prints in their wake. The ocean rolled gently up onto the sand, turning it to liquid bronze, as the early morning sun reflected across the broad expanse. The tide was coming in, not with a vengeance as it sometimes did, but tentatively, as if testing the shore. In an hour, the beach would be half the size and no longer deserted, but for now, it seemed to stretch endlessly with undisturbed sand as far as she could see. Gulls swooped overhead, screeching for breakfast, and Allie found herself smiling at the sandpipers darting along in front of her, racing the waves onto the beach, and then following them back out again, as they pecked at the sand in their never-ending quest for food.

She and Lou had walked here often, content to be together. Now, Lou's voice echoed in Allie's head as if she were beside her still. *"This is where you belong, Allie. Here. You were meant to live this life. Not that marrying Garrison was a mistake. Our paths aren't usually straight, and it's out of the scar tissue from the bumps along the way that our wisdom grows. He made you unhappy, but that unhappiness forced you to decide to leave him. Your decision was a good one, and I'm so proud of you."*

Allie blinked and glanced around, as a wave broke against her leg, soaking her jeans to the knee. No one was there, only the little dog at the end of its leash, staring up at her in confusion, as water dripped off its ears. Shaking herself, she headed back toward dry sand.

The dog ignored the birds and the fiddler crabs peeking out of burrows before slipping back out of sight as Allie and Spook approached. Allie breathed in the intoxicating smells of the Atlantic—salt, fish, and seaweed and smiled. Some people considered it a stench. To her, it rivaled the smell of newly mown grass, which was good, as very little grass grew in this area. The yards were mostly sand, driveways cracked concrete, and garages only a memory in the heads of a few die-hard Northerners. Many streets were two-lane and rutted from past storms and age, but it was all Eden to her.

A few early risers appeared in the distance, stooping to pick up the few seashells washed ashore overnight. Summers with her aunt had taught Allie much about the beach. She knew the shells were future sand, and people should leave them to tumble into grit, but she didn't begrudge the people their booty. She had a decent stash of seashells, which, like the accursed briefcase, she lugged with her from place to place and, like the briefcase, served as a reminder of what she'd left behind.

Allie wasn't a native Floridian, but she felt like one. Her parents were natives, but they had relocated to Georgia before she was born, drawn by the lure of better jobs and a good housing market. Her aunt, her father's younger sister, made no move to follow, one of Lou's early sins in the eyes of Allie's family.

Allie walked more slowly as she neared the jetty that she still loved, even though the state had re-created it in their bureaucratic image, making it safe and profitable, complete with enough power and sewage hook-ups to service the annual onslaught of die-hard RVers. Someone dubbed it Jetty Park, not the most creative name to Allie's thinking. The original jetty, a long arm of irregular stacked boulders marking the Port Canaveral channel, had evolved into a long fishing pier with side rails and caution signs every two feet. As a kid, she ran the rocks, surefooted as a mountain goat, never once so much as scraping a knee. Now, signs warned that you couldn't climb or run or dive or almost anything else that might be fun, and they called that progress.

Allie started to turn back, but the dog let out a sharp yap and started at a run toward the water, yanking the leash out of her hand. Spook stopped at the edge of the water and barked frantically. Allie could see something floating up against the rocks. *Trash?* She felt indignation well up inside her. Typical. The tourists threw trash off the jetty or off their boats all the time, never giving a thought to what it would do to the environment.

The dog's ear-splitting series of yips set Allie's teeth on edge. She waded out a couple of feet. Maybe it wasn't trash. Up closer, it looked like a fish, belly up. The sun caught on something metal. *A hook?* As she moved toward it, she could see bright colors floating under the water. Not a fish, then. She was almost on it now. A wave slapped against the thing, rolling it over in the water. Realization dawned slowly. Not a fish. An arm attached to a body, a female body with long blonde hair undulating beneath the surface. The hideous and distorted face stared straight up, sightless eyes directed at the sky. Allie registered another flash of light, as the sun reflected on an earring. She felt a scream well up in her throat, breaking free, as she turned and sloughed her way through the waist-deep water, splashing her way to shore.