

# EPILOGUE

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## LILITH

As the hot soapy water runs over my hands I linger, enjoying the warmth. The twelve pounds I've lost in the last ten months have left me freezing cold most of the time. I don't enjoy looking in mirrors much anymore, but out of habit I catch a glimpse of my face before hastily looking away.

Most would say I am extremely lucky, fortunate, *blessed*—choose your favored interpretation. Besides a substantial dowry, I was born with a face that, in my younger years anyway, caused enough testosterone surges to give my poor daddy heart failure. My nose is straight, not too long, the tip turning up ever so slightly. My lips are full and my blond hair is as thick as a horse's tail, though the gray has made it a bit wiry of late. That dowry has ensured the wrinkles stay away; the best plastic surgeon in LA is on our payroll. It's only my neck that hints I've just entered my sixth decade.



A year ago I was the envy of every friend I had. Why wouldn't I be? A perfect body. Clothing from the finest designers in the world. Owner of one of the premiere estates in Natchez, complete with the finest of furnishings. An adoring husband who caters to my every whim. Enough household help that I am free to spend my time at Pilates class instead of slaving over a dirty sink or toilet. And most important, a drop-dead gorgeous, eighteen-year-old daughter with her whole life ahead of her.

A life that no longer includes me.

I yank three paper towels out of the holder and catch my profile from the corner of my eye. This time I stare. Even the makeup applied to perfection is no cover for what lies beneath, the ugliness lurking under my skin. I've managed to hide it for most of my life, but now it's quite literally headline news. What's more, everyone in Mississippi thinks of me as a villain. Every woman I know, and even more I don't, are talking behind my back. And that long list of women includes my one and only daughter.

When I lost Annie Laurie the color drained from my world, leaving me in a monochromatic state. Nothing had hue. Everything was gray. After she shunned me, those first four weeks were spent in bed staring at the backs of my eyelids. Lord knows there were hundreds, probably thousands of moments when I pondered keeping my eyes closed for good. Isolation from your child feels as though you're locked inside a torture chamber with no way out.

When I got the phone call from someone I didn't even know informing me that I had been relieved of my duties as House Corp President, I felt the little bit of life I had left drain from my cheeks. After she asked me to resign, I spent the next two weeks pondering the afterlife. My shame was so heavy it was as if I were covered with cinder blocks, gasping for air. I became nearly



housebound. The one time I braved the grocery store I moved through like a minnow darting in and out of the aisles, hoping no one would notice me. My mother used the word *mortified* to describe extreme embarrassment. She might have known distress on a few occasions, but she never knew true disgrace.

I'd have done anything to get Annie Laurie back. I was that desperate. Desperate enough to devise a scheme not unlike the ones I'd used in the past to manipulate others into getting exactly what I wanted. I decided to write Miss Pearl a syrupy sweet note and gift her, of all things, my mother's antique Alpha Delta Beta pin. I'd tuck it inside a black velvet box with beautiful blue wrapping paper and tie it with a white satin bow. I just knew if I gave Miss Pearl my prized sorority pin it would show my daughter that I was capable of the best kind of generosity and she'd come running back. I would be a hero in her eyes. She'd think I had changed. *All* the Alpha Deltas would think I had changed. The board would forgive me.

My plan didn't work. Annie Laurie didn't come running back. Alpha Delt never came running. But one person—*one*—was kind enough to still talk to me, causing a turnaround I never saw coming.

I had never been to Miss Pearl's neighborhood when I set out to find her apartment. It's in the middle of nowhere and, quite honestly, I was frightened. Would my Mercedes be stolen? Or worse, would I even come back alive? I'm ashamed to think of it now, but hurrying back to our condo was all I could think about. When I knocked on her door, and she didn't answer, I was relieved. Besides, everything I needed to say to her was in my note.

I hid in the stairwell to make sure she picked up the pin. I certainly didn't want it stolen. But the moment I saw her, reading my card with genuine joy on her face, something inside me broke.



I could not help but walk toward her, and when she saw me, she smiled. Her unexpected kindness ripped a hole in my darkness, and I started to sob. I certainly never expected her to invite me inside, nor did I even want to go in, but that's exactly what happened. After humiliating her and treating her with disdain, she wrapped her arm around me and escorted me into her home as if I were a member of her family. Miss Pearl showed me compassion even though I didn't deserve it. She was forgiving and merciful even though I'd been deplorable. No one had ever shown me that kind of grace. I went to her apartment to get my lost daughter back and instead I gained a friend. Perhaps the only true friend I've ever known.

These days, that friend calls me every single week, without fail. "Just checking on you, Lilith," she'll say in her upbeat, jovial tone. Then she'll ask if I've heard from Annie Laurie. When I tell her no, she'll say, "Give her time. She'll come around. She's simply processing a few things." When I press her for more information, she'll say, "Try not to worry. I'm working on her."

Of course I'm dying to ask her to tell me every single word of their conversations, but I force myself to keep my mouth shut. A few weeks ago I slipped and tried to manipulate Pearl into giving me more. "I've heard Annie Laurie has a new boyfriend," I said.

She caught me red-handed. "Now, Lilith. You're getting ahead of yourself. Let's take this slow."

Annie Laurie didn't come home for Christmas. She didn't answer my calls on her birthday. I didn't even get to pin her for her Alpha Delt initiation. I sent her the money to buy a new pin since I'd given mine to Pearl, but I never heard from her. She spent the entire summer living in our condo in Oxford attending summer school, but I never once laid eyes on her. Pearl keeps encouraging me to give her space.



I can't blame Annie Laurie for the anger she feels toward me. These last months have dredged up feelings of anger toward my own mother. The only difference is: she's in the grave. I ask myself if this whole thing is my mother's fault. Or is it my father's? I've wrestled with that question for months. They modeled racist behavior my entire childhood; they were bigots until they passed away. Can I blame what's happened with Annie Laurie on them? The answer is yes and no. They might have acted unjustly, but it's up to me to lead my family down a new and better path to justice. Just like Pearl suggested that day at the Alpha Delt House.

Rush was last week. Pearl said the Alpha Delt got a great pledge class and that they invited Jasmine and two other African American girls to join. She said Annie Laurie was the one who talked Jasmine into going out for Rush. Jasmine was reluctant at first, but ultimately decided it was her way of narrowing the racial divide.

Pearl and I talk about that divide a lot, and Annie Laurie, Alpha Delt, friends, and marriage. She's spent hours of her time on the phone counseling me. I've offered to pay her for her services, but she just laughs, tells me it's her pleasure. She says she doesn't typically see it as her job to educate white ladies like me, nor should I expect it, but if helping me helps one of "her girls," she's all for it. Simply put, Pearl is a wonderful human being. She's already finished her first semester at Ole Miss. I suggested she get her degree in psychology and go on to earn her master's and become a bona fide therapist. But she had already been thinking on it. I told her I'd owe her a fortune by the time she becomes official. Sometimes I wonder how many friends I missed out on by being who I was...

Pulling the powder-room door open, I nearly collide with



someone stepping inside. We exchange apologies and I head down the hall. A whiff of garlic makes my stomach lurch. As I move through the restaurant, my heart starts racing. It's the first time I've shown my face anywhere near campus in almost a year. Pearl encouraged me to smile confidently if I happen to see someone I know. I am not the caitiff I was a year ago.

My friend—the one friend brave and kind enough to invite me to lunch today—is standing at the hostess desk when I round the corner. Knowing I'm nervous, she greets me with a warm embrace and takes hold of my hand. Then she leans toward the hostess. “Good afternoon. We have a twelve o'clock reservation for a table on the porch. Pearl Johnson.”

The hostess gathers our menus and smiles brightly. “Right this way.”

Following behind her, we wind through the main dining room and out to the porch. There's a brunette seated alone at one of the tables with her head down, studying the menu. Her hair is shoulder length and she is smartly dressed.

I pass right by her, but Pearl stops. “Hello, baby,” she says, and the young woman looks up.

The air leaves my lungs and my knees weaken. There is hardly a trace of makeup on her face and she's gone back to her natural hair color. She looks more beautiful than I've ever seen her before. Something else catches my eye and I look down. She's wearing my mother's antique Alpha Delt pin.

Annie Laurie looks at Pearl first before she slowly meets my gaze. In a soft, childlike voice she utters the words I've longed for: “Hi, Mommy.”