

*The Favorite Daughter, Kaira Rouda*

*SUNDAY*

*Four Days Until Graduation*

# Chapter 1

*6:30 p.m.*

I glance at my creation and smile: behold the dining room table. It is critical to create the proper atmosphere when entertaining, the illusion of perfection. As one of the most important hostesses in The Cove, I can assure you I pull together elegant dinners without a second thought. I know all the key ingredients: arrangements from the best florist in town, tonight white hydrangeas nestled in between succulents, and linens from the exclusive small boutique where everyone must shop to purchase ridiculously expensive tablecloths and napkins, in this case, brushed silk, off-white.

I've outdone myself with this table. This will go down in the record books as a crowning achievement in my life.

I'm kidding, of course. I don't care a smidgen about entertaining. And typically, if I'm going to spend time adorning something, it's going to be myself. Truth be told, the crystal and china pieces on the table were wedding gifts from long-forgotten friends, rarely used. I dug them out from the back of the cupboard. Perhaps I am trying a bit too hard, but tonight is special. It's my coming-out party so to speak.

After a year of grieving, it's time to step back into my family, or what remains of it and that's precisely my plan. I'm reclaiming the throne, like a queen who has been in exile but returns with pomp and circumstance. I shake my head as I look around my castle. I used to be so proud of this home, something so expensive and so uppity that my mother would never be comfortable stepping foot inside. Good old Mom. She taught me everything she knew about how to put yourself first in life. She was ruthless, delighting in bringing others down, including her own daughter. But look around: I'm winning, Mom. I touch the diamond-encrusted heart pendant hanging between my surgically enhanced, perfect breasts. All gifts from my husband in happier times.

My husband, David, will be so surprised when he arrives home tonight, and he deserves it. He's been full of surprises this year. In fact, I discovered another little secret when a piece of mail arrived at our house last week. Typically, he has his mail sent to his office, says it's easier to pay bills that way. This particular notice from the bank must have just slipped through the cracks. I'm playing along. For now.

The letter congratulated David on the purchase of a new home. I must admit, the thought of a fresh start made my heart flutter. I know it will be even bigger, more expensive than this home. I mean, this home was fine when the kids were growing up, but now we need something grander. More fitting of our station in life. We deserve it after all we've been through.

Maybe he'll tell me all about it tonight? That would be wonderful. I'm planning our reconnection dinner and he will announce his surprise. I glance at my platinum watch, enjoying the sparkles of the diamond-encrusted face, until my heart thumps at the time. It's getting late and I have so much more to do. I can't believe I've lost a year in my haze of grief. Sure, some of the haze can be blamed on all of the antidepressants the doctors made me take. They were both a relief and a distraction. While I was stuck in bed, at home, my family members have made the most of their time, both so busy in fact I've had trouble keeping up.

But not any longer. I'm back, drug-free, and better than ever. I grab the final crystal wineglass from the kitchen counter and walk to the table, glancing out the window as the bright orange sun drops into the

deep blue Pacific Ocean. In an instant, the glass topples from my hand and seems to tumble in slow motion as it falls and shatters on the stone floor, sending sound waves echoing through our lifeless house like an earthquake. Shards of glass sprinkle the tops of my bare feet and dot the floor around me while a large chunk of the stem rests under the dining room table, glistening like the blade of a knife.

I fold my arms across my chest for comfort and can't help but admire my ribs poking into my hands, a reminder of how much weight I've lost the last year. Grief is good for the figure. You and I already know thin women get attention, respect in our society. On the few excursions I've made out of the house lately, when I've taken care to dress and apply makeup, I've noticed an uptick in appreciative glances from men. That's nothing new. My whole life I've enjoyed the admiration of the opposite sex.

For months, I've been secretly working out in the garage when David is at work and Betsy at school. Just me and the handsome P90X instructors. My mom would be impressed by my fitness commitment. She never missed a chance to remind me being skinny was the key to our future. And then she'd take my dinner away. She's long gone, died when I was fourteen in a tragic car accident, but she still haunts me. That's the power of the bond between mothers and daughters. It can never be broken, even in death.

But glass can. I stare at my almost-perfect table setting—I even nestled votive candles in crystal holders around the centerpiece and in front of each place setting. Just call me Martha Stewart.

I wonder what I should wear tonight? Here, in the land of expensive designer purses and shoes, most women blend in, their monochromatic coolness anchored by jeans, topped by their perfectly smooth, porcelain faces. I remember my first dinner party at The Cove: me from the outh, them from Southern California. I'd worn a yellow silk cocktail dress, my biggest pearls and wrapped a white cashmere pashmina around my shoulders. I was as out of place as a Twinkie at a Weight Watchers meeting. But you know what? All the husbands approved, tired of the sameness they endured in their wives. Back then, David was proud to have me on his arm, proud I stood out like a beautiful flower in a meadow of boring grass. It's ironic, really: I gave up my dreams to move here, to become the perfect Orange County housewife. I could have been so much more.

This ocean view is why we bought this home all those years ago, scraping together every last dime and tapping into David's trust fund to move into The Cove, the best community in Southern California. We were young parents, and so madly in love. The ocean was romantic, beautiful then. Not deadly and dark and cold.

I feel the rush of heat as my hands clench into fists. Anger and loss, did you ever notice how those emotions mix together? It's a toxic combination. I swallow. I need to focus on the table, the first step of my coming-out party. All that's missing from this perfect setting is the fourth wineglass. I have another one, of course. It's almost symbolic. It was Mary's spot at the table, Mary's wineglass that fell to the floor.

*Mary who dropped into the sea.* I shake my head to quiet the voice.

My therapist, Dr. Rosenthal, assured me at our last session that it would be a step forward to eat together as a family in the dining room. She wants us to reconnect, and I most always do whatever she says. At our next session I'll happily tell the doctor all about tonight. I am committed to reenergizing my life, reconnecting with my family. I tell her what I want her to know, what she wants to hear. Sure, she's the one with the PhD, but I'm the one with life experience. I'm the heart of this family. That's a mom's place.

Perhaps I won't mention the broken glass during our session, although it is emblematic of all that has happened this year since Mary left us. Nothing is right. My husband has thrown his energy into work, he tells me. He's gone all the time these days. Betsy is focused on graduating high school in five short days.

I swallow. I push away the silly fear, the nagging sound of my mom's voice telling me Betsy will leave me. It's nonsense. Betsy loves me, would never leave me. I mean it's not like she's brilliant like Mary was, or smart like Mary was. No, Betsy is average. She'll be dependent on me forever, and that's just fine. And David, well, he's buying us a new home. Everyone is getting in line.

The hair at the back of my neck tingles on alert. Someone is watching me. I look out the window and see the five-year-old cherub next door, his round face pushing through a partially open window, his eyes bright and curious. He's up too high. He must have climbed onto a chair. Where is the nanny? Twenty children under the age of eleven die each year because of falls from windows, and another five thousand are critically injured.

Tragic accidents happen all the time. That's why I watched my daughters every moment of their lives, never letting them out of my sight, one way or another, ever. They were like extensions of my arms, a hand for each of them. My little mini-mes.

I glance at the boy next door and then to the ground two stories below. There is nothing to break his fall if he topples out, just a thin strip of cement between his house and ours. I shudder at the thought. We pay astronomical prices to live on top of each other at the coast. Proximity and privilege means it's hard to keep secrets here. Turns out it's also hard to keep friends, and family.

The child is waving at me. I try to help him, pointing and mouthing the word *down* like I'm commanding a dog. I know all of the tragic things that can happen to him. Children who land on a hard surface, such as concrete, are twice as likely to suffer head injuries.

I can't witness this tragedy. Glass or no glass, I tiptoe away from the table, waiting for the sharp sensation of a shard slicing through my foot. I'm almost out of the minefield of glass when I realize I have company.

"What are you doing?" Enter stage right: my handsome husband, David, thick brown hair, blue eyes, dimpled—a model WASP—is in the kitchen and assessing the scene. He could have been an actor, he's perfectly typecast as the successful businessman, 1950s to today.

"I made a mess of things." I say before covering my face with my hands. I can't resist leaving a small space between my fingers to peek at him. His smile fades as he drops his briefcase on the kitchen counter. Poor dear.

"Is that broken glass on the dining room floor?"

"Dropped a glass. An accident." I mumble my response from behind my hands.

"Are you hurt?" He takes a few steps, shoes crunching on glass, and he's beside me.

"I think I'm fine, but can you call the people next door?" I drop my hands from my face and point out the window.

"The Johnsons?"

"Yes, their child is about to die."

I watch David push his thick dark hair off his forehead, a nervous habit he's acquired in the past year. "What? Stop talking like that. It's creepy."

I sort of scare him these days. I'm not sure why exactly. Perhaps it is my seemingly unshakeable grief? Is he afraid it will envelope him, too?

He steps closer and looks out the window. I do, too. The child has disappeared, hopefully safe in his nanny's arms. Or he's died from the fall. My mind jumps to terrible conclusions these days but unfortunately, my mind is often correct. Feminine intuition, you really can't beat it. Mine is superbly tuned.

"There's no one there, Jane."

"I can see that. He *was* there just a minute ago." I hate it when he doesn't believe me and it's been happening more and more these days. I don't like it. That's one of the reasons I stopped taking the pills. I mean, your husband should love you and worship the ground you walk on. He doesn't just now, I know, but he will again. I'm back. He'll see. I take a deep breath. I need to make my husband treasure me again. I will provide him with that opportunity starting tonight. He has been avoiding me. Like I carry a disease. I'm not contagious. Of course, there are other things holding his interest these days. He thinks I don't know about that. Silly man. I force a smile to my lips, blink my eyes.

"Are you hurt?" Now he attempts kindness. What's the old saying: a day late and a dollar short?

"Don't think so." I shrug as he takes my hand. As we touch I wish it was electric like in the long-ago days, but it's not. Of course, all relationships change over time, and we've been married for more than two decades. Back in the early days, that first year together, he would have scooped me into his arms and carried me to a chair. Now that we're a longtime married couple he escorts me old-lady style to the kitchen and pulls out a barstool. I slide onto the cold, hard, wooden seat.

David checks my feet for glass while I stare at the top of his head. He's blessed with thick, dark brown hair, without a streak of gray. Mary had the same glorious mane of hair. In fact, Mary looks a lot like David, despite the fact she was adopted. Isn't that funny? Two daughters, one who looks just like my husband, the other, Betsy, our biological daughter, who looks like a watered-down version of me. Perfect, isn't it?

"You're not cut. I'll sweep up the glass. Why don't you go put socks on? Your feet are freezing."

I slide off the barstool. "Thanks for coming to my rescue, handsome." I bat my eyes at him and slowly lick my bottom lip. I should win a domestic Golden Globe. Oh come on. You know as well as I do that men love to be flattered. David's no exception. Tell a man he's handsome, smart, strong, or, the doozy, the best you've ever had in bed, and well, they'll love you at least in that moment. I just need to win him back, make him love me again. And I know I can do it. He loved me once and deep down, he still does. For now, I'll just kill him with kindness. It's the Southern belle in me. You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

See. David flashes a smile, a crack in the armor, pats my shoulder. I used to have him so well trained. Husbands. You let up just a little and they regress. And then he's back to business. "Are you sure you're alright? You're not overdoing it, are you?"

"I love this, this entertaining, you know that." I never did, actually, and I'm not fine. I'm angry, but I smile. I glance at David, my eyes taking in his cool demeanor, his practiced professional air. We speak in a stilted language now, tiptoeing around each other like we're both surrounded by broken glass. This year has been hard on our marriage in so many different ways. I'm committed to fixing things, to getting us back on track. I know this happens in every relationship. We're just in a down cycle. I'm sure you've been there, too. I'm afraid we're running out of time. Betsy will graduate soon. She needs to see us, her parents, in love. All kids want is happy parents. While she's at community college going to class, she should imagine us here, at home, waiting to share dinner together each evening, a model of marital bliss.

I hope we can present a united front for her this week. It's always best to hang on to the one you know, at least until you find something better, that's what my mom told me. And we were so good together, David and I. Meant to be.

"You set the table for four. That's just creepy. Are you trying to upset us?" he asks, his voice thick with emotion. Is it anger, too? I don't know.

"No, I'm trying to have a family dinner. Dr. Rosenthal told me to. I'm sorry, I must have made a mistake. Subconscious. I miss her so much." I look out the window. It's safe now because it's dark outside and the ocean is invisible. All I see is my reflection. Tight, formfitting white T-shirt, sparkling heart. I do look good.

"How do you make that kind of mistake? Really, Jane?" David's shaking his head. I need to woo him not disappoint him and I should try to refrain from spooking him.

*Focus, Jane.*

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, darling." I dig my fingernails into the palm of my right hand and smile at my husband. David's watching me admire my reflection. What does he think when he sees me? He can't deny that I'm beautiful, but I know he doesn't see me with the same loving thoughts of the past, that much I know is true. We all change especially in the face of unimaginable tragedy like we've been through. It's understandable. That's why I'm giving him one last chance. Starting tonight.

I turn to face him and take a step closer. He crosses his arms in front of his chest, tilts his head. His jaw is clenched, eyes dark. He thinks he's a tough guy. I take another step toward him and he backs away. Ha!

I smile and ask, "Let's start over. This is a special night. Darling, do you know when Betsy will be home? She knows how important tonight is to me." Truth be told, I'm not sure I told her about our dinner. But she's a senior in high school, she still lives in my home. She should be home for family dinner. This is part of my plan to do everything I can to make this graduation week extra special, for both David and Betsy. I hope Betsy knows that even though Mary is gone, we are still a family. None of this is easy, it never has been. I mean, it's hardest for me trying to be so selfless, the perfect wife and the perfect mother. I spoiled the girls, of course. Sometimes when you give them everything, they take you for granted. My mom warned me about that, too.

David bites his lip, another new habit. It's not really a good look for him—it shows doubt, weakness, condescension. I hate that.

David says, "Betsy has art class tonight. It's every Sunday night, has been for a year." He says the words sharply, and with a big exhale, as if he's had to say them every week to me. As if I'm an idiot. He hasn't. I'm not.

"Right, I forgot." It's hard to keep her schedule straight especially when time shifts and moves with those pills. Don't worry. I'm not taking them anymore, like I told you, it's just that lately Betsy is acting more like her father. She's hardly ever home, and has one excuse after another. Besides, David should remember that Dr. Rosenthal explained to him that grief, like many other strong emotions, makes it hard to think straight. I've read a lot about the grieving process. I am a textbook case of complicated grief. I know, I've researched it.

Betsy only has ordinary grief, of course. Betsy's grief has made her tense, angry. She's focused on school, making sure she graduates. She's hired her own tutor, and actually seems to care about grades for the first time in her life. She hasn't even spent much time with her boyfriend, Josh, which is fine with me. He's a bit of a loser, not the kind of boy we'd chose for our little girl, but he's the type Betsy attracts. Poor thing.

Before I can leave the kitchen to retrieve my socks, David says, "Did you actually make dinner? There's nothing cooked. I don't think you even told me you were doing this." His hand sweeps over to the table, to include the broken glass, and captures the stovetop devoid of dishes and meal prep, the counters pristinely clean.

“Oh darling, of course I told you about tonight. I didn’t want to overdo it, so I ordered in, from Salerno’s, your favorite. Delivery arrives in half an hour. Pasta Bolognese just for you. Hope you’re hungry.” I smile. I’ve thought of everything. I’m back. “If it’s just the two of us for dinner it will be so romantic. I hear Italian food is made for lovers.” Before I turn away I watch David’s face flush, his cheeks a rosy pink. He recognizes the phrase, and the restaurant, of course.

I walk away before he can respond. Perhaps I will slip into a sexy dress for our date, because just maybe, tonight, he’ll decide to do the right thing. I know he loves me. We were such a good team. He remembers those days, too. I know he does. We just need a fresh start.

I head toward our bedroom, walking past the front door and glancing out into our courtyard lit with white twinkle lights, the fronds of our twin palm trees rustle in the gentle breeze. I stop and scan the outdoor space. I like to try to be ready for anything now, to be one step ahead and to avoid being startled or surprised. I learned that from my childhood. My mom was full of awful surprises. For a moment I see her standing in the courtyard, a ghost from my distant past. I shake my head. *Stop it. These thoughts aren’t productive.* That’s Mary’s voice, or perhaps it is Dr. Rosenthal’s? They sound similar these days. *You’re safe. Your mom is gone.*

I hurry to my bedroom reminding myself it is possible to be scared to death. Not the outcome I’m looking for in life. A scare floods your body with adrenaline, makes your heart pump faster. If you have an underlying heart problem, fright can induce sudden cardiac death. I’ve become a bit fixated with tragic death, so I apologize in advance. Remember, knowledge is power. I have a lot of tragic knowledge to share.

Mary’s tragic death shook us all, of course. My beautiful daughter, Mary, how I miss her. I’ll never be able to curl her shiny dark hair, laugh with her about the lavish wedding we’d plan together one day, revel in her constant achievements, guide her choices as she prepared for her future. There is no future now, not for her. But I can focus on David and Betsy. I’ve been watching over them, but not engaging with them. That changes tonight. At dinner.

I’m reenergized. Truth be told, I’m a bit more awake these days than I should be and that makes me a little on edge, a little temperamental. You understand, of course, after all I’ve been through. But still, I need to watch it, practice the breathing exercises Dr. Rosenthal taught me. I take a deep cleansing breath, and exhale some of the tension of the day. I imagine my frustrations flowing from me like a fast-running river, just like Dr. Rosenthal tells me to do. I don’t tell her about the dam. I’m sure my flowing river thoughts will return soon, right? I mean, breath work is the key to health, that’s what these yoga people keep saying and what Dr. Rosenthal repeats on her relaxation podcasts. They really don’t work, but I’m not going to be the one to tell her that.

I trudge into my bathroom and through to the walk-in closet. I look at the section of cocktail dresses, but with the chill in the air I decide to grab warm socks and a cozy gray cashmere sweater. It’s brisk here at the beach once the sun sets, even in the middle of summer. Evenings in May, like tonight, always hold an extra special chill.

I glance at the cluster of picture frames on the counter next to my sink. Mary on the day we adopted her, swaddled in a soft pink blanket. Mary at age ten throwing her arms around our new labradoodle puppy, Cash. I pick up the last frame. In the photo taken a year and a half ago, Mary’s grinning, so excited to be pledging the sorority of her dreams. She wears a white cocktail dress and holds a huge bouquet of red roses her dad hand-delivered to her—without me since I had to stay home with Betsy—during one of his now frequent business trips to Los Angeles.



Mary's happiness her freshman year in college was almost too big to contain in a photo, too grand for a picture frame. Boundless potential and limitless opportunity once she left home, left me, for a new life and flowers from her dad. She was so excited to be miles away from me, my rules, my one line in the sand. I shake my head, glance at my reflection in the mirror.

Betsy is different. Although she shows all the outward signs of teenage rebellion, she's really a good, obedient daughter. My new favorite, I suppose. Mary promised me she'd be back after freshman year, of course, but she never really was. It was so hard for me when we moved her into her dorm room and then had to drive away. It was like cutting off my right hand. It was hard for David, too. He was vulnerable, missing his eldest, even though Betsy and I were still here. Are still here.

"I loved you, Mary."

"Who are you talking to?" David materializes behind me. He thinks he snuck up on me but I heard him coming. I see the judgment in his dark blue eyes as he shakes his head.

"Nobody." We lock eyes. He looks at the photo in my hands and I know he thinks I'm talking to myself. Another "creepy" habit of mine, as he says. I place the photo back where it belongs.

He's changing in the closet. I hear a swish as he tugs off his tie and know he's hanging it neatly next to the rest of his collection. Next he'll open the drawer to find a casual shirt. He reappears in jeans and a white T-shirt, dark brown Gucci loafers. He's brushing his teeth. We make eye contact in the mirror. Sometimes he knows I'm watching him. Most of the time he doesn't. I wonder if he has decided to stay with me for dinner? Perhaps I should have changed into a dress? I still can. I smile. "I'm looking forward to our romantic dinner."

"Did you sleep well last night?" He spits in the sink, ignoring my statement.

I check my face in the mirror and decide I don't look too sleep deprived. I doubt he notices the circles under my eyes. I'm an expert with concealer. Tomorrow, I'll look even better. It's only day one of operation reconnection.

I lie. "Yes. Like a baby."

He tilts his head, slaps his expensive cologne on his neck. How manly, like he's the Old Spice guy or something. "Are you sure you can handle the Celebration of Life ceremony tomorrow?"

No. What a stupid name. I'm sure this is all his assistant's idea. I answer, "Of course, I have to be there. I'm the mom. Star of the show." I meet David's eyes. I am the lead actor in this house, in this family, I'm reminding him. Every mom is. And I will be there tomorrow for the ceremony. It's my duty, it's the beginning of my reimmersion, an important aspect of my strategy even though I didn't want this memorial service, and didn't arrange it. Despite all of that, of course I'll be there. She was *my* daughter.

I know he'd like nothing better than to soak up all of the attention, both from the attendees and the event planner. The perfect father. He loves the spotlight, hosting parties, chatting with friends. But he's not going alone. I've been preparing myself for this week. I'm looking forward to reviving my role: his adoring, beautiful wife. I reach over and run my hand along the limestone countertop between our two sinks, the stone cool to the touch. I tap my nails, a slow drumbeat.

"I'm coming to the ceremony," I say and walk to the bedroom, and pause next to our king-size bed. Large enough we don't bump into each other at night. I touch my favorite pillow.

"I can take care of it, host it alone, if you're not up to it." He is behind me. I feel his eyes on the back of my neck.

"I'll be fine." I turn to face him. "Dinner should be here any minute. Tonight will be lovely, and tomorrow night, at the ceremony, I'll be right by your side, David, as you will mine."

*I'm back.* I smile at his frown. He doesn't like my answer.

His shoulders drop. "I can't stay for dinner. But you eat the pasta. You need to gain some weight. People in The Cove are talking."

"Oh, are they? About my weight? I don't think that's the hottest topic in the neighborhood." I glance at the bed. After he leaves, maybe I'll take a nap? I may be able to fall asleep even though it's barely past seven. It's been so long since I've slept. I've been so busy.

"Maybe it isn't the hottest topic, but it's a concern." David walks toward the bedroom door.

"Stop!" I blurt, my tone sharper than I'd intended. I cover my mouth with my hand, forcing myself not to say more. He can't just walk away from me. It has been surprisingly comforting to have David home this evening. I even allowed myself to imagine him joining me for dinner. I was feeling a little sentimental, a little needy. How stupid. This isn't about love, we already have that as you can see. This is about control. We will dine together soon, and for as many evenings as I'd like, once I get back in charge. The way I had been, from the moment we met.

Our relationship began slowly like an orchestrated dance number. I was in the lead. David had been dropping into the Santa Monica club where I worked for more than two weeks and we'd been making eye contact and flirting, despite his regular blonde date attached to his arm. Sure, she had a gorgeous body and the air of money that made the space around her sparkle like gold. But I knew I was different than all those sorority girls. *Special beauty*, as my mom would say when she was sober.

I'd worked hard since I'd moved to LA after high school. I'd lost my accent but I hadn't lost my Southern charm. I could tell David was looking for someone like me, someone different, someone more exotic than the cookie-cutter sorority girls, someone with big dreams, a charmed future: a diamond in the land of cubic zirconia. I slipped him my phone number, in the most old-fashioned way, written on a napkin placed under his beer, our fingers brushing as electricity surged between us.

Now, as David stands at the door to our bedroom, he laughs and shakes his head. "You shouldn't yell, Jane. It's not becoming."

I walk to his side, my hands clenched. It's part of our dance these days, this feigned politeness, this lingering something. Is it nostalgia or just an endurance test to the finish line on Thursday? I still believe in us. I put my hand on his chest, imagine I'm touching his heart. "Sorry. Please stay."

Instead of embracing me, he takes my hand from his chest and squeezes, an awkward gesture that presses my two-carat engagement ring into the knuckle of my middle finger. "I'm going to work out and grab dinner after at the club. Don't wait up."

Once he's gone I sigh, trying to push my frustration aside. In the bathroom I pick up his bottle of cologne. When I unscrew the lid I take a deep inhalation of his favorite scent, the smell of my husband. In our closet I see his silk ties hanging up in a neat little row. He's so tidy. Likes his things under control, orderly. For David, and I suppose most husbands and fathers who are the "sole providers" for their families, their personal spaces at home provide the comfort they don't find at the office. The sense of order, the semblance of routine.

Home is so much more than a place, it's your anchor, your retreat. I know it is especially important to him now that Mary is gone, his favorite daughter. He finds peace in his color-coded closet. David is a cyclone of activity out in the world ever since the accident. He's kept up a frenetic schedule this past year, but he always comes home to me, eventually.

I shake my head, knowing I don't have the energy to straighten up the chaos on my side of the closet. I've learned to embrace my mess. And besides, I have other things to focus on. My husband deserves my

thoughtfulness, my presence at the ceremony tomorrow, and I can't wait to surprise him with everything else I have planned.

Each time he walks out our front door he becomes someone different. At home, with me, he's the grieving father of a dead daughter. Out in the world, he's an übersuccessful businessman with his sculptured chin held high, invincible. Out in the world he doesn't worry about his sad wife. I'm sure of that. Most of the time, it's easier for him if he doesn't think of me at all. But I'm always thinking about him.

For example, who wears cologne and Gucci loafers to the gym? No one. I swallow and try to control my shaking hands by shoving them into the pockets of my jeans. I hurry from the bathroom and climb in bed. I stare at the dark black glass of our huge flat-screen TV. David insisted on having a television in the bedroom, something I opposed. I know myself. I can get sucked into a show, a story, and always ended up staying up too late when the girls were little. I like to lose myself while I watch television, one of the things my mom and I had in common. She had the television on all day and night, making me watch her favorite shows with her when she was in a good mood. She taught me how to critique actresses, and to learn from them.

And I've learned a lot over the years. That's why it was time to pull myself out of my seemingly unshakable depression. After this week, I'm going to begin my career again. I've already lined up a photographer to shoot some headshots. David will be so pleased. He fell in love with me when I was acting in LA. He'll be so surprised when the old me makes a comeback. I'm focusing on the future now.

Instead of dinner tonight, tomorrow's ceremony will be the beginning of my second act. Us women, especially moms, we're resilient. At times life just throws us punches. But I've always been a fighter. Sometimes we have to take a stand for those we love, protect them from bad choices, love them even when they don't think they need it. I know some women who are stuck in their relationships, in their lives, who don't have choices.

I know how lucky I am and I know how to fight to get what I deserve.

So life, let's get ready to rumble.