

chapter 1

Sloane gripped the steering wheel with clenched fists as her mind darted furiously from one direction to the next. Had she remembered to pack absolutely everything Maddie would need at sleepaway camp? She'd included enough clean underwear for four weeks without laundry and had reminded her to reapply sunscreen every two hours and always after swimming. Naturally, her daughter had rolled her eyes in response to what Sloane perceived as responsible parenting. Still, aside from time spent at Grandma's house, it was Maddie's first time away from home for more than a few days. Sloane couldn't help but feel anxious.

Her unease had tripled since she'd left Maddie at camp, even though her daughter had shown no signs of separation anxiety. As she'd pulled away from Maddie's cabin, watching her daughter's wide smile grow smaller in her rearview mirror, Sloane's stomach had roiled. It felt like another loss. Not the same kind of loss as the

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one she'd been struggling to recover from lately, but a significant loss nonetheless. She wasn't sure why.

In springtime, when she'd filled out the enrollment paperwork, she'd been so full of anticipation for everything Maddie would experience on her own during summer camp. All the friends she would make. The new skills she would learn. And Maddie had seemed happy, possibly even overjoyed at the prospect of four weeks without her mother and father to answer to. Four weeks of freedom.

Shouldn't Sloane feel the same way? No lunches to pack. No negotiations over appropriate attire for a pre-tween-aged girl to wear to school. And no threat of boys calling past ten o'clock at night to discuss "homework."

Yet, as soon as the gate to Camp Pinewood had closed behind her car, she'd felt vacant. Fretful. Now she and Eddie would have the summer to themselves. They could go out to see a movie without having to secure a babysitter. They could eat dinner naked on the back porch if they wanted—not that they'd ever do something like that. They could have sex with the bedroom door open. Weren't those the sorts of things that were meant to be going through her mind? Weren't those the sorts of things that married couples whose only child would be absent from their lives for a whole month were supposed to anticipate with great excitement? Yet Sloane had to acknowledge that she felt quite the opposite. Her daughter's departure had brought on a rush of unsettling emotions. Empty. Unfulfilled. If she was being honest, all the emotions were familiar companions. Things hadn't been right for Sloane for some time.

Her mother had insisted on meeting for lunch as soon as she got back to Brookline. Sloane tried to seize on the idea of lunch with her

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mother as a distraction for her morose thoughts, but she would no doubt receive the third degree about how Maddie had taken to her new surroundings. She'd have to be careful not to let her misgivings show, lest her mother think there was anything wrong with Camp Pinewood. She'd indicated more than once that she thought four weeks was an awfully long time for a nine-year-old to be away from home but in typical fashion had conceded, albeit reluctantly, with a hearty dose of guilt, that it was Sloane and Eddie's decision to make. *"Who am I to say? I'm just her grandmother. What do I know?"*

Of course the very last thing Sloane felt like doing at the moment, on the heels of a three-hour drive, was being on the receiving end of her mother's barrage of questions. Thankfully, her mom had invited Sloane's aunt to join them. With any luck that would divert the focus from her.

Sloane pulled into the parking lot of an off-the-beaten-path vegan restaurant, which must have been selected by her aunt. Apparently, they had the best tofu curry this side of South Asia. Period. Who could argue with that? She pushed in the front door and immediately homed in on her mother flailing her arms in the far corner to wave her over to their table. A blind man could have spotted her.

"How's my baby girl?" Sloane's mother swooped in, kissing her forcefully on either side of the mouth as she crushed her cheeks between her fleshy palms.

"I'm fine, Mom. That hurts." She shuffled into the booth and reached for a napkin to eradicate the tangerine lip stain she'd undoubtedly been branded with. Twice.

"You need to put some meat on those bones." Her mother surveyed her with one eye half-closed, taking in everything from her

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faded purple Crocs with their flattened backs to the Red Sox baseball cap she was wearing to conceal her day-three-without-washing chestnut brown hair. “Did you lose more weight?”

“I don’t know, Mom.” She did know. And she had. Ten pounds in the past month alone. Quite unintentionally. “I’m just stressed-out, I guess.”

“You kids these days and your stress.”

“I have a lot on my mind is all.” Sloane spread her menu in front of her face, intending it as a makeshift barrier. As if that would discourage her mother’s third degree. Margaret Allen was not one to be discouraged. Ever. As a devout Catholic—somewhat ironic in light of her overbearing and overfeeding tendencies; she would have made a great Jew—as well as a lifetime busybody, her claim to fame was that she hadn’t missed a Sunday at church in thirty-six years. Not even when she’d given birth to Sloane’s younger sister, Amy, on a Saturday afternoon. God couldn’t have forgiven that?

“I’m listening.”

“I’m not really in the mood to talk about it now.” Sloane fidgeted with the frayed corner of her menu.

“Well, fine. Then how’s my granddaughter? Did she cry when you left?”

“No, Mom. She’s nine.”

“So? You bawled for three hours when Daddy and I dropped you at day camp.”

“I did not.”

“You most certainly did.” She nodded, as if she’d never been as sure of something in her entire life. “Do they feed her at this camp?”

“No, they starve them.”

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“Very funny. Maddie is skinny enough. I hope she doesn’t lose weight.” She paused. “I’m going to send her a care package with some of my brownies.”

“They don’t allow them to receive food in the mail, Mom.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“It’s the rule.” Sloane shrugged.

“Well, it sounds like *jail* to me.”

“It’s not jail, Mom. Believe me, jail doesn’t cost a fortune.”

“Well, hello, ladies!” Sloane’s aunt floated toward them, her commanding voice drawing the attention of almost everyone in their vicinity, despite the fact that Annabel Winston was a woman whose presence needed no verbal introduction.

Today, she was bedecked in a caftan that looked more suitable for Woodstock circa 1969 than present-day Brookline, Massachusetts, with its swirling rainbow of colors and coordinated handkerchief-inspired headband—if you could really call the tattered piece of fabric tied across her forehead a headband. During Sloane’s childhood and well into her teenage years, her aunt had represented everything her mother wasn’t. She would descend upon their modest New England saltbox house bearing exotic gifts, such as the worry dolls from Guatemala she’d instructed Sloane to place under her pillow before going to bed to ensure a good night’s sleep.

Annabel Winston did not cook. She most certainly did not clean. She didn’t help with homework or wipe tears away when knees were bruised. But she did regale Sloane and Amy with tales of her mysterious and, typically, unpredictable travels around the globe.

All the while, Sloane’s mother would endure being sidelined, often rolling her eyes as her sister elaborated, possibly to the point of

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untruth. But Sloane and Amy didn't care and their mother's nagging cynicism served only to shine a brighter and more flattering light on their aunt.

"Hello." Her mother's lips pursed into a thin line as Annabel proffered three kisses on alternating cheeks and then signaled for her to slide over so she could squeeze into the booth next to her.

"Now let me get a look at my gorgeous niece. Stand up, stand up." She gestured by lifting both hands in the air.

"Aunt Annabel," Sloane moaned, but she couldn't hide a smile. She got out of her seat and stood in the aisle, where she did a quick rotation at her aunt's direction—one index finger held high, winding in a circular motion.

"Every inch as stunning as ever. You must have inherited my genes." She nudged her sister in the side. "Right, Margie?"

Sloane laughed. Her mother absolutely despised being called Margie and had been known to bite the head off anyone who dared to mutter any version of a nickname without explicit permission.

It never ceased to astonish Sloane how very different her mother and aunt were. Same parents. Same DNA. Same Roman nose and olive complexion. Same zaftig thighs. But the similarities ended there. Nothing like Sloane and her sister, Amy. While they'd certainly pursued diverse interests growing up—Sloane had been head cheerleader and Amy had been head of the debate team—they'd always preferred the same clothing, food, friends, sometimes even boys. Amy had been the smarter sister, no doubt. Sloane had been the prettier one, but not by much.

"So, what's good here aside from the tofu?" Sloane's mother lifted her reading glasses, which hung around her neck on a thick, glossy

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gold-link chain, onto the bridge of her nose out of habit, even though they all knew she could decipher the menu just fine without them.

“What do you have against tofu?” Sloane’s aunt arched a bushy eyebrow.

“Well, for starters, it tastes like a soggy sponge.”

“Oh, would you stop! It’s good for you. And it wouldn’t hurt you to lose a few pounds.”

“I could say the same to you,” Sloane’s mother grumbled. “On the other hand, my daughter here is fading away to nothingness from all of the *stress* in her life.”

“Is that so, dear?” Sloane’s aunt turned to her, a look of genuine concern swathing her rugged face. “What’s troubling you?”

“It’s nothing really.”

“It’s never nothing.” She contemplated this. “Is it . . .”

There it was. The proverbial dot dot dot. As if saying her name would make it a final period.

“Amy?” Sloane filled in the blank and her aunt nodded somberly. “No. I mean, I don’t know. Maybe.” She noticed her mother shift uncomfortably in her seat. She’d already compartmentalized things and closed off this particular topic of discussion. Apparently, she and God had worked it out. “I’m probably anxious because I just dropped Maddie at sleepaway camp for the whole month of August, and with Eddie working . . .”

“You’re concerned you’ll be a bored housewife?” her aunt blurted, not bothering to consider a tactful response. Nothing revolutionary on that front.

“That’s not exactly how I would have put it.” Sloane laughed. “But I guess kind of.” Nor was it nearly the whole truth.

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Sloane had quit her job as a third-grade teacher nine years earlier when Madeleine was born. It was hard to believe almost a decade had passed since she'd nuzzled her colicky little miracle and watched the rest of the world fade into the distance. She'd gone from the workforce to force-feeding a newborn—who'd spit up nearly everything she'd ingested—without so much as an inkling of regret.

"That's entirely understandable." This coming from the woman who'd sooner be burned at the stake than bored.

"My friend Hillary and I have been thinking about taking a little trip or something, but I can't go too far with Maddie being away from home. I've been meaning to ask if you have any ideas. Someplace we can both . . . clear our heads."

"Not only do I have an idea." Annabel hesitated for effect. "I have the *perfect* idea!"

"I'm all ears." Sloane felt a rush of enthusiasm at the mere suggestion of an escape.

"My Lake George house!"

"I thought you were selling it?"

"I am. But it can wait until September. I'll take it off the market for a few weeks while you stay there."

"Are you sure?" Sloane nearly leapt across the table to hug her.

"Never been more sure. Gerome and I are leaving for Europe next week with no immediate plans to come back." She winked at Sloane, who knew that her aunt said such things only to get under her mother's skin. "So it's yours. You can leave tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow? That's amazing! I'll have to ask Hillary. It's okay to bring her?"

"Bring whomever you'd like, my dear."

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“Won’t Eddie join you?” This was Sloane’s mother trying to insinuate herself back into the conversation.

“No,” she answered abruptly, and then, thinking better of alerting her mother to any marital complications, cleared her throat. “I mean, maybe for a little, but you know he can’t take much time off from work, especially on such short notice.”

“He works for his father, for crying out loud!” Sloane’s mother countered. “Like he’s going to fire his own son.”

Sloane ignored her. “I really can’t thank you enough, Aunt Annabel. You have no idea how important this is to me.”

“Listen, I’m just happy you’ll get some final enjoyment outta that old place. She holds a lot of memories.”

“She sure does.” Sloane couldn’t help but think back to one glorious summer she and Georgina, her best friend from college, had spent there. Those were the days.

“And . . . that house is famous for its healing qualities.” Her aunt nodded sagely as she spoke.

“Is that so?” Sloane was dubious. While a getaway certainly sounded like a much-needed short-term antidote to her tumultuous emotions, it seemed highly unlikely that the house itself was capable of a permanent cure. Not that she was entirely sure what she was trying to cure.

“Oh yes. Enter broken. Leave fixed. Mark my words, my dear.” She stared off into the distance. “Mark my words.”