

Chapter 1

I lost Chloe twice. The first time, she was six. We were in Walmart. I still, to this day, don't know how it happened. My daughter was there one minute, hanging on to the cart, singing "Itsy-Bitsy Spider" in that husky little voice of hers. Then she was gone. I have never been so terrified in my life.

Until today, maybe. Now.

Losing your six-year-old in a public place is every parent's nightmare. You imagine all the possibilities. You're certain she's dead. You *know* a pervert has kidnapped her. You see the headlines in tomorrow's paper. You hear your tearful interview on the local news, begging the perv to bring her home, unharmed.

I've never been the woman who needed to one-up others. We all know one of those. If you have a headache, she has a migraine. If you stub your toe, she's sure hers is broken. But losing Chloe in that Walmart was worse than the usual lost-child-announced-over-the-public-address-system situation. My six-year-old couldn't speak her own name clearly. Not even her first name. She could sing "Itsy-Bitsy Spider," but she didn't know her phone number, or her street address. All she knew was that we lived in a red house . . . except that it wasn't red, it was yellow.

The house has always been yellow. My ex and I bought the house on Ivy Drive, in the little college town of Port Chapel, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, the fall before Chloe was born. I didn't like the yellow, but Randall said we would repaint it. Financially, the house was too good a deal to pass up; we used the inheritance from my grandmother to make a hefty down payment.

The location was ideal, just on the edge of the college campus where my husband, the literature professor, taught. He could walk to work in his tweed blazer and wool cap. Later, I learned the location was also convenient for him to meet his grad students alone in his office to have sex with them on the leather couch I bought him his first Father's Day.

I digress. Back to the yellow house.

I wanted to paint it white. I'd always dreamed of a white house with green shutters on a quiet street. Like my grandparents'. Randall and I agreed the day we went to settlement to paint the rambling Victorian white with green shutters. I was at an OB appointment when Randall met with the painters. It was mild for late January and he was in a hurry to have the peeling paint tidied up before there was snow.

And when I arrived home, the painters were painting it yellow. I called Randall at his office. He called me back two hours later. It was too late, he said. The paint had been bought. It was nonrefundable. The house would look better yellow than white anyway, he told me. He told me a lot of things that I didn't question. Until I was older. Wiser. At least, wiser to him.

So I always wished it was white. But it was yellow. And Chloe could never remember the difference between yellow and red, so she called it our red house.

I walk to the window and gaze out. It's winter, but there's no snow on the ground. Just dead leaves, dead branches. The same deadness I feel inside.

I think about that day in Walmart when Chloe was six. I'd been so terrified that it took me a moment to move, to find my voice. Then I ran from aisle to aisle, calling her name, trying not to panic, knowing logically that panic wouldn't help.

I've always been able to think logically, even in the most emotional of times. But that day, my emotions were lodged in my throat, threatening to spill out between the aisles in hardware.

Cleanup on aisle twenty-two. Mother's puke.

I found her within two minutes, three tops. By the time I spotted her, my heart was pounding so hard that I couldn't catch my breath. "Chloe!"

She turned to me. She'd been studying doorknobs. Or maybe the boxes of screws beside them.

"Chloe?"

"Mama Bear." She pointed at a pack of shiny brass screws. She was all smiles. She hadn't missed me or realized *she* was missing.

That perfectly round, flat face, almond-shaped eyes, putty nose, and tiny rosebud lips. All telltale signs. When I close my eyes, I see still see her as she was that day. Small and round. Red-blond hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, blue corduroy pants, a light blue shirt, blue sneakers with sparkles on them. She loved blue. Blue like her eyes. Her father's eyes.

Chloe, my precious daughter, was officially diagnosed with Down syndrome, or Trisomy 21, at eleven days of age. I knew within seconds of her birth. During my pregnancy, I'd read about all the things that could go wrong. I don't know if I had *known*

she wouldn't be what Randall was expecting, or if it had just been my usual slight paranoia. When I was pregnant, my OB had said it was common for mothers to worry about the possibility of birth defects, and that I should relax and anticipate a healthy baby.

Chloe wasn't a defect. I refuse to ever look at my child that way . . . or allow anyone else in my presence to do so. And she *was* healthy. But she would never be what Randall had wanted. A "normal" child, whatever the hell that is. What he wanted most, what he dreamed of, was a scholar, a son or daughter to attend his alma mater, Princeton. What he wanted was all the things Chloe would never be.

I lean so close to the window that my breath fogs the cold glass. In literary analogies of a broken heart, images of *fragmentation* are often used. My heart isn't a thing in broken pieces. It's like something that's seized up. Frozen. I touch the foggy, cold glass, but they're not my fingerprints that appear. They're Chloe's.

I hear her husky giggle. She's no longer a child and her fingerprints are no longer tiny. She's twenty-five, almost twenty-six, standing here at this same window.

"Come on, Chloe. We're going to be late." It was only three years ago, but it seems like . . . another lifetime. When I close my eyes, I can smell her still, *here* in this room. Her room. Does a mother ever forget the scent of her child? I fight the tears that sting the backs of my eyelids.

I see myself in the reflection in the window. I watch myself walk around her bedroom, the walls painted a pale blue, picking up dirty clothes: panties, socks, her PJ top. "Get dressed."

She's here, standing at the window, breathing on the glass, then pressing her fingertips against it. She's wearing flannel pajama bottoms, slippers, and a pale blue bra with little hearts on it. She doesn't have very large breasts. Really, a cami would do, but she likes wearing a bra. It makes her feel like a woman, I think, instead of the child she will always be.

"Get dressed," I repeat, tossing her dirty clothes into her hamper. She's so fastidious about some things, like where her comb and hairbrush go in her bathroom. Lined up side-by-side, parallel to each other, perpendicular to the edge of the sink. If I move her hairbrush over an inch, I'm in big trouble. So, why is it okay for her to leave dirty underwear on the floor? "You're going to be late to Miss Minnie's and I'm going to be late to class."

"Teacher's late. Late, late." She pronounces the words as if they're a tongue twister. She's worked hard with her speech therapist, with me, with the mirror, to speak clearly. I'm proud of her, but I don't have time to be the proud mama this afternoon. It's my first day teaching Sue Chou's British Literature 101.

I can't for the life of me figure out why I'm nervous. It's a one hundred level class. I could do it with my eyes closed: Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Lewis Carroll. I have a doctorate in Comparative Literature. I've been with the department (Randall's department) for nineteen years. I don't teach freshman classes. I don't have to. I'm only doing it as a favor to Sue, who's gone to California to bring her mom home to put her in a retirement home. Alzheimer's.

I'm jealous. Not of the retirement home or the Alzheimer's, of course. The having a mom part. I wish I had a mom to put in a retirement center. Mine's been dead since I was twenty-two. Ovarian cancer. A long, sad tale that I don't have time to think about right now. Dad lives in Boca Raton with his second wife, Gloria. I don't care for Gloria, but it's not really an issue because I don't care for Dad, either. The feeling's mutual. It took him exactly four months after my mother's death to marry Gloria. She'd been my mother's home care hospice nurse.

"Chloe, put your sweater on. Put your jeans on." I point to the blue knit pants we've agreed to call jeans. She can't wear jeans; at least I can't find any to fit her. She's built like a fireplug; five three and a size sixteen with a weird waistline not made for blue jeans.

Chloe has moved from fingerprints to handprints on the glass pane. She seems utterly enchanted by the phenomena.

"Please?" I beg, holding out her sweater.

"All right, already," she grumbles.

It comes out more like "Awight, aweady." She talks as if she's Elmer Fudd with a mouth full of marbles. I understand her perfectly . . . most of the time. Other people . . . not so much. But we're working on it.

"Sweater, underwear, jeans, socks, *and* shoes," I remind her. Everything is laid out on her bed.

"What's today?" she asks, finally tearing herself away from the window.

"Tuesday." I pull a sock out from under her bed. Shoot for the laundry hamper.

"I don't go to Miss Minnie's on Tuesday. Not on Tuesday," she repeats firmly.
"Not on Tuesday."

I miss the hamper. "You go on Tuesdays now. Because I'm teaching a class." I remain patient, even though we've had this conversation at least half a dozen times in the last week. Chloe doesn't adjust well to change. That doesn't mean she *can't* adjust, according to our family therapist; it just means we need to give her the tools.

She thrusts out her lower lip. "Not on Tuesdays."

Just once in a while I'd like to forego *the tools* and have her do what I ask her. Not put up a fight.

I pick up the sock next to the laundry hamper and drop it in. "You're going to Miss Minnie's for a couple of hours, then your dad will pick you up."

She struggles to get the sweater over her head. I fight the urge to help her.

"Then you're going to Chick-fil-A, for dinner," I say brightly. "Just like every Tuesday night."

I keep the bitterness out of my voice. This is the sum total of Randall's commitment to his relationship with his daughter. His weekly date with Chloe at Chick-fil-A. He picks her up here in his silly little fluorescent yellow Smart Car, he takes her to the fast food place, they have chicken sandwiches, fries, and diet lemonade and he returns her by six thirty. Less than two hours a week. That's how much time he spends with her.

And now it will be three hours, because of the change in my schedule.

"Do you think it's wise, modifying Chloe's *sked*?" he asked.

I'd stopped by his office. It's difficult to get him to return my phone calls. "Sked?" I'm impatient. With him. With Chloe. With my students. With everyone, these days. I feel like I need a change. Maybe that's why I agreed to take Sue Chou's class in her absence. Because I was bored with my life. And I thought teaching an extra class would help? Maybe. Or maybe it was the idea that I might have time to meet David after class for coffee . . . before going home. Was that what was driving me? Did I think I was going to go all wild and crazy and have a coffee date once a week?

"Chloe's schedule," Randall said.

Only he pronounced it *sheh*-dule, as if he were British. Which he isn't. He's just an ass, an ass with a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, a wool blazer, and a tweed driving cap.

"Skeds were used early in the century, mostly for sports—"

"I know what a *sked* is," I interrupted. I stood in front of his desk, my hands in my coat pockets. I'd walked over from my cubby office down the hall, which, unlike his corner office, had no window.

He'd kissed me for the first time in front of that window twenty-seven years earlier. I was a grad student and his teaching assistant. He'd been helping me with a paper on the Changing Meaning of the Victorian Family in the Work of Elizabeth Gaskell. I'd only had a couple of boyfriends before that, and mostly boring sex (except with bad boy Tommy LaGeedo, who had dumped me a few months before). I was still smarting from the breakup when Professor Monroe came on to me.

Randall is fifteen years my senior. At the time, he seemed so . . . mature. So . . . unlike Tommy LaGeedo. So brilliant and . . . exciting.

I try not to think about what would have happened if I hadn't let Randall kiss me that night. If I hadn't gone back to his apartment with him. Shared a bottle of pinot with him and dropped my panties. Maybe Tommy and I would have gotten back together? Tommy had worn men's knit bikini briefs. They'd fascinated me as much as the jumbo-sized package inside.

"Alicia—"

"Randall." I lifted my gaze to meet his. At the last undergrad reunion, I'd chatted with Tommy. He was still married to his first wife, his only wife; they had three great kids. Two were at Stanford. Maybe Randall should have married him.

"Chloe's schedule." Randall, always Randall, never Randy, always spoke as if he was standing in front of a lecture hall. He had become a perfect caricature of a literature professor. "I fear it's unwise to make any serious alterations—"

"She likes Miss Minnie's. And you guys will have a little more time together. Maybe you can take her back to your place." *And hang out with you and Kelly*, I thought.

"Play a game or something. I'm teaching her to play Go Fish."

Kelly was his fourth wife. Thirty-five years his junior. Oddly enough, like me, and Ann (wife number three), Kelly had been a grad student here at Thomas Stone University when Randall met her. Randall had been separated from his first wife when we began dating, although they were still living together. Something he failed to tell me

when he plied me with wine and Emily Brontë quotes that first night. She'd been out of town, leaving him free to *entertain*.

"I think we should talk this through," Randall puffed. "A change in Chloe's schedule could potentially—"

"Inconvenience you?"

"Must you always interrupt me, Alicia?"

I walked to the door. "Pick her up at four thirty at Minnie's. There's a charge for every five minutes you're late. Don't be late or you're paying, not me," I warned. I rested my hand on the doorknob, feeling like a total bitch. Knowing I can be at times, but who isn't, with their ex-husband who cheated on them with a younger woman? Several younger women. With bigger breasts and smaller waists. Young women unencumbered by a mentally challenged child. "I'll be home by seven thirty."

"I thought your class ran until six thirty."

Three hours. He didn't want to spend three damned hours *a week* with his daughter. With *our* dear, sweet-natured, stubborn daughter.

I remember vividly, at that moment, wanting to strangle him. I wanted to kill him and wait until late at night to drag his body out of Ballard Hall. His head would *thump, thump, thump* as I dragged him down the marble steps. I had it all worked out. I'd put him in the trunk of my Honda. He'd fit; it was a big trunk. I'd dig a hole in the backyard near the rosebushes where the soil was soft. I'd plant him there. Throw in his driving cap. Maybe, in the spring, I'd even add a couple more rosebushes. Yellow teacup roses. And I

would never, *ever* tell. That's how people usually got caught; they brag. I wouldn't need to brag, not even to my best friend, Jin. The satisfaction of the deed would be enough.

But I didn't kill him. Instead, I just looked at him, my face carefully constructed to hide my emotions. How could I still be hurt all these years after the divorce? It wasn't the divorce that still caused the pain. It was the fact that he didn't love our daughter. Not like he should. Not like she deserved. "We agreed that I would make these kinds of decisions, Randall," I deadpanned. "Chloe can handle the change."

Chloe can handle the change. She handled the change, all right.

Tuesday. I don't go to Miss Minnie's on Tuesday. I go Wednesday. And more days. Mom is a dummy head. I'm not a dummy head. I get the days mixed up sometimes, but I know I don't go to Miss Minnie's on Tuesday.

I go to Chick Filly on Tuesday. With my dad. Not Miss Minnie's.

Mom tells me to get dressed. She has to go work at college. But I don't want to get dressed. I want to make handprints on the window in my bedroom. The glass is cold.

I don't want to go to Miss Minnie's. I don't want to go to Chick Filly with Dad. He reads his paper when we eat. He doesn't talk to me. He thinks I'm a dummy head. He doesn't know I'm smart. He doesn't know that I can order my sandwich by myself. I can tell the lady I want diet lemonade. I practice saying the word sometimes because it's hard words: *diet lemonade*. Every time we go, I think Dad will let me tell the lady what I want.

I say, "I can tell her."

But he never lets me.

I think that's because my dad doesn't like me. I want to tell my mom. Then I wouldn't have to go to Chick Filly with him on Tuesday. But that would make my mom sad. She loves me. She wants me to go to Chick Filly.

She loves me and I love her. That's why I put my sweater on when she tells me. Because I love her mostest in the world.