

CHAPTER ONE

Eliza surveyed the dining room table, which was groaning beneath the array of shiva platters, wondering if the dish of pickles in her hand would be the straw that broke the camel's back. She found a spot for it between a pyramid of bakery cookies adorned with multicolored sprinkles and a plate of overstuffed sandwiches. At the last minute, she plucked a half-sour wedge from the plate and sank her teeth into it.

"Eliza, dear, I'm so sorry!" A hand came down on her shoulder, and she turned, quickly trying to swallow the pickle without choking.

"Thanks, Mrs. Kazinsky," she mumbled as the older woman pulled her into an awkward hug. She smelled of lavender and mothballs.

Mrs. Kazinsky released her, and Eliza pushed wisps of hair from around her own eyes. They had escaped the messy bun on the top of her head. She hadn't intended it to be a messy bun, but it had become one as the endless day wore on.

"How are you doing, dear?" Mrs. Kazinsky had been her parents' next-door neighbor for ages. *When did she get so wrinkled?*

"I'm okay." Eliza shrugged. "You know."

Mrs. Kazinsky nodded. "I keep thinking about when your mother passed away. Poor, poor Laura. It feels like yesterday. Funny how ten years can go by just like that. How old were you then? Seventeen?"

The back of Eliza's throat burned. "Sixteen."

"Sixteen!" Mrs. Kazinsky shook her head sadly. "And now you've lost both your parents."

"Yes, Mrs. Kazinsky. I know."

The older woman patted her arm, but Eliza interrupted quickly before she could speak again. "I'm sorry, I need to see if Carol needs help."

"Oh, yes, of course."

Eliza left the dining room, her eyes trained on the floor. But instead of the shiny wood planks, she saw herself as a five-year-old, sitting on her mother's lap watching TV past her bedtime. She was utterly convinced that, if she didn't turn around, her mother wouldn't know she was there. Now her twenty-six-year-old self hoped the same magic would work—cloaking her in invisibility as she made her way through the house. Despite the excuse she'd given to Mrs. Kazinsky, Carol was the last person she wanted to see. She slipped down the hall to the back door and stepped outside, sucking in a deep breath of the crisp fall air—early this year—before flattening herself against the back wall of the Levinger house.

The small backyard was usually neatly kept, but no one had raked the leaves that had just begun to litter the lawn. Inside the house, there was a framed photograph of Eliza and her brother, Scott, nearly buried in a pile of leaves they had jumped into moments earlier. Scott was laughing, his mouth wide open, and Eliza was gazing at him adoringly, the way only a younger sister could look at her beloved older brother. She wasn't sure if she actually remembered that day or if it was just the picture that had fixed the image so firmly in her mind.

The door next to her creaked, and she jumped. *Please let it not be Carol.*

“Hiding out, huh?” Scott stepped outside. “I figured I’d find you here.”

Eliza had no response, so she didn’t make any. She still couldn’t get used to seeing her brother in a suit, even though he surely wore one to work every day. And he’d worn one when he’d gotten married. Nonetheless, it always made her think of another framed photo in the house—of Scott standing on the bimah the day of his bar mitzvah. It used to hang next to another photo, of all four of them that same day—their mother wearing a dark green crepe dress, with sleeves that ended at her elbows. That photo had disappeared from the wall shortly after Carol moved in.

“It’s times like these I wish I smoked,” Scott quipped, showing his hands into his pockets.

“You could always start,” offered Eliza.

“Yeah, no, I think I have enough vices.”

Eliza snorted. The idea of Scott having vices was beyond ridiculous. Not Scott, the golden child.

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh, you may think I’m perfect, but go talk to Maren. She could give you a long list of my faults.”

“Where is she anyway?”

“Sitting with Carol.”

No wonder she hadn’t seen her sister-in-law.

“You’ve got to work on that poker face of yours, sis.” Scott shook his head. “You know, she really did make Dad happy. And she’s totally devastated.”

Carol hadn’t been able to speak at the funeral. She couldn’t stop crying. Her eyes had been puffy even before the service started. Eliza wanted to be a better person. The kind of person who could be a comfort to her stepmother. But given their history, it was hard for her to think kindly toward Carol, even

now. Perhaps especially now that time had run out for Eliza to fix her broken relationship with her dad—a relationship Carol had done nothing but widen the cracks in.

Leaning against the back wall of the house, she smoothed the nonexistent wrinkles in her knee-length black skirt, which she wore with black tights and tall black boots. Her black sweater was making her itch. She wished she'd been able to find something else in her closet that would have been appropriate to wear, but there hadn't been much time.

When her mom died, Aunt Claude had taken her to buy a dress. She dragged her through Macy's, Eliza's eyes trained on her own red Chuck Taylors instead of on the dresses Claude was trying to show her. What difference did it make what she wore to her mother's funeral? It wouldn't bring her back, and why would anyone care what she looked like?

Claude pulled her to a mirror and pointed her face at it, holding a dress in front of her. Eliza dragged her eyes up from her Chucks to look at the dress. It had long sleeves and a boat-neck. Decorative buttons adorned the shoulders. On any other day, she would have announced that she wasn't forty years old and that the dress was hideous. On that day, however, she was silent, waiting for her aunt to say something. When she didn't, Eliza raised her eyes higher to meet Claude's in the mirror. Her aunt was crying.

Claude quickly swiped at her tears and sniffed. "Oh, Liza, I'm so sorry. I just look at you and think, *No girl your age should be shopping for a dress to wear at her own mother's funeral.*"

Eliza looked back down at her Chucks. Who could have imagined they'd be so interesting?

Claude cleared her throat and patted Eliza's shoulders. "Anyway. Let's try this on. If it fits, let's get out of here."

It did fit, and on the way home, they stopped for ice cream. Eliza managed to eat half her small cup of chocolate before it

melted into soup. By the time her appetite came back, she'd lost twelve pounds.

"Liza? Yoo-hoo?" Scott was waving his hand in front of her face. "Where'd you go?"

Eliza blinked. "Sorry. What did you say?"

Scott exhaled loudly. "Nothing. Doesn't matter." He looked away, staring unseeing across the yard before turning back to her. "How are you doing, anyway?"

She shrugged. "You?"

Scott closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I just can't believe it, you know? Dad was never sick a day in his life."

Eliza raised her eyebrows. "Or maybe he just didn't want to admit it. Always the tough guy."

"Maybe." Scott pressed his lips together—a childhood habit he hadn't broken. Eliza knew he was trying not to cry, and she reached out to touch his arm. It was Scott who had called her on Monday with the news. Carol had come home to find their dad, Jack, on the kitchen floor. He was already dead. Eliza couldn't count how many times people had asked her in the past three days if her dad had heart problems. No one knew the answer because he never went to the doctor. Perhaps he'd had enough of doctors during his first wife's two-year-long death march.

Scott squeezed Eliza's hand. "I'm okay," he said, and Eliza wondered if he was speaking to her or to himself. "We should probably go back inside."

Leave it to Scott to "should" her into doing the right thing.

He opened the back door and stepped aside, allowing her to go first.

More people had arrived, and a loud burst of laughter erupted from the dining room, where there was now a dent in the cookie pyramid. Eliza had a sudden memory of screaming

at Aunt Claude ten years earlier. “I’m not going back downstairs. Everyone is acting like it’s a party. And Mom is *dead!*”

Eliza slipped into the powder room. Before she even realized she was going to do it, she ran her wrists under the cold water, a trick her mom had taught her when she felt anxiety bubbling up inside her. *When your heart starts beating so fast that the blood is pounding in your ears, the cold water will slow it down. Just keep your wrists under until you can breathe again.* Adult Eliza wasn’t sure if Laura’s explanation made any medical sense, but somehow the trick still worked for her.

She took a deep breath and looked at herself in the mirror. With the tip of her pinky finger, she repaired her eyeliner. Her honey-blond hair was barely contained in its bun, so she pulled it down and twisted it into a long braid over her right shoulder. It still looked messy, but it was the best it was going to be.

As soon as she left the bathroom, one of her dad’s golf buddies spotted her. And then she was back running the gauntlet of neighbors, friends of her dad’s, cousins, and some old friends of hers and Scott’s who still lived in Westchester—or near enough to drop in for the Jack Levinger shiva. Maren convinced her to have something to eat, and when she returned to the living room after managing to swallow a few bites of corned beef, Aunt Claude had arrived. Claude’s hair was still dark thanks to the wonders of chemistry, but golden highlights helped conceal the gray as the roots grew out. She was wearing the trim black suit she’d worn at the funeral, even though she’d gone home after the cemetery service to drop off Uncle Mitch.

Claude’s hand was on Carol’s arm, and Carol was introducing her to someone Eliza didn’t recognize. “This is Claudia, Jack’s sister-in-law. I mean, she was Laura’s sister.”

Eliza hovered on the periphery, waiting to catch her aunt’s eye. It didn’t take long—it was as if Claude had special Eliza

radar—and before she knew it, she was enveloped by the firm hug she knew so well.

“Oh, Liza, so sorry I couldn’t get here sooner,” Aunt Claude whispered into her hair.

And for the first time, Eliza allowed the tears to fall.

Later that evening, after the rabbi had come and gone and the prayers had been said and only a few stragglers remained, Eliza granted herself permission to leave. She gave Carol a hug—which her stepmother accepted without returning—and followed Claude out the door so her aunt could drive her to the train station. Scott and Maren had headed back to the city a little earlier.

Claude put her arm around her as they headed toward the street. “I’m not going to ask how you’re doing,” she said with a little laugh.

Eliza smiled wryly back. “And I’m not going to tell you,” she replied.

Then Claude’s face changed. “Actually, I need to give you something. I’m not sure if now is the time, but I don’t know when the right time is.”

Eliza looked at her, puzzled, and wrapped her arms around herself. It was chilly, even now that she was wearing her jacket.

“Let’s get into the car.”

Eliza nodded and followed Claude, sliding into the front seat. It had been a long time since she’d been in her aunt’s car. Then, Claude still had the minivan, but now that her two kids had left for college, she’d downsized to a sedan. Teddy and Nora were both plane rides away and, not surprisingly, hadn’t flown in for their uncle’s funeral. Though Claude had remained snugly rooted in Eliza’s and Scott’s lives, the rest of Laura’s family had drifted away after Jack married Carol less than a year after Laura’s death.

Claude sat behind the steering wheel, her large purse in her lap. "Okay, so," she started, and then paused.

Eliza's eyebrows drew together as she waited.

"So," Claude started again. "I have this letter."

Something in her aunt's voice made Eliza's heart beat a little faster, and her body temperature dropped another degree.

Claude reached into her purse and pulled out a standard white business envelope with something written on it. She held it for a moment before speaking again, as if she were considering stuffing it back into the bag and pretending it didn't exist.

Finally, she took a deep breath. "Your mom wrote this before . . . before she died. She asked me to hold it for you."

Eliza's hands went cold, and she clasped them together to keep them from shaking. Her aunt looked at her as if she were trying to see into her mind. Or her heart.

"I didn't give it to you before because she specifically wanted you to have it only after your dad was gone." Claude continued to hold the letter tightly in both hands.

Eliza's mouth was dry, and it took two tries before she could speak. "What does it say?"

Claude shook her head slowly. "I don't know." She passed the envelope to Eliza, who reached for it with one trembling hand.

On the front, in blue ink and in her mother's script, it said *For Eliza*. Underneath, in Claude's careful print, it said *Give to Eliza only after Jack's death*.

As if she could read her niece's mind, Claude quickly explained, "I wrote the instructions in case something happened to me. I wanted to make sure Mitch and Nora and Teddy would know what to do."

Eliza bit her lip. Somehow, she was no longer twenty-six. She was sixteen again, and when she looked down at her feet

she expected to see her red Chucks in place of her high-heeled black boots. Why would her mother have written a letter for her that she wouldn't see for . . . how many years? Jack was fifty-nine when he dropped dead. No one could have expected this. Maybe her mother had thought she'd be getting this letter twenty years from now. Thirty years from now. She smoothed it out on her lap.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered.

"Do you want to open it here, with me?" Claude reached out, putting her hand on Eliza's knee. Her fingernails were perfect plum-colored ovals.

Eliza's breathing was shallow, and she felt a little light-headed. Part of her wanted to rip open the envelope immediately. But another part wanted to just hold it for a while. She had never thought she'd have any other words from her mother. This wasn't ever going to happen again.

"Are you okay?" Claude rubbed her knee, and Eliza looked up.

She shrugged helplessly and then had a sudden thought. "Do you have any other letters?" Maybe Laura had written one for her wedding day. Or the birth of her first child.

Claude shook her head sadly. "No, this is it."

"Is there one for Scott?"

Her aunt shook her head again.

"And you have no idea what's in it?"

Another shake of the head. Eliza nodded slowly. "I think I want to read it alone, if you don't mind."

"Are you sure?"

Claude's concern wasn't surprising. Or unreasonable, given Eliza's history. But she needed to have this final moment with her mother alone.

Claude nodded. "You know I'm here for you, right?"

She did. Sometimes she wondered if her cousins resented

how much attention their mother had paid her when Laura was dying and after she was gone. Claude had spread herself so thin being both a mom to her own kids and a substitute mom to her niece, especially once Scott left for college and Carol entered the picture.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be okay.” Even as Eliza said the words, she wondered if they were true.