

Chapter 1

Maddie

Two caskets flanked the church altar: dark wood—mahogany, maybe—for Dad and a warm honey oak with white satin trim for Mom. So many flowers surrounded them, my nose stung from the mixture of scents, or maybe it stung from my grandmother's perfume, sprayed on thick to mask her alcohol-laced breath. Grandma Rosie and Aunt Shannon both reeked as though they'd spent the entire morning at a bar.

Alex sat, unmoving, across the aisle from me. My stepmother's perfect auburn hair draped over her shoulder like a scarf as she stared into her lap. Her hands rested over her flat stomach, but I knew what she hid under those bony fingers. And she could pretend all she wanted, but her stomach wouldn't be flat for much longer. She didn't even bother wearing black to her own husband's funeral. Instead, she wore a stupid purple cashmere sweater and gray slacks—not a stitch of black, unless you counted her soul.

Father John recited a closing prayer, and the organist played a low, mournful melody as people exited the sanctuary, turning their backs on my parents... and on me. When most everyone had left, the immediate family—and *she*—was allowed a few private moments. My aunt and grandmother got up and headed straight to my mother's casket. No one from my dad's family came. His parents had passed away years ago.

"Maddie? Would you like to come up?" The priest asked.

I sucked in a deep breath and stood, but the world spun, and I stumbled. Alex looked up at me with her emotionless green eyes but never made a move from her seat. Regaining my footing, I marched toward my father first.

“Hi, Daddy.” I didn’t really know what else to say. He was gone. His body was in the box, but my *dad* was gone. I kissed my fingers then pressed them to his heart. “I love you.” Then I wiped my eyes and went to see my mom. My grandmother and aunt stepped aside but hovered close by. “Mom,” I whispered. “I-I’m...” I burst into sobs, wishing I could crawl into the casket with her and shut tight the lid.

Alex’s mother put her arm around me. “She’ll miss you just as much as you miss her.”

I doubted it. Did the dead even have the capacity to *feel* anything? I glanced at my stepmother. Some of the living didn’t seem to feel much as it was.

She gave my shoulder a light squeeze then stepped back, allowing me some space to wipe my eyes and nose with my already well-used tissue. That was when Alex decided to stand and go to my father’s side. I watched her put her hands over his, but if she said anything, it was too quiet for me to hear. Grandma Rosie *tsked* and left the sanctuary with Aunt Shannon close on her heels, probably both in search of a drink.

“We’ll take care of your parents until the ground thaws in the spring,” Father John said, reminding me we had to wait months before burying them.

“Thank you.” I swiped my sleeve across my eyes to dry my tears. “I think I’ll go find my friends now.”

“Very good.” He smiled then turned toward my stepmother. “Alex, would you like to join the others for some refreshments?”

My dad’s new wife, his *widow*, didn’t move. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

The old priest nodded, making the loose skin on his jaw bounce. “Take as much time as you need.”

With one last look at my mom and dad, I left. On the way to the reception area, I nodded at Alex's parents, refusing to read too much into their sad smiles. Father John held the door then walked me through the lobby and all the way to the fellowship hall. I was barely ten steps inside before people surrounded me, offering their condolences. I felt like the french fry all the seagulls fought over at the beach, but the attention always seemed to come with a lot of shit.

Mrs. Jarvis—the lady who lived down the block from Mom and me—latched on to my wrist. “Oh sweetie, your mother was such a wonderful woman, and we’re all going to miss her.”

One of the guys from Dad's golf club patted my head as if I were the family dog. “I bet your dad's already found a prime course, wherever he is.”

“Your parents loved you so much, Maddie. It's just so, so sad,” said a woman I didn't even recognize.

Each comment, laced with well-meant but unnecessary pity, made me want to run away, screaming. None of these people knew my parents as I did. None of them knew *me* the way my parents did, especially Mom. The nearly uncontrollable urge to bolt from the room as if a horde of zombies was bearing down on me swept through me, and I had to force myself to breathe through it.

“Hey.” Haleigh hugged me. One of her corkscrew curls caught in my eyelashes, and I smothered a laugh. “I have to admit, I thought it would be weird having your parents' funeral together, but Father John did a nice job.”

“Yeah, he did. And nobody had to sit through two services. But now I just want to get out of here. I can't stand all these people looking at me like I'm the most pathetic thing

they've ever seen." I wrapped my arms around myself. I'd worn my black sweater dress, the one Mom'd bought for me to wear on New Year's. We'd done our annual shop 'til you drop at the after-Christmas sales, and she'd found it on a clearance rack. The fit, the style, everything about it was perfect.

"You don't look pathetic. You look stunning right now, and you should totally show off that dress later."

Part of me knew I should have probably stuffed the dress in the back of my closet and never thought of it again, but no matter how badly I wanted to, I just couldn't do it. I didn't have anything else to wear for the party, and Mom *did* buy it to show it off. She'd been so happy when I modeled it for her that day.

"Maddie, I'm so sorry for your loss." My school principal put her hand on my shoulder. "I wanted to let you know that, in light of your current circumstances, we're not going to take any action regarding last week's incident. However, that doesn't mean I want to see a repeat of it." She stared down at me, raising one penciled-on brow in a perfect arch.

"Thank you, Mrs. Walker." I forced a smile. *So kind of you to remind me of my transgressions at my parents' funeral. Bitch.*

"And who are you staying with?" She looked around the room as if scoping out my possible caregivers.

"With Haleigh's family."

"Oh..." She glanced between the two of us. "Well, I'll make a note of that in your record, but if you need anything at all, please be sure to let me know."

"Okay." I shrugged.

She patted my shoulder again then went over to Haleigh's parents. The three of them kept glancing in my direction, and I knew without a doubt they were talking about my *situation*.

Poor Maddie, the troubled sixteen-year-old orphan, whose parents died in a car accident together. She's going to need lots of support and... a keeper. She's going to need to talk to someone and tell them all about her feelings.

"I could really use a hit right now," I whispered in Hayleigh's ear.

Hayleigh went wide-eyed. "Maddie! We're at your parents' funeral."

I rolled my eyes. "My point exactly."

"I get it. But you might want to be careful. You could've been expelled if it weren't for—" Her mouth fell so far open I could see her uvula—a word I'd learned in biology the week before.

"My parents dying?" I stared her down, watching her face turn every shade of red in the color wheel. I had no idea why I was punishing Haleigh for the shit day I'd had. She hadn't done anything wrong.

She stared down at the floor. "Mm-hm."

"Sorry. I just... I don't even know." Then I bumped her with my shoulder. "Did your mom say we could use her car tonight?"

Haleigh smiled. "As long as the snow holds off. But I wish you had your license. I hate driving at night."

"Yeah, maybe I can get it in April." That seemed like such a long way away, and I wasn't even sure who'd take me. Mom and Dad had made me agree to wait until I turned

seventeen because they didn't think I was ready to have my license. *I'm pretty sure they didn't expect to die before then.* I know I never expected to lose them so soon.

"What are you two girls conspiring about over here?" Grandma Rosie slurred her words, and I wondered where she'd found more alcohol in the short time since the service ended. The church most likely didn't keep a stocked bar, unless you counted the communion wine. But I wouldn't have put it past my grandmother to raid that when no one was looking.

"Probably some party with booze and boys. Maybe we should crash it." Aunt Shannon winked at me, though she had trouble re-opening her eye, as if she were moving in alcohol-induced slow motion.

I tried to guard myself against the offensive smell oozing off the two of them, but it was impossible when my grandmother wrapped her twig-like arms around me, and her bleached-blond hair fell in my face.

"You know you can come with me if you want, to live I mean. We'd have such a great time." I had to help her stand upright as she let me out of her grasp.

"Oh, that would be fun!" my aunt squealed a little too loudly. "It'd be just us girls, and we could give each other facials and watch Hugh Jackman movies. God, that man makes me wet."

Ew, gross! "Um, thanks. I'll keep that in mind." I grabbed Haleigh's hand. "I should probably go say hi to some people, so..." I took a step back, pulling my best friend with me.

"Okay, sweetie. You just let me know," Grandma Rosie said, though it came out more like, *Okay, sheety. Youused lemme know.*

I hadn't even made it halfway across the room when my former ballet instructor cornered me. "Maddie!" Miss Nicole pulled me into a hug, enveloping me in her familiar gardenia perfume. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. Your parents were such wonderful people. I've missed seeing them—and *you*—since you stopped dancing." She finally let me go and took a step back. "My God, has it been three months?"

"Time flies." *When your life is falling apart around you.* "I've missed you too."

"Why don't you stop by the studio? You never did see the new floors. No more warped wood."

I'd sooner spend a week in detention. "Sure. I'll do that. I, uh, should go say something to my, uh, stepmom before she leaves."

"Okay, good." She pressed a kiss to each cheek before setting me free again. "I'll see you soon."

I turned around to make my escape and ran smack into Brody Allen, all six feet, blond hair, and brown eyes of him. His soft dark sweater clung to his lean muscular chest, and he smelled like sweet pine with a hint of chlorine, probably from spending most of his time swimming with the school's team.

"Sorry, I—"

"You have nothing to be sorry about." Brody winked at me with that skeezy half-grin of his perched on his kissable lips. "I'm the one who's sorry about your parents. My dad's really shaken up by it too. He keeps saying he's going to sell his golf clubs and take up fishing instead." Michael Allen and my dad had golfed together every week, from the moment the snow melted until the course was too cold to walk, so I'd known Brody half my life. The guy went through girls like Grandma Rosie went through six-packs, and he was

exactly what I wanted at that moment. *Sign me up for self-destruction 101—only bad boys need apply.*

Brody ran a finger across the back of my hand, and my mouth turned dry. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck as if someone had turned up the furnace to its boiling point. “Thanks. Um, I think my dad would want him to keep playing, though.” If the look in Brody’s eyes was any indication, I was about to become his flavor of the week.

“Let me know if you need anything. I’ll even cover your next stash,” he whispered in my ear then kissed my temple and stepped back. “So, are you two coming to Drew’s party tonight?”

Haleigh giggled and turned a lovely shade of pink. I managed to nod just before another well-wisher appeared.

“I’ll see you later, then.” He winked and walked away. I knew he probably practiced that wink for hours in front of the mirror, but I couldn’t help the butterflies in my stomach when he directed it at me.

Chapter 2

Alex

“Oh, Alex, it’s just so sad. So unbelievably tragic,” my mother whispered, dabbing at her eyes with a crumpled tissue as she shifted her gaze between the two glossy caskets. “That poor girl lost both of her parents. Where will she go? Who will take care of her?”

Never mind the fact that *her* only daughter had just lost her husband in the same tragic accident. Leave it to my mother to worry about David’s daughter—the girl who couldn’t look anything more like his ex-wife if she’d been born as the woman’s identical twin, right down to her perfect, long brown hair, amber eyes and oh-so-cute button nose. What would happen to *my* unborn child?

“I’m sure she’ll be fine, Mom. Kids are resilient, right? Practically all of Lake Edna showed up to support *her*.” I forced a smile, but based on my mother’s expression, I’d failed miserably.

She clasped both my hands in hers in a vise grip. “Oh, my dear girl. You’ve lost just as much. I didn’t mean to suggest you haven’t. But David left you a piece of himself, and I just know you’ll be a wonderful mother. I can’t wait to spoil my grandbaby. But I worry about poor Maddie. I can’t imagine losing both parents that way. Do you know what arrangements have been made for her?”

“I’m just the stepmother. Why would anyone bother to tell me?” Once I’d wrestled my hands free, I dug through my purse in search of my cell phone, keeping busy to avoid

meeting her scrutiny. I knew I was being childish, but at that moment, standing alongside my husband's casket, I couldn't find it in me to care.

The low battery warning flashed up at me. Of course, I'd forgotten to charge it, again.

Life goes on, right?

Mom gave a resolute nod. "I'd like to talk to her, if only to make sure she has someplace to go."

"I'm sure she'd like that." *She'd like anything if it meant avoiding having to talk to me.*

"Come on, Helen. Let's give the girl a few minutes to grieve... alone." My father stepped forward and motioned for my mother to follow him. He always had perfect timing and seemed to know the right things to say.

"Promise you'll come eat something?" Mom's mossy-green eyes pleaded with me.

"You haven't eaten since—"

"I promise." As if food was something I was even remotely interested in at that moment.

My father pulled me into a hug and whispered in my ear. "I'm so proud of you, Sweet Pea. Life wasn't fair, taking him too soon. And for you to have to plan not just David's funeral, but hers..." Dad glanced at Sarah's casket, and I was thankful the funeral director had closed it before leaving the room.

"Thank you, Daddy. I didn't do anything special. It's what David would have wanted." My eyes burned with unshed tears, and I blinked them back before stepping out of his embrace. "Can you give me a few minutes to say goodbye?"

"Take as much time as you need. We'll wait for you in the fellowship hall." My father pressed his lips to my cheek then patted my shoulder before turning to lead my mother out.

A shaft of sunlight broke through the stained glass windows, bathing David's casket in a kaleidoscope of colors. My fingertips ran over the warm mahogany finish as I inched my way toward the opening where he lay, motionless, as if he was simply sleeping, not—*dead.*

Why, David? Why did you push so hard for me to go on that trip? I could have stayed home—should have stayed home. I had a bad feeling. If I'd only followed my instincts... listened to my gut... maybe you'd still be here.

The control I'd fought so hard to maintain slipped, and my body shook with quiet sobs. I grabbed the hem of my sweater, twisting the cashmere between my fingers, struggling to rein in my emotions. I refused to break down here, where *they*, the strangers who'd never bothered to get to know me, could watch it unfold in front of them. I reached out with trembling fingers to cup David's chilled face, stroking my thumb against the faint stubble peppering his jaw.

"Why was she in the car with you?" My heart stuttered, threatening to break all over again. "You *lied* to me, David. You brought me to this godforsaken place, halfway across the country, and you left me here alone. You said we'd *grow old together*. How can I ever forgive you?" More tears threatened to fall, but I squeezed my eyes shut, trapping them.

Three months. We'd been married for a moment, and he was gone.

With one last jagged breath, I pulled myself together and brushed David's hair to the side. They'd parted it all wrong. I straightened his silver tie, tucking the end into the V of his black suit coat. "Who dressed you?" If I hadn't known better, I'd suspect he'd done it himself. He'd always had a knack for crooked ties and misaligned buttons. I gave his lapel one last pat then pulled my hands back to wring them together.

“Mrs. Barrett?”

A deep voice drifted into the quiet sanctuary, and I turned to face the source.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt you. I just wanted to pay my respects.”

I didn’t recognize the tall, slender man in front of me with golden-brown hair and a gentle smile. “It’s okay, I was...” After a quick glance at David’s casket, I turned back to the man’s blue eyes.

“No.” His forehead wrinkled. “You don’t have to say anything. I’m intruding on your grief.” He shoved his hands into the front pockets of his charcoal dress pants, shifting his gaze—and my own—to his polished black shoes.

I took his moment of inattention to swipe at the traces of moisture beneath my eyes. “Were you and David friends?”

“Uh, no... we only met in passing. Sarah had nice things to say about him, though. I wish I’d had a chance to know him better.”

The mention of her name set my jaw on edge. “So you and Sarah were...?” I waited for him to fill in the blanks.

His face flushed crimson, and he pulled a hand from his pocket to rake it through his thick hair. “We... uh... knew each other from the hospital. We went out a few times. She was a nice lady, but her heart was somewhere else. She’ll be missed.” He was obviously uncomfortable, but I had no desire to ease his discomfort.

I struggled to come up with something appropriate to say about the woman I barely knew. “I’m sure she will be. It’s clear from today she touched many lives.”

“They’ll both be missed. And God... *Maddie*.” He sank his hand deep into his pocket to jingle his change, leaving his hair in complete disarray. “I can’t imagine what she must be going through. First the divorce, now this. Poor kid. What’s going to happen to her now?”

For what could have been the hundredth time that afternoon, I forced a smile. “I’m sorry. I don’t know. I’m sure her family will want to step up. Her grandmother and aunt are here today. She’ll be fine—in time.” I had to remind myself that he didn’t know about the other child who’d lost a father in that same tragedy. Almost no one knew.

His head bobbed a few times, but he said nothing.

“I should really...” I nodded toward the double doors leading to the vestibule, desperate to escape the attempts at polite conversation that made me realize I hadn’t really given one moment’s thought to my stepdaughter’s fate.

He stepped aside. “Oh, sure. Of course. I should get going anyway. My shift starts soon, and well, again, I’m very sorry for your loss.”

With one last nod, I turned to walk out of the sanctuary. I still had to find my parents and suffer through forced socializing with the Michigan natives who had been so welcoming to me during my time in their town.

The back of my neck prickled, and I glanced over my shoulder to see the man still standing in the aisle. He flashed a warm smile, and I realized he’d never introduced himself.

My gray pumps clacked against the tile floor as I reluctantly marched toward the fellowship hall, leaving my husband, his ex-wife, and the stranger behind.

Clearly, the fine parishioners of Saint Michael’s had funded several additions to the old building, so there were multiple corridors I had to choose from. I followed the sound of somber voices until I reached my destination.

“There you are!” My mother grabbed a hold of my sleeve, tugging me toward my father and a few people I recognized but couldn’t place. “I thought you’d gotten lost. Come... have something to eat.” She thrust a dried-out cucumber sandwich into my hand. “We were just chatting with Mrs. Walker.”

I blinked a few times, compelling my brain to fire on a few more cylinders while I ran through the possibilities of who the woman was. The name seemed familiar, but I couldn’t recall the angular face made harsher by the severe bun tugging her skin taut across her sharp bones.

Mrs. Walker extended a hand to me. “My condolences. I’m the principal at Lake View. I knew both Mr. and Mrs. Barrett. They were such loving, attentive parents. I’m confident they wanted the best for Maddie, so let me assure you, I will do everything in my power to make this transition easier for her. I hear she’s going to be staying with a friend for a few days. The school will need you to sign some papers, but we don’t need to discuss that today.”

My attention shifted from Mrs. Walker to my parents then to Maddie standing beside the buffet table across the room. Her amber eyes locked with mine for a moment. She resembled her mother so completely I had a hard time looking at her without drowning in a sea of inadequacy, so I turned back to her principal. “Why would I need to sign papers? She has her grandmother and her aunt. Wouldn’t one of *them* be better suited for this conversation?”

“Oh.” Mrs. Walker blinked at me, and I struggled to avoid staring at her drawn-on eyebrows. “I just assumed since Mr. and Mrs. Barrett listed you as the only other contact, you would be taking care of Maddie.”

An involuntary burst of laughter bubbled out of me. “That would be the worst possible scenario I could think of. I can’t imagine Sarah would’ve wanted *me* making life decisions for *her* daughter.” The one time I’d met her, she couldn’t keep the disdain from her expression if she’d tried, and she obviously hadn’t tried.

“Of course. I understand. Would it be all right if I contacted you next week just to make sure all the necessary papers are signed?” She carried on as if she hadn’t heard a single word I’d just said.

“Sure.” Turning up the corners of my lips was such a chore when all I really wanted to do was to curl into a ball and disappear. “That would be fine. But if you’ll excuse me...”

I couldn’t get away from her fast enough, but I’d barely gone a few steps when a familiar, friendly voice stopped me in my path. “How ya holding up?”

I twisted my head around to greet my favorite barista—and only friend—in that godforsaken town. “Natalie,” I said her name on a sigh, relieved to have at least one person in the wretched place I could actually confide in. “I’d be a hell of a lot better if I had a decent cup of coffee.”

“Well, you won’t get one here. They didn’t exactly ask *me* to cater this shindig.” Natalie bumped my shoulder with hers.

For the first time that day, a genuine smile broke through, and I let myself relax. “I’ll be sure to speak to the establishment about that the next time I hit the confessional.” As if I’d *ever* hit the confessional.

“Yeah... if you ask me, He owes you one.” She drew me into a one-armed hug.

“I’m not sure *He* keeps track like that, but thank you just the same.” I hugged her back before taking in her out-of-character appearance. Instead of her signature coffee

house apron worn over snug jeans, a form-fitting sweater, and bright-red Converse sneakers, the bubbly blonde wore a sedate white blouse, pressed black pants, and a pair of conservative pumps. "You clean up nice." She'd even combed and subdued her typically tousled hair into a stylish chignon. "Thank you for coming. I think you might be the only person here who isn't looking at me like I devour small children."

Natalie shrugged. "Hey, what else was I going to do all day when my best customer was otherwise engaged?"

I glanced around the room at the sour faces paying too close attention to our conversation. "Believe me, I would have rather spent the day drowning my sorrows in espresso."

"Well, first thing Monday morning, we've got a date. You, me, and the biggest damn cup of decaf I can pour." She patted my stomach, reminding me of my self-imposed ban on caffeine for at least the next six months.

"As soon as I drop my parents off at the airport, you're on. I only hope I survive until then."

"Okay... come on." Natalie tucked her arm around mine, tugging me toward the buffet table. "Let's get you a cup of this crappy coffee before you chew your own arm off to escape."