

CHAPTER ONE

The cancer is back. I'm sure of it. What else could explain why I haven't heard from him?

I called Owen's cell twice in the hour I sat at the airport in Philadelphia and once before that, from my hotel. *Be patient, Daphne*, I think. I pull the newspaper out of my bag and try to flip through it but I can't focus. The words are slippery. My eyes jump from headline to headline. *New campaign finance legislation introduced. Silver screen legend dead at the age of ninety-six. Strong storms expected in the Midwest.*

The flight attendant gets on the intercom to tell us that we're beginning our descent into Raleigh–Durham. *Two different places*, I think. I don't know why it irritates me so much every time I hear it, but it does. People don't live in *Raleigh–Durham* any more than they do in *New York–New Jersey* or *San Francisco–San Jose*. Two. Different. Places. I fold the paper in my lap and close my eyes. *He's just busy*, I say to myself like a mantra—*he's just busy, just busy. No news isn't always bad news.* Minutes later, the plane's wheels hit the ground and I pull the phone from my bag. No messages. I call him again. No answer.

I shove the newspaper into my bag. The woman next to me—skinny, smelling faintly of coffee and the mint gum she's been chewing since takeoff—is sitting obediently with her hands

clasped over her lap, her eyes pinned on the seat belt sign, waiting for it to ding and tell her it's okay to get up. I look out the window and tell myself to stop overreacting—*he's just busy*—and remind myself to breathe.

It's normal for Owen and me to ignore each other's messages during the workday, but this day is different. Kevin, who's fourteen and one of his favorite patients (really his favorite patient, not that he'd admit to having one) is getting the results of his latest scan. Owen's done everything he can to treat the leukemia, all of the traditional methods and then a clinical trial. The test is due back today. *If the blood work still shows evidence...* I stand up in my seat and smile at the woman next to me, who's still frozen in her seat even though the people three rows up are starting to get off the plane.

I could tell that he was anxious when we spoke last night, him at home and me in my room in Philadelphia, where I was staying for an annual medical conference I always dread. I hesitated whether to even bring up his birthday, which is today, because I knew he wouldn't want to acknowledge it if Kevin's scan was bad. *Are you nervous?* I finally asked. He cleared his throat and muttered that he was. When he didn't elaborate, I changed the subject, saying that I'd pick up takeout from his favorite Mexican place and that we could just eat it whenever he got home. He said that sounded fine (his code for that he didn't really care) and then asked how my talk had gone. I made a bad joke about there being a drunken rush for my autograph at the cocktail reception, and he laughed politely.

I told him that I loved him. I wished him luck. I said good night.

Three hours later, I look out our kitchen window at the sun setting behind the pine trees that line the edge of our property. I

know that I am lucky to have such problems, but I can't help feeling like there's something wrong with the fact that it's seven p.m. and I still haven't spoken to my husband on his birthday. I picture him in one of the hospital conference rooms with Kevin and his parents, whom I've never met, of course, but whom I feel like I know well. I picture the boy's mother with a crumpled tissue in her hand. I picture the boy, his thin frame lost in an oversized Duke sweatshirt (he was a fan long before his health brought him here for care), and I sit down on the wood floor next to Blue, the Newfoundland we adopted two years ago. Our pre-baby baby, I joked. I scratch the top of her head and wonder how soon he'll be back, whether I should put the takeout in the oven to warm it up.

I decide to set the table at least, placing Owen's present in the middle like a centerpiece. Inside the box is a gift certificate for the two of us to go on a paddling trip later this spring on the Outer Banks, which, despite the fact that we've lived in North Carolina for ten years, is a place we've never been. I was able to make a reservation with a touring company without specifying a date, which is good, since pinning down a weekend when Owen can take off work is never easy.

It will be good for us. Canoeing is our thing—sort of. Owen even proposed on a canoe six years ago, which, now that I think about it, might actually be the last time I held an oar in my hands, but it's part of our history. We met when we were twelve years old, at summer camp in western Massachusetts, and our friendship began on the day that we sat across from each other in an old metal boat on the lake. Though it was almost twenty-five years ago, I still remember how it felt to be there, my skin seeming to glow from the summertime film of dirt and sweat that I can feel just thinking about it. Owen and I were buddies, that's the very best

way I can describe it. We compared bug bites, raced each other during Capture the Flag, and sang the goofy songs that the counselors taught us to pass the time during hikes (“Fried ham, fried ham, cheese and bologna . . .”). He called me Daph and I let him, even though I had recently decided that because I was almost a teenager—*twelve and a half, almost an adult, really*—that I would answer only to Daphne.

The following summer, we shared a tentative slow dance at the August banquet and then we kissed. It was quick and sweet and meant that the one photograph that I had of him, in a dirty T-shirt and the soccer shorts we all wore that summer, was granted a permanent spot in the front of the Velcro wallet that I’d started carrying in my book bag. We wrote letters throughout the fall. My family lived outside of Boston, and he was farther west, near Springfield. He doodled at the bottom of the spiral notebook pages where he signed his name—blocky graffiti letters, *Owen + Daph*. Of course, we were in middle school, so by Christmas break, the letters were sporadic on both of our parts. That spring, my father’s job got us transferred to Northern Virginia. Owen became a memory, and a good one.

Thirteen years later, I was standing in line at a sandwich place on Ninth Street just before the start of my residency when I noticed a handsome guy with a mop of wavy dark hair wearing the very same Duke tee that I’d bought for myself at a bookshop hours earlier. When our eyes met, he squinted, and then he shook his head in disbelief. “This is going to sound really weird, but did we go to summer camp together?” he asked, abandoning the guy who was reaching across the counter to hand him his turkey on rye. “Are you Daph? Daphne Mitchell?”

He was about to start his residency, too.

We found a bench somewhere and ate our lunch. Mustard spilled down my shirt and we both pretended not to notice. We moved on to afternoon beers in a dark pub where somebody kept playing Joni Mitchell on the jukebox and we discovered after a few drinks that we both remembered the words to “Fried Ham.” The next week, we found time in our packed orientation schedules to share a walk across campus, and under the archway of an old stone building, we had our second kiss, all those years since the first.

What were the chances that we'd both end up here? In Durham, North Carolina? After all of these years? We kept saying it, over and over again, to each other, to our parents, to anyone who asked how we met. There was eventually an apartment together, and five years ago, a wedding, and now the farmhouse, which we fell in love with last fall despite its iffy foundation and the cracks in its windows. It is slowly coming together. Everything is falling into place.

Nine o'clock.

The laundry is folded. The floors are swept. I am answering emails and halfheartedly watching a TV cooking competition when I see Owen's headlights finally bouncing up the long driveway. I close my laptop and head into the kitchen, where I pull one of his favorite IPAs out of the six-pack that I bought on my way home from the airport. I'm pulling the top off of the bottle when he comes in the side door. He looks exhausted.

“Hey.” I smile. Blue beats me to him and I gently nudge her away with my knee so that I can wrap my arms around him. I press my head to his chest and he kisses my cheek. “How was your day?” I ask.

“I'm sorry I didn't call,” he says, his lips vibrating on the top of my head as he speaks. “I had my phone on silent all day.”

“It’s okay,” I say, running my hand up and down his back. *The news isn’t good.* “I’m guessing that you don’t want to celebrate?”

“Actually,” he says, taking the beer from my hand, “Actually, the scan was good.”

“What?” I take a step back and put my hands to my face. “He was clear?”

Owen smiles. God, he looks so tired. He nods. “Crystal clear.”

“Owen! That’s such good news!” I squeal. “We need to celebrate! His family must be so happy. Have you been with them all day?” I don’t want to dampen the mood but I can’t help but ask: “What took you so long to get home?”

He walks to the kitchen table, where he puts down his beer and runs a finger along the top of the box that holds his present.

My stomach flutters. I don’t want to fight tonight. Lately we’ve been arguing a lot. Well, not arguing, but bickering, picking at each other, starting little fires about nothing—whose turn it is to pick up the dry cleaning, the way he refuses to rinse the peanut butter off a knife before he puts it in the dishwasher. I’ve stalled on having the talk we need to have though I know why it’s happening. I want to have a baby. Owen’s still not ready. We’ve been talking about it for months—or, more accurately, *I’ve* been talking about it. A few days ago, just before my trip, I brought it up again, reminding Owen that I am turning thirty-seven in a matter of weeks. Thirty-seven! He brushed it off, in the way that he always does, and the tension’s been building ever since. I could feel it every time we talked while I was on my trip.

“Daph,” he says, turning to me.

“I’m sorry,” I start. “I know that things haven’t been great. But it’s your birthday and—”

“Daph, please.” He runs his hands through his hair. “We need to talk.”

“Owen, come on. It’s your *birthday*,” I say again. “And we have great news about Kevin. The other stuff can wait.” I go to him and start to put my arms around him again but his body goes stiff. He’s never brushed me away before. “Owen?”

He rubs his palms up and down his face and then I watch the way his eyes survey the room. He starts to say something but then he stops.

“Owen, what is it?”

“Daph, I...” He looks at me for several seconds before he speaks again. “Daphne, I met someone.”

Wait. *What?*

“Daphne, there’s someone else.”