

C H A P T E R

1

Esme

IN A THREE-HOUR car ride, I've thought of at least three ways to kill him.

Moments like these, when I have time to stop and think about what he's done, are the worst.

I look over at Greg. My husband's hands are on the steering wheel. He's blasting some progressive rock jam band—awful music and nodding his head in rapture. Our twin girls are in the back of the SUV. Both have their pink headphones on, each watching a different movie on their own iPad. The pine trees outside are getting larger and larger, the mountain road winding endlessly up and up as we climb toward our destination.

I pinch my fingernails into the pads of my hands. What a beautiful family we have. Why is he destroying it? For what?

Now is not the time to fall apart. My sisters will both be at our summer house. The last thing I need is their judgment. I can imagine their shock if they knew the truth.

His phone pings. My heart rate picks up. I know who it is.

I sneak a look over at Greg. He's oblivious. He's rocking out to his music. The music that I've told him, repeatedly, I don't like to listen to.

I wonder if *she* likes his music. Do they make love to it?

Greg reaches down for his black stainless-steel water bottle. I watch his Adam's apple bob as he drinks thirstily before returning it to the console cup holder.

"I'd like to use the restroom," I say.

"We just stopped." He frowns and looks at the GPS. "It's only a half hour more. You can wait."

I want to protest but bite my tongue.

His phone beeps again, and I look at Greg to gauge his reaction. No emotion.

"Going to check your messages?" I ask.

He's silent.

I press on. "Your phone has been going off for the past half hour. Could it be important?"

For the first time during the three-hour car ride, I feel Greg's eyes on me. The road is particularly narrow in this section.

"Watch out," I say, as another car speeds by us from the opposite direction. Greg looks back at the road and overcorrects, swerving to the shoulder of the road. There's not a lot of room between the shoulder and the low gate barrier. Beyond the barrier is a steep mountainside. An image of our car flying down the embankment, flipping over and crashing at the bottom, flashes before me.

I let out a small scream and grab onto the door handle as Greg shifts back into our lane from the shoulder and presses on the brake to regain control of the SUV.

The other car is long gone.

“Watch the road, please,” I say, breathless.

I glance back at the girls in the backseat. Gracey lifts her eyebrows up in question, and I nod and smile, reassuring her. She looks out the window briefly, and then back to her movie. Brielle’s eye’s never leave her screen. Unfettered access to screen time—a privilege for the car ride—has absorbed their attention, and for that I’m grateful.

We travel in silence until I see the sign that we’re entering Lake George. It’s the same sign, the one with the bear and a pine tree, that welcomed me as a child.

“We need to stop in town at the grocery, before we get to the house,” I say to Greg.

“Why?”

“To fill the refrigerator and cabinets with supplies, obviously.”

He groans. “Why did you offer to cook tonight?” His words are short, the way he speaks when he’s annoyed. “I just want to get to the house and relax.”

“You know I like to cook the first meal of the trip,” I say. I make a meal schedule so my two sisters and I spread out dinner duty, rotating nights, over the two weeks we’re here each August. I’ve found that if I don’t make a schedule, I end up doing all the cooking.

“It’s fine,” I say. “I’ll go back out to the store. Let you and the girls get settled.”

That appeases him. We travel the rest of the way in silence.

I push thoughts of his phone beeping from my mind. I have a plan for how to handle those messages, but now is not the time.

A half hour later, our tires crunch against the gravel as Greg turns onto the road that leads to our house. It’s an isolated swath of the lake, devoid of other homes. The property

was purchased years ago by our great grandparents, before it became conservation land and building was prohibited. We were grandfathered in—ours is the sole house standing in the area. My mother, Audry Howard, tells the story of how her grandfather Charles Goodall chose the property perched on a massive crystal-blue lake, such clarity he'd never seen before or since in a body of water, and old-growth pine trees as far as the eye could see. The perfect spot to expand his logging business, and establish the Goodall family legacy. Shortly after he built on the land, though, the government deemed the area a preserve to keep it from being logged. Since then, the population and tourism have exploded on the other side of Lake George, leading our little alcove to be a respite, miles away from any neighbors, but close enough to drive around the lake and into town for a meal or shopping.

The trees are thick overhead as we drive deeper into the forest along the long, narrow road that is the only access point to our house. The road follows the curve of the lake, and I can see the blue water sparkling in the sun. The house appears before us. It's a white Victorian with a covered porch and turret on the left side, with an expanded three-car garage and six bedrooms.

"Girls," I say. "Girls," I say again, louder. "We're here."

The girls break from their daze. Brielle throws off her headphones and her eyes widen with excitement.

Gracey pops her headphones off, too, folding the cord neatly and tucking it in its case. "I can't wait to see Aunt Piper and Aunt Regina," she says.

"They may already be here, or arriving shortly, if not," I say. I smooth down the skirt of my dress and brush my blond hair behind my ears, and quickly check the mirror that my lipstick is still fresh.

"I can't wait to meet baby Preston," Brielle says, clasping her hands together at the thought of her four-month-old cousin.

She's going through a baby fascination stage and has been asking Greg and I endlessly if we're going to have another child. To which the answer is a firm, but gentle, no.

"I can't wait to play with Cousin Lana," Gracey says. Lana is five years old, just one year younger than my girls.

My mood lifts. This is why we come here every year. Why we've spent money from our own pocket to renovate and expand the house I share with my sisters. Granted, my sisters didn't contribute to the renovations fund—even though we own the house evenly—and they'll benefit from the improvements.

There's an agreement. When my mother was diagnosed with cancer two years ago, she put her type A personality to work and spent a great deal of time planning for her own demise. Dictating the funeral details, allocating her jewels and artwork to each of us as she saw fit, making sure her social contacts and charity binders were in order and ready to pass on to her successor. And, finally, making a plan for our cherished family summer house.

My mother willed the three of us daughters, the Howard sisters, this house with the clear stipulation that we must all occupy it for two weeks in August. Together. Failure to do this results in forfeit of the share in the house. My mother, ever the stern director, even from beyond the grave.

I'd come here regardless of the rule. I'd like to think my sisters would, too. Either way, for me, the joy at bringing the girls together with their cousins is worth it. The cousins, at least, get along.

Last year was our first year here after my mother's death. We three sisters and our families all gathered here in August, as instructed, new owners and without my mother to hold us together.

It was strained at best. I'm not sure any of us were our best self. Piper was still trying to get pregnant after years of

struggles. She seemed more anxious than ever, which is saying a lot for Piper. Regina and her husband, Bryce, fought the entire time, and Greg and I were going through a rough patch then, too. Though we'd never show it by screaming and shouting about money troubles like Regina and Bryce did into the late hours of the night. When I'd politely asked them to keep it down, the shouting became directed at me. How I'm terribly uptight and Miss Perfect.

Hopefully, this year with my sisters will be different. Now that Piper, our middle sister, has baby Preston. Maybe this year, she and Regina and I can get along. Move forward from the strife that always follows us.

Finally, Greg pulls to a stop in front of the house. I swing open the door of our SUV and inhale the scent of pine needles and clean air.

I catch sight of Greg, head bent to his phone. My eyes narrow.

This won't do at all.

2

Regina

GOD, GRANT ME patience. She's doing it already—holding court. My gaze rests on my oldest sister, Esme, seated at the head of the dinner table.

She talks to us like she's on stage answering one of her pageant questions posed to her by a judge. She even looks pageant ready with her long blond highlights, toned frame, and perfectly proportioned features enhanced subtly with the help of injectables.

In the car on the drive up, I'd been telling my husband, Bryce, how her pageant voice drives me nuts. I squeeze his hand and open my eyes wide, giving him the look. *See?* He frowns and gives me a slight shake of his head.

It's our first meal all together at our summer house, and he wants it to go smoothly.

Esme smiles, her white teeth gleaming. “My favorite part of being here is cooking for everyone. Making some of mom’s favorite recipes.” She nods at the table. She insisted on cooking, and the spread is impressive. Chicken Française. Mashed potatoes. A breadbasket with warm rolls. Freshly baked apple pie.

I look at her with a mixture of envy and disdain. *Doesn’t it ever get tiring to be so extra all the time?* But then the voice is there, in the back of my head. That I don’t try simply because I can never be as good as her.

I’ll always be the baby of the family, looking up to my poised, eldest sister—Mom’s favorite—both so alike.

Glancing down at my white T-shirt and cutoff shorts, contrasted with Esme’s pretty summer dress, I think how different we are. I’m concerned with comfort and practicality, while she’s always *on*. I smooth my hands over my chestnut-colored tangled layers, comparing them to her straight, smooth hair.

“Dinner is amazing, thank you, Esme,” our middle sister, Piper, says. Piper is petite in stature, like Esme, but a pared-down version. Her brown hair has never been touched by a colorist, and she hardly wears makeup. “It’s nice to have one of Mom’s recipes.” Piper and her husband, Paul, have named their baby son Preston to keep the P tradition going. It’s cute. Not my thing, but cute. It’s what she’s always wanted, a baby of her own.

My own daughter, Lana, is seated next to me. I wink down at her. “Good?” I ask. She’s notoriously picky.

“Mmm,” my daughter answers loudly. “The best. Mommy, why don’t you make food like this?”

The whole table turns their heads to look at her. Esme chuckles from her end of the table. “I’m sure your mommy prepares you very nice meals, but thank you, sweetie, for the compliment.”

“Oh, no, she doesn’t,” Lana answers happily, taking a giant bite of buttered bread.

“Hey,” I say, offended. “You love takeout.” I feel the need to defend myself. “She asks for it every night.”

Everyone nods politely.

“*My* mommy is teaching us to bake,” says one of Esme’s twin daughters. I’m ashamed, but I can’t tell which twin she is. Esme usually has Brielle in a pink bow and Gracey in a blue bow. I check the bow of the girl speaking. Pink. Brielle . . . I think.

“Baking. That’s fun,” I say, chewing a bite of my chicken. God, it’s tender. So flavorful. It does taste like how Mom used to make it. Maybe even better.

Seated next to her, Greg, Esme’s husband, takes his cell phone out from his pocket and begins tapping away. It’s beeped a couple of times already.

Esme’s pink lips purse. “Honey, not at the dinner table.” Her tone is apologetic as she turns to the rest of us. “Greg has a hard time unplugging from surgeon mode. He’s used to attending to his patients’ every need. But this is supposed to be a time to relax. Not work.” She says the last bit with an edge to her voice.

Beside me, my own husband is practically groaning as he eats, such is his enjoyment of the meal. I know he, at least, won’t take out his cell phone at the table. He usually can’t even find his phone. He’s a true outdoorsman. Fishing, hiking, camping. He loves coming here every summer, and so does Lana, our daughter—an only child who loves seeing her twin cousins. If it weren’t for them—and a favor I need to ask Esme—no way would I come back to this place. Not after all that’s happened here.

A loud wail rings out. Baby Preston begins to cry, suddenly and shockingly loudly. Piper, or middle sister, sets down her fork with a flustered expression. “I don’t get a moment to eat.” She hesitates and looks at each of us anxiously before scooting back her chair. She picks up Preston from the bouncer

“Are you hungry, Pressi?” she says to him in a high-pitched voice, holding him in the crook of her arm. “I’ll make you a bottle.” She sets him back down, which causes him to wail even louder.

Another bite of mashed potatoes melts in my mouth. A perfect combination of butter, garlic, and a hint of cream.

Piper has the baby’s bottle supplies lined up on the kitchen counter. She measures formula and heats up the water to make the bottle with frazzled, harried movements, darting around the remodeled kitchen.

“Not breastfeeding then, Pipe?” Esme asks her over Preston’s cries.

Piper picks up Preston and attempts to get him to take his bottle. “Um, no,” she says. “Come on, baby boy. Here’s your bottle. Come on,” she coos to him with a hint of panic.

“My girls loved breastfeeding,” Esme says, turning to the rest of us with *the voice*. “Breastfeeding twins was exhausting. I wanted to do the bottle, but they just loved breastfeeding. And you know what they say . . .”

I wince, worried at what she’ll say next.

“Breast is best.”

And there it is.

Piper looks at Esme and tears immediately well up in her eyes.

“I tried to breastfeed,” Piper chokes on the words. The baby, mercifully, starts sucking at his bottle. Piper turns away and walks briskly to the living room. She sits down on the new sectional sofa, cradling Preston as he continues to eat.

I put down my fork. “Nice, Esme,” I say. “That clearly was what she wanted to hear.”

Esme’s mouth makes a round O. “I didn’t mean—” Her cheeks turn slightly pink. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I

just meant, that's what I've always heard. For me. That's why I did it. The bottle would have been great."

"What's breastfeeding, mommy?" Lana, never one to shy away, asks me.

"It's when milk comes out of your boobs," I say. "To feed a baby."

"Like when a cow gets milked?" Lana asks.

"Yes," I say.

"Eww. We saw that at a farm," Lana says.

"We did." I nod.

"It's not quite like milking a cow," Esme says.

"I mean, it is," I answer defensively. Why am I getting so worked up about breast milk?

My husband, Bryce has already finished his dinner and looks around the table, eyeing seconds. He reaches for the potatoes.

"The house looks terrific with the renovations," says Paul Piper's husband nervously, desperately trying to change the subject, no doubt. "The addition is awesome."

Esme paid for—overpaid for, probably—and oversaw a huge makeover of the house over the past six months. I preferred the house before—the older cabinets, the intricate woodwork, the floral wallpaper.

Now, the wood floors have been refinished. Walls knocked out to reconfigure the kitchen to allow for a massive marble island and a six-burner stove with a commercial range hood. The updates look beautiful. But the house is lacking the authenticity it once held as an Adirondack home from the turn of the last century. On the lower floor, past the living room, she added a rec room, complete with pool table, foosball table, pinball machine, and a bar area with a sleek top-of-the-line beverage cooler. Beyond that is a new powder room and guest

bedroom that doubles as an office. On the other side of the house, our old garage was torn out and then extended to hold three vehicles. It's all a little much.

"It looks great," I offer. "It's much bigger now," I add, not sure what else to say.

"Well, it wasn't cheap," Esme brags. "But the old house badly needed the updates. So—"

"Right. I mean, it looked cool before. Timeless. Cozy," I add.

Esme looks at me and frowns. "Sure, Regina. But it's clearly better now."

I shake my head. "Better for you, maybe. But I'm allowed my own opinion. It's a lot of money to suck the charm out of a place."

Oops. I'd promised myself I'd be on my best behavior. *Keep passive-aggressive snark to a minimum.*

I look down at Lana. She's old enough to sense tension and fighting. I have to keep myself in check.

I sigh. "You're right, Esme. The house needed this. Change is just hard for me, I guess." I give her a tight smile.

"You've always been sentimental," she oozes.