


## CHAPTER

# 1

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**I**N JEANS THAT FIT FOUR POUNDS AGO BUT NOW squeezed her in a mildly intrusive manner, Dana stood at her kitchen counter pinching foil over a tray of lasagna and waiting on hold, the phone wedged against her shoulder. Her gaze skimmed the obituaries in the local paper, but Dermott McPherson's name did not appear—not this time anyway. Mr. McPherson was the reason she'd made the lasagna, though it wasn't actually for him. He probably wasn't eating much. It was for his family, who were understandably distraught over their loved one's terminal illness. Dana didn't know them. She belonged to Comfort Food, a group who cooked for families in crisis.

When it was her turn, Dana prepared meals that would, she hoped, sustain them as hands were held and medication dispensed, bedding changed and phone calls placed. She often thought of her own mother's quick descent into a gray, fetid-smelling infirmity, with lungs that seemed to shrivel almost visibly. Dana would have appreciated a well-made meal. Nothing fancy, just something better than rubbery pizza and half-flat soda. A small connection to a world outside the thick humidity of death.

Her father's exit had been swift and clean by comparison. There'd been no hospital stays or grieving friends, or even a casket to chose. But Dana didn't like to think about that.

"Cotters Rock Dental Center," said a voice in her ear. "May I—"

Startled from her somber reverie, Dana flinched, and the phone clattered to the floor. She grabbed it up quickly. "Kendra, I'm so sorry! I hope that didn't make an awful noise in your ear."

"That's all right," said the receptionist.

"I'm so embarrassed. I really apologize."

"I'm fine. May I help you?"

"This is Dana Stellingen. Morgan and Grady's mom? I need to make appointments for their checkups, if that's okay."

Out in the mudroom, there was a squeak of the door and the thud of a backpack dropping onto the tiles. "Excuse me for just a minute, please," Dana murmured into the phone, then covered the mouthpiece with her palm. "Morgan?" she called.

"Yeah."

"I thought you were going to Darby's."

"Well, now I'm not." Morgan appeared in the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. She stood staring in, as if there were some movie playing that only preteens could see, in among the condiments and containers of yogurt.

"I'm so sorry, I'll have to call back," Dana said into the phone. She focused on her daughter, backlit by the refrigerator light. "The plans changed?" she asked.

"Darby didn't *feel* well." Morgan's fingers twitched abruptly into little quote marks.

"Did you reschedule for another day?"

Morgan twisted toward her mother. "No, Mom, we didn't *reschedule*. It's just hanging out. You don't reschedule hanging out."

"You seem . . . Are you angry with Darby?"

Morgan closed the refrigerator door with a thump. "I don't *get* to be angry. She didn't do anything wrong."

"How did she tell you?" Now that Morgan was in sixth grade, Dana had learned it wasn't *what* girls said to each other anymore. All the real information came from *how* they said it.

Morgan slumped into a kitchen chair, picked up a napkin, and

twisted it into the shape and density of a swizzle stick. “She was standing with Kimmi, and I was like, ‘Hey, I’ll meet you after last period.’ And she looked at Kimmi.”

This was bad, Dana knew. Their eyes were their weapons now. “She looked at her?”

“Yeah. And she was like, ‘Oh, yeah, um, I don’t feel good. I think I should go home.’ So I said, ‘Are you sick?’ Then she looked at Kimmi *again* and said, ‘I’m fine. I just need some downtime.’”

*She would rather be alone than with Morgan?* thought Dana. A wave of protective anger swept over her, but she didn’t show it, knowing that it would confirm Morgan’s suspicions and make her feel even worse. Dana herself often needed to cling to the slim chance that things weren’t quite as disheartening as they seemed. “Honey, maybe she’s just overscheduled,” she offered.

“We’re not preschoolers, Mom.” Morgan rose and went up to her room. Dana let her alone. She knew that Morgan would open a textbook and curl over the page, narrowing her focus until all that existed in the world were Figure A and Subsection B.

“I’m taking Grady to practice!” Dana called up to Morgan a little while later. She loaded Grady and all his gear into the minivan and made a detour to drop off the lasagna, Caesar salad, Italian bread, and brownies at the McPhersons’ house.

“Ca’ I shay inna car?” asked seven-year-old Grady, sucking on his mouth guard.

“What?” Dana struggled to pick up all the containers of food. “I could use some help here.”

He yanked out the mouth guard. “I don’t wanna go to the door with you. It’s all, like, *sad* in there. And if a kid answers, he’s gonna hate me because *my* dad’s not sick and *I* don’t have to wait for some lady to dump off my dinner.”

Dana sighed and went to the door. No one answered. She

placed the food on the front step in the cooler labeled COMFORT FOOD and went back to the car. As she was pulling away, a woman in jeans and a T-shirt came out with a toddler on her hip, glanced down at the cooler and then out toward the street. For a brief moment, she met Dana's eyes and raised a hand in thanks. Dana waved back.

*So young . . .* she thought as she drove away.

Dana tried to attend as many of Grady's football practices as she could. The coach scared her. He yelled at the unruly posse of second-graders as if they were candidates for the Navy SEALs. Dana wasn't used to this. Until football, Grady had been coached mostly by weary fathers who sped down Interstate 84 removing their ties as they drove, trying to get to practice on time. They had no interest in yelling at other people's children—they yelled enough at their own. They just wanted the kids to learn a few skills, have fun, and avoid bloodying each other.

Coach Roburtin—Coach Ro, as the kids called him—espoused a less limited philosophy. Football practice doubled as his own workout, and he charged around the field running laps with the boys and doing push-ups. He slapped the tops of their helmets when they weren't listening, their little heads bobbing into their shoulder pads, a sight that made Dana's own neck hurt. She'd heard he was unmarried and childless, had grown up in town and played football for Cotters Rock High. He was now a car salesman in nearby Manchester.

"Stelly! Where's Stelly? Get your butt over here, son! Did you come to play or knit mittens?"

"Mitten knitting" was a catchall phrase for Coach Ro, indicating anything that wasn't football. A boy ran over, his bright blue T-shirt dangling down from under his practice jersey. That was Grady's shirt, Dana was sure of it. Coach Ro was so busy roaring at

the boys he hadn't learned their names! Maybe Coach Ro had had his *own* helmet thumped a few too many times. Then it occurred to her—Stelly was short for Stelligarten.

"All RIGHT, now." He grabbed Grady's face mask and positioned him next to the quarterback. "Timmy's gonna take the snap. And he's gonna hand it off to YOU, and you are NOT going to drop it. You are going to run like your PANTS are on fire to the end zone! You with me?" Grady's helmet bobbed up and down. "Lemmeheary-ousay YES!" bawled the coach.

"YES!" came Grady's high-pitched howl.

Then the play was in motion, and the disorderly gaggle of youngsters suddenly transformed into two focused, goal-driven teams. For about six seconds. And then Grady's blockers seemed to forget they had anything else to do but ram their friends or straggle toward their water bottles. The opposing team swarmed toward Grady, who'd been running back toward his own team's goal line. One boy yanked at his practice jersey, pulling him down from behind. Then boys from both teams began leaping on top of them until there was a pile of bodies about three feet high. With Grady at the bottom. Dana let out a panicked, "Oh, my God!"

"Get up, you baboons! Get off him!" boomed Coach Ro, grabbing players by their shoulder pads and heaving them to the side. "Stelly, you okay? You're fine, right?"

Dana began to rush toward Grady but got only a step or two before a hand grasped her forearm. "You *know* you can't go to him," said the voice behind her. Dana turned to see Amy Koljian, Timmy the quarterback's mother. "Coach will wave you over if it's bad," Amy said with a knowing nod.

"But he could be hurt!" Easy for Amy to be calm. Her son was now sitting off to the side, chewing on his mouth guard like he hadn't been fed in a week.

"No parents on the field unless Coach says," Amy chided. "Grady'll be embarrassed if you go."

“Coach says?” said Dana. “Coach doesn’t even know his first name!”

Amy motioned toward them. “See?” she said smugly. “He’s fine.” Grady was sitting up now, air heaving in and out of his little body. Dana willed him to look at her, to assure him of her presence. His helmet turned in her direction, and then he slowly got up. Coach thumped him on the shoulder. “All right, you knuckleheads, what the heck was THAT?” he yelled.

“God, I hate football,” Dana breathed.

Amy chuckled beside her. “New football moms are always so skittish.” Timmy was the youngest of Amy’s boys, and Amy enjoyed being the superior, experienced mother.

Dana attempted a grateful smile. Grady certainly would have been embarrassed, and in the end he hadn’t been terribly hurt. His spine was still intact, his teeth still fit snugly in their gums. And yet Amy’s self-satisfaction made Dana want to wring her neck—or, better yet, mention the girls’ night out her friend Polly was throwing, knowing that Amy was not invited.

This uncharacteristic surge of vindictiveness surprised Dana. This was not her. She never purposely hurt people’s feelings. And it was the very thing she’d drilled into her children since the formation of their first friendships: Do not discuss invitations. Do not mention that Cassandra is having you over after preschool today and you might finger-paint with chocolate pudding if her mother remembered to buy some. Do not announce that you’re going to Owen’s birthday party at Laser Tag Rumble and you thought all the boys were asked. Don’t even squeeze your host’s hand behind the monkey bars at recess and whisper, “I can’t wait!”

Practice was over, and Grady walked toward her—was that a limp?—grabbed her thumb, and began towing her toward the car. “Are you okay?” she asked him. “That was heck of a pileup.”

“Yeah,” said Grady. “Can Travis come over tomorrow?”

“Sure, I’ll call his mom when we get home.”

“TRAVIS!” bellowed Grady across the parking lot. “WANNA—”

Dana clamped her hand over Grady's mouth, a lightning strike of parental correction. "What have I *told* you about that?" she murmured at him tightly.

"No one cares, Mom," he insisted squirming away from her.

*Everyone cares, she thought. Even if they don't want to go, everyone wants to be asked.*