

CHAPTER 1



When the plane took off, Sean didn't experience that exhilarating liftoff surge he usually got when his body, mind, and soul were ejected into the earth's atmosphere. This flight was no prelude to the next adventure. In fact, it was adventure's negative image. It was an anti-adventure. He was going home.

High in the whispery layers of cloud above the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sean had a moment of regret. Maybe he shouldn't have left. Maybe if he'd just hung in there a little longer, the burnout he'd been feeling would've worked itself out—and maybe the knots in his back would've followed suit.

A miraculous healing of mind and latissimus dorsi. He chuckled at the thought, and at his own sudden nostalgia for the hardest, most heartbreaking stint he'd ever taken on. Not that he disliked his work. In fact, he loved it. Recently, though, his plan for his life, his very vision of himself, seemed to be coming unraveled. Threads popping, holes gaping like a poorly constructed sweater. And he had no idea what to do about it.

When he changed planes in Nairobi, Kenya, he downed a quartet of ibuprofen tablets and balled up his old canvas jacket for a pillow, hoping for sleep during the overnight flight to London. Something crinkled when he laid his head down. Paper in one of the jacket pockets.

It was Deirdre's letter. He'd first read it while walking back to his quarters from the hospital a month or so ago and must have jammed it into a little-used pocket and forgotten about it. Or tried to forget about it. He certainly hadn't kept it on purpose. Traveling light

was a sort of obsession with him. But somehow, despite his distaste for the letter and for hanging on to stuff, her words had come along for the ride.

Sean,

How's everything. Hope you're well. So, it's great you're over there saving the world and all, but we're having our own little natural disaster here at the moment. Aunt Vivvy's lost it. She brought home a dog. I am not making this up. A big one, some kind of german shepherd or doberman. The thing is huge— scares the crap out of Kevin.

On the upside, I got a part in Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat at the Worcester Footlight. Just the chorus, but I'm also understudy for one of the leads. Hopefully, she'll develop a facial tic or get incarcerated for criminal lack of talent before the show goes up. Rehearsals start in a month, and I'll be gone a lot. Not as much as I'd like, but a lot.

Kevin's okay, though all he does is go to school, study, and walk in the woods. It's creepy.

I really think you should come home. I know I keep saying that, but I've about had it now, Sean. Seriously.

So happy birthday. 44. Wow. Who'd have thought, huh?

Dee

Actually, Sean wouldn't be turning forty-four for another six months. He guessed it was Hugh's birthday she'd been thinking of, and since their brother had been dead for six years, he wasn't around to correct her. Sean didn't really care if Deirdre knew the actual date of his birth, though she was his sister, and he imagined normal families kept track of things like that.

He tucked the letter into the seatback pocket in front of him, intending to give it to the flight attendant when she came by collecting trash. It was midnight and relatively quiet, the plane's muscular hum

obscuring what little evidence there might be of human interaction. Sean closed his eyes, but as he drifted off, the image of the letter peeking from the seat pocket insinuated itself into the landscape of his dreams.

The connecting flight out of London was oversold, and passengers waiting to board were getting unruly. As Sean stood braced against a wall, willing his aching back not to go out on him, he saw a man in a business suit jab his finger toward an airline employee behind the desk. The aggravated drone of his voice rose until Sean heard him yell, “I demand an explanation!”

Sean chuckled to himself. He hadn’t set foot in the so-called first world in years. Granted, he’d lived in the poorest, most degraded places on the planet for most of his adult life, so the contrast was particularly palpable. In the tiny hospitals and medical outposts he’d staffed, people were grateful just to be kept alive for another day. They didn’t demand explanations.

As the plane began its businesslike descent into Logan Airport, Sean gazed out the window. The city seemed to be posing for one of those tourist postcards with the word *Boston* written in colorful letters across the top. Low humidity, he realized. Weird for June. He could see everything so clearly. The Custom House Tower, Rowes Wharf, Chinatown. He knew that planted awkwardly among the dim sum restaurants and acupuncture clinics was Tufts Medical Center, where his mother had first been diagnosed. It was a genetic coin toss—heads you got it, tails you didn’t. She’d lost the toss. Her older sister Vivian had won. Depending on how you defined winning.

In 1980 the whole family—Sean, his parents, baby sister Deirdre, and six-year-old brother Hugh—had moved into Aunt Vivvy’s cavernous house in Belham, Massachusetts. Sean’s father was a merchant mariner, out at sea for months at a time, and his mother could no longer remember if she’d fed the dog six times or at all. That dog

was sent to live with a new family. Sean always suspected that Aunt Vivvy had simply had him put down. She was not an animal lover. Or a lover of anything other than order and gardening, as far as he could tell.

And now she had a dog of her own? Sean wondered if Deirdre had overdramatized the visit of some unfortunate pooch to Aunt Viv's perfect, crabgrass-free lawn. Drama was the currency of Deirdre's life—she was the Warren Buffett of drama—and she was clearly invested in Sean's return. A hostile takeover of his life designed to increase her assets and cut her liabilities.

No one met him at the airport, nor did he expect anyone to. He took the Logan Express toward Framingham. It all looked different from the ground. The Massachusetts Turnpike, a smooth ribbon of roadway, laid itself out submissively before the bus. He'd ridden this stretch countless times in his childhood, but now, after years in places where the roads were little more than rutted, hole-pocked paths—if there were roads at all—the Mass Pike seemed suspiciously unimpeded, as if it were a trap of some kind, leading him docilely toward his downfall.

As the bus sped forward, a strange feeling came over Sean, his heart rate increasing, his breathing oddly shallow. Had he picked up some sort of respiratory bug? The sound of his pulse throbbed in his ears as he gripped the battered straps of his backpack. He had to get off the bus. He had to run from this illness, and though he was sure he was sick, he also felt as if he could run faster than he ever had. He took a few deep breaths and closed his eyes to the Mass Pike racing by. Then it came to him. It wasn't a bug at all, though it was a rare condition, at least for him.

Anxiety.

Deirdre met him at the bus station in Framingham. She was waiting in the drop-off/pickup area, idling Aunt Vivvy's ancient but meticulously maintained Chevy Caprice Classic. He heaved his backpack

into the back, got into the front seat, and took a deep breath, hoping the oxygenated blood would soothe his still-constricted veins.

Deirdre watched him for a moment, and then reached over to give him a brief hug. He responded a second late, as she was beginning to release him, making the gesture even more awkward than it normally would have been. *Six years*, he thought. *I barely know her anymore.*

“So, um . . .” She glanced around and spied his pack behind him. “That’s all you’ve got?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Looks like the one you had in high school.”

“It is.” He sucked in another oxygen load and glanced over at her as she backed out of the waiting area. Her pale skin was sprinkled with freckles—Irish fairy dust, their mother used to call it. And fanning out from the corner of her eye was a tiny thread of a line. Crow’s-feet? How did his baby sister already have crow’s-feet? But she was thirty-two now, he remembered. She’d only been twenty-six the last time he’d seen her, after their brother Hugh died.

“Who’s at the house?” he asked.

“Viv’s there. Who knows where Kevin is—probably in the woods somewhere. School’s out next week, so there isn’t much homework going on.” She glanced at him, dropping her chin so her eyes peeked out over the tops of her sunglasses. *Drama*, he thought, *here it comes. . . .*

“And there’s George.” Her gaze returned to the road.

Would he take the bait? Hell, why not. “Who’s George?”

“Oh, you’ll see. Can’t miss her,” Deirdre said dryly. “Especially when she sniffs your crotch.”

He smiled—he couldn’t help it. Deirdre knew how to deliver a line.

“Good,” he countered. “Haven’t had a good crotch sniff in some time.”

“She’s thorough. You’ll be set for years to come.”

When they pulled into the driveway, he noticed the grass was long. And was that a dandelion? Was Viv laying off the chemicals? She usually spent the entire spring with a spray bottle of Roundup in hand, ready to spritz even the most delicate weed to kingdom come.

“What happened to Stevie?” he asked.

“She fired him. She said he was cutting it too long so he could come back more often.”

“Stevie? The guy would’ve cut it with nose hair trimmers if she’d asked him.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. Kevin cuts it now, but he can’t always get the mower started.”

When they walked up the wide steps to the front porch, a loud bark startled Sean. Deirdre didn’t flinch. “Shut your pie hole, you damn dog!” she yelled, turning the knob and shoving her shoulder against the door. The barking intensified. Deirdre heaved her shoulder against the door again and it popped open. The dog (if it could be called that—in the dim foyer, Sean could’ve sworn he was looking at a Shetland pony) stood on high alert, barking as if it were the last defense against masked intruders.

“Cripes, enough already!” Deirdre said, and the dog reduced its clamor to an annoyed growl. She turned to Sean. “Just stand there a minute till she decides if she’s going to take a chunk out of you.” The dog stalked forward and stretched its long black nose toward Sean’s hand. Then the nose jammed between Sean’s thighs so hard he yelped, swatting the dog away. The dog stepped back, apparently satisfied that Sean—or his crotch, at least—posed no immediate threat.

The swinging door from the kitchen let out its muted little screech, an *ee-EEE* sound that Sean would’ve recognized in any state of consciousness. It soon revealed Aunt Vivian, her wizened arm pressed against it as if she were pushing back the stone from a tomb. Once she’d gotten through, the dog lowered its tail and murmured a low whining plea for her attention.

“Shh, now,” she told the dog, her hand running over its back as it slid up beside her. “Deirdre, did you forget to feed this poor creature?”

“Auntie Vivvy,” she said, feigning patience. “Sean’s home.”

His aunt glanced over to him, and for a moment there was no look on her face at all, as if she were seeing a shrub or a bookshelf. Aunt Vivian wasn’t given to grand gestures of warmth, even by an orphan’s standards, but this seemed colder than usual. Then her eyes sharpened to reveal the relentless intelligence behind them. “Sean Patrick,” she said. “Has war broken out here in Belham? Some horrific act of God, perhaps? I must have missed it on the news.”

Sean smiled. “Thanks for sending the airfare, and your driver here to round me up.”

Aunt Vivvy’s gaze dropped to the worn backpack on the floor beside him. “Take that up to your room, please,” she said. “And I’d like you to cut the grass. Kevin has yet to prevail over the mower this week.”

The oak stairway rose to a landing halfway up the back wall of the house, then did a tidy about-face and continued in the opposite direction toward the front. At the top was an alcove with a cushioned window seat. A circular window looked out over the front yard; Sean remembered imagining that it was really a ship’s hatch. On the ship was his father, giving orders, bravely securing lines in a storm, or keeping a lookout for pirates. Sean knew the kind of pirates his father spoke of didn’t wear eye patches and striped shirts, but he’d often found it hard to adjust the picture in his mind. Once an imaginary pirate had a striped shirt, it was pretty hard to make him change his clothes.

To the right was Aunt Vivvy’s room, and no one but her ever went in that direction. Sean hauled the backpack down the hallway to the left, back aching with the effort. The first bedroom was Deirdre’s, the walls plastered with theater posters. Aunt Vivian had often chastised her about the wallboard being shot with thumbtack holes

and said that “when the time came,” Deirdre herself would be the one to spackle all those marks. Apparently, in the thirty-one years she’d inhabited the room, the time had yet to come.

At the end of the hallway was the room that Hugh and Sean had shared until Sean left for college. It had bunk beds, but these had been un-bunked and placed next to each other when Hugh brought his pregnant girlfriend home to live. Her strict Filipino Catholic parents had disowned her, but as Hugh mentioned to Sean in that offhand way he had, “It really isn’t that big of a deal. They’ve been disowning her since she started smoking weed in the ninth grade. This just made it official.”

On the right side of the hallway was his parents’ room. It also had twin beds, because their mother couldn’t always remember that the man who tried to climb into bed with her at night was actually her husband. “Lila,” Sean could remember hearing his father plead when they lived in their old house, just the five of them. “It’s me. *Jesus sufferingchrist*, it’s me!”

Now it appeared that Sean would occupy his parents’ former quarters. There was clearly a boy living in his and Hugh’s old room. Sean peeked in and saw the strewn clothes, the bed piled high with mismatched blankets, and the odd collection of items on the desk: an old cassette tape, a scratched compass, a short pair of scissors, and a blue plastic whistle.

Sean set his pack on the floor in his parents’ room and lay back on one of the beds, but his body didn’t seem to remember how to relax. What was he thinking, coming here? That static feeling he’d been having off and on for months came over him again. There was no guidance anymore, no reassurance that he was on the right path. In fact, he was pretty sure he was currently on no path at all. Maybe this had been the case all along.

He had the sensation of being observed, and for a moment it calmed him. This used to happen often—a feeling that there was a presence watching over him as he disinfected a wailing child’s suppurating gash or held a baby while his mother’s rape wounds were

examined. *Yes*, this presence seemed to say, *this is where you should be, doing exactly what you are doing.*

That hadn't happened to him in over a year, though, and after a moment he realized it didn't feel as if he were being gazed upon lovingly. It felt like surveillance. He snapped his head up and looked around quickly. There in the doorway stood the dog, just staring at him.