

Chapter 1

With sleet tapping at the window of her New Bedford, Massachusetts apartment, Beth Henson sat on the floor, packing a box of books. The phone rang with her sister's unique ringtone and interrupted her off-key singing. Beth hesitated, pressing tape over the flaps of the box, and considered letting the call roll to voicemail. Instead, she wove her way through a maze of packed boxes, retrieved her phone and answered.

It was a video call from Grace.

"Mommy won't wake up," her niece said in her fragile voice, while she also signed at a frantic pace. "Scared."

"Is she breathing? Turn the phone so I can see Mommy," Beth said, signing the main words. Grace understood and switched the phone's camera to Patrice on the couch. Beth saw that she was breathing deeply.

"I'm coming now, sweetie. Stay on the phone with me." But the call ended. Beth must have signed wrong. She didn't take time to call back. She grabbed her purse from the table by the front door. "Keys. Keys," she said, dumping the contents on the floor. She scooped up the keys and left everything except her wallet where it landed. Grace had to be alarmed to use her voice. Beth was afraid she knew what it was; had seen it before.

Though traffic was light, conditions were hazardous, so it took longer than the usual five minutes to drive to Patrice's apartment. She gripped the steering wheel. Why did this have to happen now?

When she opened the apartment door, she could see into the whole dingy living room through to the eat-in kitchen. In the front corner of the apartment, two couches, upholstered in a worn, flower print, sat perpendicular to each other. Patrice sat dazed, but awake, on one of them. Relief mixed with ire tightened Beth's throat.

She stared at the tableau, allowing her heartbeat to drop to a slower tempo. Perhaps because she was moving away, her sister and niece looked different to her: Patrice, with her tousled blond hair, her long legs crossed at the ankle, her fine artist's hands rubbing her eyes. Grace knelt beside Patrice, using her small body to guard her mother. Her dark green eyes glared at Beth. Her face was pale, made paler still by the contrast of her long black hair. It hurt Beth to look at her. Clearly, Grace remembered the last time this happened, and she still blamed her aunt for sending her mother away.

"What happened, Patrice?" Beth asked.

“Grace overreacted. I’m fine. Just taking a nap. I don’t know why in heaven she called you.”

Her slurred words and glassy eyes made Beth want to cry with disappointment. “What did you take?” She spoke with her hand near her mouth so Grace couldn’t speech read.

“I’m clean. Didn’t take anything. I’m just tired.”

Beth ignored her and went to search. Her sister rarely hid anything well. A short hall led to two bedrooms with a bath in between. She stepped into the bathroom. The sink had globs of toothpaste in it. In the corners of the vinyl floor, webs of fallen hair had accumulated. A hair dryer lay on the toilet lid, still plugged in. It was obvious by the mess, today wasn’t the first day Patrice had started taking drugs again. Beth had missed the signs. Or maybe blocked them.

She pushed open the plastic shower curtain. There it was: a brown plastic prescription bottle with the remnants of a label across it. She opened it and poured the red pills into her palm. Four of them left.

She dropped them into her pocket and went back to the living room. “Grace, Mommy and I have to talk. Can you go in your room and read a book for a bit?” Beth struggled with her imperfect signing, but Grace seemed to understand. She looked to her mother who nodded and gave her a crooked smile.

When Grace was gone, Beth pulled the pills out of her pocket and showed them to Patrice. “How many did you take and what are they?”

“Just a couple of Darvocets. Nothing bad.”

“They’re all bad! And it was *way* bad for Grace. She was petrified when she called me.”

Patrice turned her head away. “She didn’t see me take them.”

“Do you think for one moment she doesn’t know? Do you realize what you’re doing to her? What if you didn’t wake up? For God’s sake, Patrice, how can you do this to yourself and to Grace?”

“You think it’s easy?” Patrice’s voice was hoarse. “I’ve been clean for months. But it’s so hard. You’ll never know how hard it is.”

“Grace might.” Beth dropped onto the couch, her hands on her knees. She took some breaths. This was not the way to handle it. Anger didn’t help. *Unconditional love*, she told herself. “What made you take drugs again? Why now?”

Patrice walked on wobbly legs to the kitchen and filled a glass with water. She swallowed three-quarters of it before she looked back at Beth in the living room. “You’re leaving us. That’s what weakened me.”

Beth raised her chin. “We agreed the move was good for both of us.”

“How is it good for me?”

Beth bit her tongue. Patrice was manipulating her, and Beth had to stay strong. “I have to put myself first for my own health. Every time I rescue you, I’m enabling you and feeding into my codependence. We both need to become self-reliant. I’m going to Cape Cod to live, Patrice. I’ll be an hour and a half away. I won’t be able to run over in five minutes—” Beth clamped her mouth closed. She felt a rope pulling tight from her throat to her stomach. Though she knew she was right to leave Patrice, what about Grace? How could she leave *her* now?

Grace was a shy child, having become more so since her deafness. But she was strong, even feisty, especially when it came to protecting her mother. She signed well, but was only fairly accurate at speech reading, and she rarely used her voice. In fact, most of the time she was silent. When she did speak, as she had on their video calltonight, she also signed.

Patrice bent her head and began sobbing into her hands. It was a picture of grief that Beth couldn’t bear. She walked into the kitchen and put her arms around her sister. Patrice lifted her face. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I can do it. I can. It’s just that I’ll miss you so much.”

Grace peeked at them from the hall. When Beth smiled at her, she spun both index fingers around each other in a sign for *Go*. As in *go away*.

Moving a few steps back from her sister, Beth signed to Grace, “I’ll go soon. Everything is all right.” She turned back to Patrice. “What do we do now?”

Grace was reading their lips. They had developed some code words to talk about addiction so as not to frighten her.

“I—I just needed a little help. I’m okay now. Those things won’t hurt me, won’t start anything.” She shook her head.

Beth turned away from Grace’s view. “Call your sponsor. Get to the NA meetings. You know what you have to do.” She held up both hands. “Look. We’ve been over this too many times. But think of Grace.”

“I’m sorry. I am. I want you to be happy. Don’t worry, that’s it. I won’t slip again. I’ll get back to the meetings. Really, I’m okay.”

“You have to be. From now on, Grace will only have you to depend on.”

Grace stiffened again as Beth hugged her and said goodbye. Patrice held her so tightly, Beth could hardly breathe. But the tears in Beth’s eyes weren’t from her sister’s tight hug; they were the cost of tough love.

Beth closed the door of her apartment and strode across the living room. She was so inside her head, she tripped over the corner of a box and went down hard. She lay still in the heap she landed in and let the tears flow. She should have expected it. Years of taking care of her sister. Years of getting her out of trouble. How many bills had she paid for therapy, for rehab? Everything was set. Patrice was clean, working. And now this. It was not the way Beth wanted to leave. *Damn!* She picked up a book and threw it across the room. Addiction was a disease, she knew, but sometimes she just resented the hell out of it.

Beth stood up, rubbing her right hip, which would surely have a bruise to remind her of this night. She looked at the boxes. Just hours ago she was happily filling these last few containers. Now she was sick with worry. Did Beth have an obligation to take care of Patrice forever? She knew from Al-Anon meetings that she didn't. But wasn't she abandoning Grace?

Tomorrow would be her biggest challenge; she had to follow through with her move. When Patrice visited next weekend, Beth would be able to tell if she was clean. She hoped with all her heart it would be all right.

By the time Beth finished packing the books, she could hardly keep her eyes open. She walked into her bedroom. The one thing left to do in the morning was to put the bed linens into the open box on the floor and tape it up. The coffee pot would go right into the car with her. Could she regain the joyful anticipation of her move to Cape Cod? Either way, tomorrow she would leave New Bedford.