

## CHAPTER 1

The wake-up alarm on my cell phone jolted me from my nightmare. I grabbed the phone from the bedstand. Reviewed the last week of texts I'd sent my son. Tried not to panic. *Silence for a week is normal, Maggie*, I reminded myself. *Normal*. Aiden was a senior in college. Independent. Forging his own path.

April 1:

Me: *How are classes going?*

Aiden: *Fine. TTYL XO*

April 2:

Me: *How is the internship going?*

Aiden: *OK. XO*

April 3:

Me: *How is Celine?*

Aiden: *Mom, stop trying so hard. You made your decision. Talk soon. XO*

That one had caught me up short. Aiden could be succinct but never curt.

April 5:

Me: *Touching base.*

Aiden:

April 7:

Me: *Knock, knock, you there?*

Aiden:

Up until the last few days, all had seemed okay. What was going on? Throughout his life, we'd been able to talk about issues. See the reasoning behind things. He was nothing if not pragmatic.

I wrote him one more time. Willed him to reply even though it was early.

Me: *Hello? Everything okay?*

And then it came.

Aiden: *Taking off for a bit. Getting my head on straight.*

Taking off? Getting his head on straight?

“Crap.” I tossed my cell phone aside.

*Chill, Maggie. Inhale, exhale, let go. He’s young. Probably thinking about graduation.*

The drone of the industrial fans on the ground floor of my late-Victorian period home shifted my angst to my other major concern—the overpowering smell of mildew that was pervading my senses. The remediation people said they’d sopped up every last lick of water from when the main plumbing line burst last week, but I was certain they hadn’t. I’d have to contact them later. Tell them they needed to come back.

I lumbered out of bed, shrugged into blue leggings, tank top, and zippered hoodie, and slipped on my favorite tennis shoes. I needed a cleansing run to kick my focus into gear before heading to my job at Pelican University. A run to rid me of the nightmare that had, yet again, invaded my sleep. The young student dead by his own hand. His tortured face. The crowd of sweaty college-aged football players watching on as they cheered *Bravo*.

Just as I reached for the front door knob, my cell phone jangled. A frisson of dread spiraled down my spine. Was it Aiden? No. He only texted. Was it Provost Southington? Or our biggest donor Gregory Watley? It wasn’t my assistant. She knew not to disturb me before my first cup of coffee.

I hurried to the bedside table and scanned the readout. *Josh*. The dread turned to irritation. When he moved out, all of the fond memories from our marriage—painting the rooms of our house, welcoming Aiden into the world, hiking trips, and more—evaporated. I stabbed Send. “Do you know what time it is?” I demanded. No preamble. No warmth.

“Maggie,” a woman said. Not Josh. “I’m sorry to bother you. It’s Tess Toussant.”

Tess. Josh's fiancée. The news about their engagement had stung more than I'd cared to admit. When Josh left me five years ago, it wasn't simply because he'd hated how much time I gave to my job—he dedicated himself to his career, too. No, it was because he'd found someone new. A woman who adored him and made him feel special. Not Tess. The first one's name was Allie. A year later, he dumped her and hooked up with Marianna. Now he was with Tess, twenty years his junior, like the others. But he hadn't asked the others to marry him.

“Joshua—” Tess stopped abruptly. Was she crying? “Joshua . . .” she tried again.

During Josh's and my last conversation a couple of months ago, he said he preferred to be called Joshua because it was hipper and classier. I didn't mention that my older brother Benjie, in his freshman year of high school, had told everyone to start calling him Benjamin, believing it would earn him more respect. It hadn't.

“What about him, Tess?”

“He's been shot,” she blurted. “He's in the hospital.”

My breath snagged. “Is it serious?”

“Yes, but the doctor said it was noncardiac penetrating. That means—”

“I know what it means.” The bullet hadn't hit his heart, but that didn't guarantee things couldn't go south. “How did it happen?”

“He was ambushed.”

“Do the police know who did it?”

“Not yet. He's been investigating a case of corruption, but . . .” Tess sucked back tears.

Despite our breakup, I had always respected Josh's ability to hunt down the truth. He was fearless when it came to the consequences. His father, who'd also been a reporter until he died, had been equally intrepid.

“I want Aiden to see him,” Tess said, “but he isn’t answering his phone. I’ve left messages, but he hasn’t responded.”

He’d just texted me. Why wasn’t he answering his phone now? Had I been wrong not to worry about him? Wrong not to be the smothering mother he hated? Wrong to untether myself from the helicopter?

*Maggie, get a grip.*

I knew why I was overreacting. After my brother committed suicide, my mother mentally abandoned me, and I’d made a pact with myself that when I became a mother, I wouldn’t be like her. I would be in control. I would be present. My child would feel safe and loved.

Maybe Aiden went back to sleep after his acerbic reply to me, I told myself. *Occam’s razor, Mags. The simplest explanation is usually the best one.*

“It’s early, Tess,” I said. “School doesn’t start for a while. His phone is probably on mute.”

“Could you follow up and have him call me? Please. I know you and Joshua don’t get along—”

*Don’t get along? Understatement of the year.* Two years after Josh and I married, I, who’d been an English professor at Tulane at the time, was offered the position of chair of the English Department. Four years after that, Pelican came knocking. I’d told Josh it was an honor to be selected as the first female dean at the boutique college. He’d agreed. He didn’t start taking potshots until a year later. When he did, they were doozies. And when I started to have less time for him, and when Aiden, who had become so involved with high school and his girlfriend, could no longer act as our buffer, Josh snapped. He was done. With me. With the marriage.

“The doctor is keeping him sedated,” Tess said. “He says it’ll help with the healing process.”

Josh. Devil-may-care, yang to my yin. Before Aiden came along, Josh and I had strolled to dinner holding hands. We’d sat on the porch every evening to discuss the problems of the world. We’d even solved a few. Once Aiden was born, we did everything as a family. Mardi Gras parades, graveyard tours, voodoo doll crafts. We had embraced every aspect of New Orleans’s steeped-in-history culture. We’d laughed. We’d loved. Oh, how we’d loved.

I ran my fingers through my short hair and sighed. The day Josh left, I’d cut it.

“Aiden always returns Joshua’s phone calls,” Tess said.

Of course he did. He adored his father.

“Do you think he’s okay?” Tess asked.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I said, more to convince myself than her. His text said he was going to get his head on straight. Why? Not just graduation. What had set him off? I shuffled into the kitchen. Caught sight of a half-drunk bottle of wine on the counter. No, I would not pour myself a glass at six in the morning. Unlike my father, I had a modicum of restraint. “Which hospital is Josh . . . *Joshua* in?”

“University Medical Center. A policeman has been assigned to protect him.”

I agreed to track down Aiden and ended the call.

“Coffee,” I said, under my breath. “Must have caffeine.” I put a pod into the Keurig and set it on brew, then dialed Aiden’s number.

His phone rang three times before rolling into voicemail. I listened through his brief message. “Yo, it’s Aiden. Be your creative self. Beep!” He chuckled after saying *beep*, so like my brother. How I wished they’d met.

“Aiden, it’s me. Mom.” I clicked my tongue. “Yeah, you probably know that. My name popped up on your screen.” Or had it? Maybe he’d erased me from his contacts. “It’s about . . .”

My throat went dry. Why were my nerves jangling? Because I didn’t want to burn bridges. Because bad news needed to be said person to person, not left as a message.

*Speak, Mags.* “Call me.”

I stabbed End, clapped the cell phone on the counter, and muttered, “Where are you, my sweet, emotionally-overwhelmed, artistic son?” Single-minded creativity was his go-to default response, not anger. Granted, he’d changed since he’d met Celine Boudreaux and married her. He hadn’t exactly become distant, per se, but he wasn’t as willing to confide in me as he’d been in the past. Sure, I’d expected us to grow apart as he aged. Many of my students experienced a deep-seated need for parental separation. Lately, whenever I asked Aiden if he needed to talk, his answer was *Yeah, sure, soon.*

I reread the last text exchange. No *XO*. Aiden always signed off with a kiss and hug. Was omitting the letters his way of being defiant?

Sure, he was upset with me for cutting off his funds. Got that. Money issues could be prickly, I told him. I tried to explain the perfect storm. The rising cost of my mother’s living facility. My ten-year-old car biting the dust. The main plumbing line bursting in the house. The lapsed insurance because my business manager—my now fired business manager—had forgotten to pay the premium. The cash-out-of-pocket cost to repair the damage had literally put me under water. He said he understood, although he’d added that he thought I was doing it on purpose to prove a point. I wasn’t.

I removed the mug of coffee from the Keurig and took a sip. And then I eyed the cell phone. Aiden was fine, I assured myself. After I’d informed him that with all my other

obligations I was tapped out, I'd reminded him that he was married. He had a wife who'd graduated and had a good paying job. Plus he was weeks away from graduating himself, with a viable position in the works. It was time for them to start supporting themselves.

To be fair, up until then, I had paid for everything. Tuition. Housing. Books. Extra cash for fun. I'd never been good at saying *no*. His father had been quite deft at saying *no*, claiming his own father, Aiden's grandpa, hadn't helped him a whit. But I was a hoverer. A nurturer. Okay, yes, dammit, a smotherer.

I studied his last text again, and unease scudded through me. Why no *XO*?

