

Chapter One

Relentless Addiction

Mom is too tired to play hide-and-seek. Her stomach hurts so she took some medicine to make it feel better. I don't like it when she's sick. Grandma doesn't know about Mom's stomachaches, and I haven't seen Grandma in a few weeks, but I'm starting to think I should tell her.

Mom is asleep on the sofa; at least, I think she's asleep. I can't really tell the difference anymore. Sometimes, when I think she's sleeping, I'll try to sneak some cookies out of the cupboard then she hears me and yells at me to get out of the kitchen. Sometimes, she sleeps with her eyes half-open and I wave my hands in front of her face and make silly faces at her. She never wakes up and I always get bored after a couple of minutes. It's no fun teasing someone unless there's someone else to laugh, and it's just me and Mom in this house.

Her skinny arm is stretched out over the edge of the sofa cushion and I stare at the bandage that barely covers the open sore. One of those things she calls an *abscess* burst open last night while she was fixing me some macaroni and cheese. A thick, light-brown liquid poured out the crook of her arm. It reminded me of the glaze on maple donuts, but it didn't smell anything like a maple donut. The whole kitchen smelled like stinky feet as she ran the water over the wound then wrapped a billion paper towels around her arm.

She didn't want to go to the doctor. She said that if she goes to the hospital and shows them her arm they might make her stay in the hospital for a long time and I'll have to live with people I don't know, people who might hurt me, until she gets better. My mom loves me a lot and she doesn't want anyone to hurt me the way she was hurt when she was

nine years old.

Mom teaches me a lot. She isn't just my mom; she's my teacher. When she isn't sick, she teaches me math and spelling, but my favorite subject is science. I love learning about the planets the most. I want to be an astronomer when I grow up. Mom said that I can be anything I want to be if I just keep reading and learning. So that's what I do when she's sick. I read.

She's been asleep for a long time today and I've already read two chapters in my science book. Maybe I should try to wake her up. I'm hungry. I can make myself some cereal—I *am* seven—but Mom promised she'd make me spaghetti today.

I slide off the recliner and land on the mashed beige carpet, that my mom always complains is too dirty for me to sit on. I take two steps until I'm standing just a few inches away from her face. Her skin looks weird, sort of grayish-blue.

"Mom?" I whisper. "I'm hungry."

Something smells like a toilet and I wonder if it's the stinky abscess on her arm. I take a step back so I'm not so close to her arm. I put my hand on her shoulder and shake her a little. Her head falls sideways and glob of thick, white spit spills out the corner of her mouth.

The memory dissolves as someone calls my name.

"Claire?"

The cash register comes into focus, the acrid stench in my memory is replaced by the rich aroma of espresso, and I realize I've done it again. For the third time this week, I've spaced out while taking someone's order. The last two customers were understanding, but this guy in his *Tap Out* T-shirt and veins bulging out his smooth bald head looks like he's ready to jump over the counter and either strangle me or

get his own coffee.

“Sorry, about that. What was your order?”

“Wake the fuck up, blondie. I asked for an Americano with two Splenda. Jesus fucking Christ. There are people here who have serious jobs and need to get to work.”

I take a deep breath, my fingers trembling as I punch the order in on the touchscreen. “Will that be all?”

Baldy rolls his eyes at me. “Yes, that’s all. Come on, come on. I gotta get the fuck out of here.”

“Hey, take it easy. She’s just trying to take your order,” says a voice. I don’t look up, but I can tell it came from the back of the line of customers.

“I already gave her my order three fucking times,” Baldy barks over his shoulder. “Mind your own fucking business.”

Linda comes up from behind me, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder as she sets the guy’s Americano on the counter next to the bag holding his multi-grain scone. She doesn’t say anything, but the nasty look she casts in his direction could make an ultimate fighting champion piss his pants. Linda is the best boss in the world and one of the many reasons I still work at *Beachcombers Café*. All the other reasons I still work at one of the tiniest cafés in Wrightsville Beach have to do mostly with my desire to disappear after dropping out of UNC ten months ago. But that’s a whole other story.

Baldy peels the lid off his coffee and rolls his eyes as he peers into the cup. “I said I wanted room for cream. Are you all fucking retarded?”

Before I could reach for the cup, a guy in a suit steps out of line, grabs the cup off the counter, and dumps the entire contents into Baldy’s scone bag. A loud collective gasp echoes through the café.

“Now you’ve got plenty of room for cream,” the guy says and I clap my hand over my mouth to stifle a laugh.

The rage in Baldy’s eyes is terrifying. “You motherfucker!” he roars, as my white knight grins.

And what a handsome white knight he is. Even in his pressed shirt and slacks, he can’t be more than twenty-two and he has an easy-going vibe about him, as if he’d rather be surfing than standing in line at *Beachcombers*. With his sun-kissed brown hair and the devious gleam in his gray eyes, he reminds me of a young, more muscular Leonardo DiCaprio. I wouldn’t mind being his Kate Winslet.

Baldy charges Leonardo DiCaprio, but my Leo swiftly steps aside at the last moment and Baldy trips spectacularly over a waist high display of mugs and coffee beans. All six people in the café are now standing silent as Baldy spits curses at the cracked mugs and spilled beans under him.

I look at my white knight and he’s smiling at me; a sneaky half-smile, and I know what he’s about to do.

Before Baldy can get to his feet, Leonardo drops a few hundred-dollar bills on the counter. “For the damages.”

He winks at me as he steps on Baldy’s back, one last blow, then hurries toward the exit with no coffee, just a huge grin that makes everyone laugh and cheer. He gives us a quick bow, showing his appreciation to the crowd, and slips through the door as Baldy lumbers to his feet.

My gaze follows Leonardo DiCaprio as he slides into his truck, one of the newer models that looks like something conceived in the wet dreams of a rough neck and a Star Wars geek. He pulls out of the parking lot and disappears down Lumina Avenue.

I have a strong urge to whisper, “I’ll never let go, Jack,” but I’m pretty good at keeping my urges to myself; especially when there’s a six-foot-two ‘roided out freak staring me

down. Something snaps inside me as I remember what started this whole fiasco.

I step aside so Linda can take over and I skitter away through the swinging door into the stock room. I unfold a metal chair and sit down next to a small desk where Linda does the scheduling. I pull my legs up so I'm cross-legged on the chair, place my hands on my knees, and close my eyes. I take a long, deep breath, focusing on nothing but the oxygen as it enters my lungs. I let the breath out slowly. A few more deep breaths and the whole incident in the café never happened.

Some people are addicted to heroin. Others are addicted to coffee. I'm addicted to meditation. No, not medication. Meditation.

Meditation doesn't just relax me; it helps me forget. It's like a friend I can count on to say just the right thing at the right time when that thing you want them to say is nothing. Meditation is the friend who intervenes when you're about to say or do something very stupid. Like ten months ago, when meditation saved me from pulling the trigger after I realized I had become my mother.