

## CHAPTER 1

In life everyone has secrets. It took me a long time to realize that, probably longer than most. I thought I had finally accepted my own demons and learned to live with them, but as I stared at the glossy, five by seven postcard in my hand, my stomach was churning. It was postmarked March 8 from Wilmington, North Carolina. Dread started to spread throughout my body, causing my hands to tremble slightly. I was unable to move as sweat beaded on my forehead.

“Another late night Dr. Dani?” I heard someone close to me ask. After several awkward moments the voice tried again.

“Dr. Dani, you look a little pale, is something wrong?” the voice asked again, finally getting my attention.

“Me? Everything’s fine. I just got an invite to my ten year college reunion,” I said, shaking my head but avoiding eye contact. Bill, the building doorman now stood next me, and he looked like he doubted my comment as he frowned in my direction. I took one more look at the card, shrugged, and tossed it into the trash beside the mailboxes. It was the best ‘I don’t care’ attitude that I could muster at the moment.

“Sounds like fun,” he said, trying to engage me further.

“Sometimes it is better to leave things in the past,” I mumbled with a slight wave as I stepped onto the elevator.

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I lived in a new luxury high-rise apartment on Boylston Street near the iconic Fenway Park. It wasn't something I could afford, but it was something that my father insisted on. He was so proud that I had gone to medical school that he spared no expense when it came to my living arrangement over the last couple of years. My mother, who had a bit of a shopping problem, always went over-the-top decorating and styling whatever residence I was occupying. This particular one-bedroom apartment looked like it belonged on the cover of a *Better Homes & Garden* magazine; it was way more than I needed given the little time I actually spent there. The apartment was cold when I entered; mail was piled up on the counter by the door, and the sink was full of dishes causing me to sigh. The large windows in the living room gave me a clear view of the city skyline which was illuminated with thousands of lights twinkling in the distance. I turned the heat up and kicked my cros off in the hallway as I stripped off my scrubs, heading for the shower. It had become a routine of mine over the last couple of years that as soon as I got home from a shift I would try ridding myself of the sterile hospital smell. This particular night I had just completed an eighteen-hour shift at the hospital for the third consecutive day—my feet hurt, and I felt mentally and physically drained.

After letting the steaming hot water engulf me for the better part of an hour, I finally slipped into an old pair of boxer shorts and a ratty CSU baseball sweatshirt. I stared at myself in the mirror as I brushed my teeth – I had dark circles that seemed like a permanent fixture under my light blue eyes, and lines had started to appear at the corners of my mouth, framing it like parentheses. I was turning thirty-two soon but I felt ten years older than that. Pulling my long wet dirty

blonde hair into a messy knot, I sighed and crawled into bed. The clock next to the bed blinked that it was now just past two in the morning. I was exhausted, yet sleep eluded me as I lay in bed trying to listen to the sounds of the Boston city life, which usually helped lull me to sleep. However, on this particular night, even the streets of Boston were quiet. Lacking a clear distraction, I tried meditating and focusing on my breathing, but my mind kept drifting back to the postcard I'd received in the mail. Had it really been ten years since we all graduated from college? It couldn't have happened that fast.

Acknowledging defeat, I crawled out of bed and wandered around the apartment picking up random clothes scattered about and started a load of laundry. I stared at the dishes for several minutes before finally deciding to do them, suddenly grateful for the dishwasher in the apartment. As I was tucking the last dish into the dishwasher, I found that no matter what I did, my mind kept drifting back ten years – images of Sarah, Callie, Vinny, Addie and Jake cluttered my mind. Unable to fight it any longer, I headed to the closet by the front door. On the floor in the back of the closet were several boxes that never got unpacked. The box I was looking for was beat-up from all the moves it had made over the years. Some places I never even bothered unpacking it, as was the case here. I had been at Boston's Children's Hospital for just a little over a year of my two-year fellowship and it still sat in the back of the closet. Mostly it was memorabilia like certificates, awards, prized essays, college tassels, some pictures and several yearbooks. As I tore open the box, dust filled my lungs and I coughed. Waving the dust away I pulled the final flap open and instantly saw the top of my blue and white college yearbook sticking out. Reaching in and dusting it off caused me to pause in order to take in the cover.

I had attended Coastal State University (CSU) in Wilmington, North Carolina. Growing up in the heart of New York City I made a very conscious decision to go south where one snow storm a year was considered ‘a bad year’, the scenery was beautiful and it was far away from my parents and my current life. My mom lamented about the distance and my turning down more prestigious schools and my dad was furious but I didn’t care; CSU had a solid pre-med and biology program and it was near the beach. At 18, it was all I could think about. Most of my friends stayed in New York opting for Columbia or NYU – some even ventured across the borders of New York to Yale or Princeton.

I vividly remember the day I got my acceptance letter to CSU. It’s not easy to forget the day you stand at a crossroads and decide to defy your parents and their lifelong expectations of you. It was April 3<sup>rd</sup> and so far I had been accepted into every school I’d applied for, and yet, I still didn’t feel like I had found ‘the one’. I must admit that for the first 18 years of my life my father dictated my life. I attended the best private schools, scored in the top 3% on my SAT scores, volunteered regularly at the hospital where he worked, was student government president, was captain of my state champion soccer team and was a tutor in multiple subjects at two different schools. My father was proud, and I was miserable. If life is supposed to be this amazing journey, then I was a passenger on the journey. I was not in control of my own destiny. In fact, I wasn’t even in the passenger side seat; I was in the last seat way in the back, brooding angrily at my parents. My parents had expectations and goals for me. They wanted me to follow in my father’s footsteps and become a brain surgeon by way of Harvard, Princeton or Yale or some variation of Ivy League school. I glided along listening to them drone on about good grades and my future. I remember having a

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conversation about goals and expectations in the third grade after bringing home an unsatisfactory grade in reading. So for the majority of my life, I let him make the decisions for me – it just seemed easier that way. Then, on a fluke, my soccer team traveled down to CSU in the fall of my senior year, and all that changed. I had this amazing feeling of purpose and sense that I finally belonged somewhere. It didn't feel pretentious or staged like the other schools I had toured with my parents – the people were all warm and welcoming, not hostile. Maybe they weren't like me, but I wanted to be like them; CSU was where I suddenly and desperately wanted to be. I applied in secret as soon as we got home from the tournament, and until that warm sunny April morning I had thought of little else but getting in.

I had been running late to my volunteer shift at the hospital, and by chance I ran into the mailman in the lobby of the building. He handed me a stack of mail that I was going to throw into my messenger bag when the blue CSU seal on a large envelope stopped me in my tracks. The size of the package told me that I had gotten in before I even opened the envelope. An instant smile spread across my face, and joy swelled up inside me, followed instantly by panic, as my hands started to shake. I knew at that moment I was going to CSU; my parents just didn't know it yet. Over the next couple weeks, I let my college deposits lapse until CSU was the only school left. My bravery to do so was only slightly strengthened by the full academic scholarship that CSU had offered me. I dropped the bombshell on my parents two nights before my high school graduation. I left for CSU two months later in early August, with my father still not speaking to me.

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I sighed as I thought back to that moment in my life, and ran my hand over the cover of the yearbook. To this day, my father still doesn't acknowledge the four years I spent at CSU; it's like a black hole in my family history that no one ever speaks about. But to me, of everything I have ever done, it was those four years that challenged me the most and shaped me into the person I was.

I had a different feeling now as I traced the CSU logo on the yearbook in my Boston apartment at 2:45 in the morning. The yearbook cover had a faded picture of the Wallace Center on the front with groups of students arbitrarily lying around in the grass and laughing. It had a cheesy tagline embossed in gold in the bottom right corner – 'one family, one time' – and 2004 stamped in big, bold gold font. I took a deep breath as I flipped the book open. Everyone has secrets and some people have this burning desire to share their secrets. I promised myself my secrets would stay at CSU the day I walked across the stage and received my diploma. I never had the urge to share them or talk about them, not even with my best friends Addie or Callie. As I stared at the pages I had this sinking feeling that secrets never stayed buried. They just linger below the surface ready to bubble up at the first moment.

Casually flipping through the pictures I saw images of friends I hadn't seen since graduation, probably not even thinking about them until this very moment. Then there were pictures of me with my three best friends and roommates collaged together. Adeline, or Addie for short, was the first one on the left; she had her blonde hair in a short pixie cut. She was wearing a CSU shirt and shorts; she was in mid-laugh looking carefree. Next to her was Colleen, but we all called her Callie. Her long brunette hair was pulled back in some kind of braid, and she

was smirking. I stood next to Callie, and I was wearing running shorts and a CSU soccer sweatshirt. My shoulder length, dirty blonde hair was straight and down as I smiled for the camera. Sarah was last; she was wearing an oversized rugby pullover and jeans to hide her thin frame. She was leaning over a little, cracking a joke; her red hair had fallen in front of her face, and a faint smile showed. The photo was captioned, “Adeline (Addie) Smith, Colleen (Callie) Schumaker, Danielle (Dani) Jackson and Sarah Mead attend CSU’s Fall Derby.” What the photo didn’t show was that we would be crying from laughter two minutes later or that this would be one of the last photos taken of all of us together. I flipped the page, and the picture on the next page made me inhale sharply. It was me again in the same CSU soccer sweatshirt and shorts, which made me think it must have been taken on the same day as the other picture. In this picture, Jake had me up in his arms. I looked to be protesting as we were suspended in mid-air about to go into the pool. The photo captioned, “Danielle (Dani) Jackson, Captain of the Soccer team and Jake Dillon, Captain of the Baseball team make a splash.” My stomach still turned to knots when I thought about his touch or when he whispered, ‘Dani just trust me,’ moments before he swept me up and jumped into the pool. The problem was that I had trusted him... and probably still did.

I closed the book, and a little bit of sadness crept through me. The days were never going to be that easy again. Life only seemed to get more complicated and more stressful. Part of me would have given anything to go back and relive those days, but the other part of me wanted nothing to do with any of it. I put the yearbook back in the box and closed it up, then pushed it back into the closet. I got back into bed and finally fell asleep, dreaming of pools, friends and laughter.