

CHAPTER ONE

Obstacles from the Start

I was happy ... for a few minutes. The sun was bright and warmed my skin as I walked home from school after lacrosse practice. I looked up at the trees with their new leaves: There was a slight breeze that caused the leaves to do a happy dance.

I opened the front door of our two-story house. Though the sun was blinding in the blue spring sky, inside our house it was dark as night: In every area of the house, the room-darkening shades had been pulled all the way down to the window sills. The drapes were drawn tightly closed, without so much as a tiny opening where they met in the middle of the window. Not a single window was open; the house seemed totally devoid of air. It was silent: no whirring sound of the washing machine or dishwasher. This didn't strike me as anything odd: It was just like many other afternoons when I got home from school. I simply assumed that Mom hadn't gotten out of bed yet. In fact, it was rare for her to be up and about when I got home from school. Sometimes she still wasn't up at 6 p.m. From where I stood at the front door, I could see last night's pots and pans filling the sink and dirty dishes scattered on the counter—along with an empty bourbon bottle. A single glass, with an inch or so of watered-down whiskey left in it, was still on the coffee table in the living

room. It wasn't unusual for me to see a couple of highball glasses—still sporting tiny bits of ice—on the living room coffee table when I left for school in the morning. When I saw those highball glasses with remnants of drinks from just a few hours before, I knew something was wrong.

As the oldest child by quite a few years, and a son at that, I always felt as though it was my responsibility to take control and fix whatever was wrong.

As ill as she was, my mom was wonderful in so many ways. I loved her and never once doubted her love for me, though, from a young age, I somehow understood that she didn't have the ability to really show it. My dad was a four-striped captain in the United States Navy. Many people considered him to be a brilliant man. It was highly unusual to make it to captain, never having gone to Annapolis. The Navy even sent him to Harvard Business School, as one of only two candidates sent to Harvard that year for an MBA. At age forty-four, after twenty-two years in the Navy, my dad went on to become the vice president of a large shipping company, Grace Lines, in New York City.

Dad was mostly absent—if not physically, then emotionally. We moved seven times—pretty much every two or three years, and sometimes more often—while I was growing up. Mom and Dad didn't get along, but Mom played the role of a Navy captain's wife quite well, even in spite of her illness. My parents were always attending parties in Washington D. C. and Mom excelled in that capacity. In fact, they attended parties wherever we lived. Mom was stunning, truly drop-dead gorgeous. She looked just like one of those old black and white photos of a Hollywood movie star that anyone would look at and say, "She's beautiful." At parties, people were automatically drawn to her, I suppose for many reasons: she was attractive and charming, and she was the wife of a senior naval officer. I thought she was gifted with a wonderful personality and tremendous charisma, and at the same time, she was also high maintenance. In my young mind, I believed she thought she was a bit of a queen, a chosen one. My feelings about my mom were confirmed later in life by those who knew her. Mom went to college for a short time, and then married Dad, a naval ensign from a well-known Washington, D.C. family. Mom and Dad had a big military wedding, complete with swords and white uniforms, and all the pomp and circumstance.

When I saw it was dark in the house on that spring afternoon, I flicked on a lamp that sat on a table next to the front door. *Will things ever change? Will it always be like this?* I had to keep my mom's illness a secret from my friends. I couldn't be what I thought I wanted to be (the "big man on campus") and tell the truth about my mom. I couldn't go around telling my friends that my mom was mentally ill, an alcoholic, and an abuser of prescription drugs. I couldn't divulge the fact that my mom commonly drank too much, that she often couldn't get up in the morning and make lunch for her kids like every other mom, and sometimes, when she did finally wake up, she had the smell of vomit on her nightgown.

I felt so alone. I *was* alone.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of my mom on the second floor. She was running down the hall, her nightgown billowing out behind her. Within a few seconds, a number of scenarios flashed through my brain. I bounded up the stairs, taking them three at a time. My heart was pounding in my chest as I went from one room to the next looking for my mother. And then I found her. I stood in the doorway of the bathroom for a second, almost paralyzed.

"STOP, Mom STOP!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. *No! Could this really be happening?*

Mom was holding one of those large amber pill bottles in her right hand. In a split second, she managed to snap off the secured white cap, put her mouth around the bottle, and start chugging. I rushed into the bathroom.

"Mom, DON'T," I screamed again.

It was as if she couldn't hear me. I knocked the bottle out of her hand and hit her hard across the side of her face in an attempt to bring her out of her stupor.

"Spit them out," I begged.

Again, no response. I grabbed her cheek and shook until the pills fell out of her mouth and onto the floor. Mom looked up at me; her eyes were full of fear and sadness. She slowly made her way back to her bedroom and closed the door behind her. I picked up all the pills that were on the floor and flushed them down the toilet.

The fact that my mom tried to kill herself right in front of me was never spoken about. I had to get up and go to school the next morning and perform on the lacrosse field that afternoon—as if nothing had happened. This wasn't the first time I had to deal with stormy seas, and shock in my life, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. And, this trauma was far from the only obstacle that I would have to overcome.