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*Wait for
the Rain*

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Chapter One

“You awake yet, hon?” Carol asked in her perpetually cheerful voice.

Daphne yawned into the phone. “Barely, but yes.”

“Barely’s good enough for me, and it’s certainly good enough for the airline. Are you all packed?”

Daphne glanced at her bulging suitcase in the hall. “*Overpacked*. It’s the curse of motherhood.”

“But Emma isn’t going with you, right?”

“No, she’s off to Utah with her dad. But I still packed way too much. I had to stop myself from tossing an iron in there. What is wrong with me?”

Carol chuckled. “Well, I guess it’s better to be overprepared than the alternative, right? I’ll be over in just a few minutes to grab you.”

Daphne glanced out the window into the pitch-black Columbus winter and wondered how anyone could be so peppy at such an ungodly early hour. “Okay, thanks, Carol. See you soon.” She hung up the phone and set it on the kitchen counter, then with another sleepy yawn opened the overhead cabinet. She reached for her favorite mug, the pink ceramic one Emma had made years earlier that said “I love you, MOMMY!” in wobbly blue lettering. It

had been a Mother's Day gift back when Emma was in third grade. The pink was a bit faded now, and the handle had a small chip that seemed to be growing, but Daphne treasured it like gold. Despite her daughter's occasional groans of protest, especially those weekend mornings when she had a friend or two over—*Mom, that's so embarrassing!*—Daphne still used it nearly every day. If and when it became necessary, she would fix the crack with superglue. Retiring the mug to the back of the cabinet, much less to a dusty box in the garage with other mementos from Emma's early years, was simply not an option, at least for now. Daphne had never been one to hold on to possessions that had outlived their use, but when it came to her little girl's things, that was a different story. Going on sixteen now, Emma was growing up so fast, and Daphne was determined to cling to what little remained of her childhood for as long as she could. She couldn't yet bring herself to think about what her life was going to be about once Emma left for college. Just the idea of it was almost unbearable.

Her eyes still not entirely open, Daphne poured herself a cup of steaming black French roast, extra strong, and glanced at the time on the coffeemaker: 5:17 a.m.

She yawned again. It was much too early to be out of bed, much less on a day when she didn't have to rouse a slumbering teenager before school. She stirred cream and sugar into the mug and wondered how cold it was outside. It was certainly dark out there, and they'd been saying it would probably snow again today, or maybe there'd be freezing rain, which in her opinion was the worst weather of all. As she sipped her coffee, her mind traveled back to the period of her life when rising before the sun was the norm, not the exception, back when feeding Emma in the early morning hours was as much a part of her day as packing Brian a sandwich to take to the office.

Back when the house was rarely this quiet.

Or still.

Or . . . empty.

It was all of those things now, at least when Emma was at Brian's place. Or, as of last weekend, Brian and Alyssa's place.

Daphne stiffened at the thought. *I can't believe he's really getting remarried.*

She looked around the tidy kitchen and dining area, a bit too orderly for a house with a teenager living in it, even though Emma was only there half the time. She closed her eyes. *I can't believe this is my life now.*

She felt a pang deep inside as a vision flashed before her, one of Emma decorating her spacious new bedroom at the house in tony Westerville that belonged to the woman who would soon be her stepmother. It was a spectacular, magazine-worthy structure, one of several high-end properties Alyssa's family owned in the Columbus area. Daphne imagined her daughter giggling and gossiping with Alyssa as she unpacked, sharing her secrets and stories and crushes—things she never seemed to tell Daphne anymore. Daphne pictured the two of them chattering like classmates as they strolled arm in arm down the driveway of Emma's new home. Of Brian's new home. Of *their* new home.

Daphne closed her eyes and willed her mind to erase the painful visual. She took a deep breath. *Don't torture yourself like this. You know you're better off without him.*

She set down her coffee and glanced at Emma's monthly calendar on the refrigerator, secured front and center with an OSU magnet. As usual, her daughter's schedule was packed with volleyball practices and games, piano lessons, chorus rehearsals, study groups, and a smattering of birthday parties. Recent additions to the list were driver's training and an SAT prep course. Daphne had not only typed up and color coded the schedule but memorized it, and

she took great pride in making sure Emma never missed an activity or appointment.

Daphne picked up the mug and made one last trip into her bedroom to confirm that she hadn't forgotten anything essential, although given that she'd triple-checked everything on her list after packing her enormous suitcase last night, she knew the chances were slim if not zero. Then she stopped by Emma's room to have a quick peek inside, something she often did when Emma was staying with Brian. She never *entered* the room, determined to give her daughter the privacy her own mother had never afforded her as a teenager, but she found it comforting to see Emma's things there, even if she was currently elsewhere. As usual the room was relatively clean, the bed made, the pink-and-white-checkered comforter smoothed evenly over the twin bed. The white walls were sprinkled with posters of pop stars and award ribbons from various events and competitions. A cork bulletin board above her white wood desk was covered with smiling photos of her and her girlfriends, the matching white chair tucked neatly underneath. A thick blue binder lay atop the desk next to a small stack of textbooks. Her daughter had inherited Daphne's knack for keeping things organized, something Daphne loved given how messy Brian was. It had been a daily battle just to get him to put his dirty clothes in the hamper, a battle Daphne had given up fighting years ago but had never been able to understand. How hard is it to toss clothes into a hamper or hang up a wet towel? Besides, they'd had bigger problems in their marriage than laundry.

On her way back into the kitchen she looked over at the empty oak table in the quiet dining room. Her imagination suddenly flashed to an image of breakfast time at Alyssa's place, where she pictured Emma, Brian, and Alyssa conversing energetically over pancakes about their upcoming adventure. It was Emma's spring break, and the three of them were headed to Park City to spend the week skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing, sledding, and whatever

else outdoorsy people do in the Utah mountains. Despite Emma's grumbling about a week away from her friends, not to mention her electronic devices, Daphne knew she was looking forward to the trip. No doubt she, Brian, and Alyssa would have a fabulous time together.

Just like a real family.

Daphne flinched at the thought.

In a few months it would be official. Alyssa would become the new Mrs. Brian White, assuming the title of Emma's stepmother.

Daphne felt another stab at the thought of Alyssa playing such a formal—and important—role in her daughter's life, one Daphne had wanted so desperately to keep all to herself. She glanced at the clock again, then peered through the white plantation shutters. A moment later she spotted Carol, the unofficial matron of their tidy block, emerging from the two-story Colonial-style house across the street. Bundled up in a massive red ski jacket and shiny black rain boots over what looked like a white flannel nightgown, she carefully navigated her way through the swirling snow flurries.

Daphne picked up the coffee and closed her eyes, again willing her anxiety to pass.

Be happy for Brian.

He's not a bad person.

Things will get better for you.

Things have to get better.

The divorce was now final, so it wasn't like she could expect him to stay single forever, even though part of her secretly wanted him to. He'd been dating Alyssa for more than a year, but for Emma's sake he had waited to move in with her until they were officially engaged, and Daphne had to give him credit for that. He was clearly trying hard to be an involved father now—much more than he had when Emma was younger. If he and Daphne didn't share a daughter, she'd be free to cut ties with him, but unfortunately that wasn't

an option, emotionally or logistically. While no longer her husband, for better or for worse he was in her life for good.

This is how things are now.

She squeezed the pink mug tight, desperate to escape from the suffocating disappointment that her life wasn't what she thought it would be at this age.

She just wished she knew how to do that.

How to be alone after being part of a couple for so many years.

How to find herself again.

How to start over.

I could have had a career. Now I have just the shattered pieces of a family.

She blinked a few times to shake the visions from her head. It was time to focus on the reason why she was up so early this dark winter morning.

The birthday trip. I can't believe I'm really going.

Carol's knock on the door jarred her from her thoughts. She rinsed out the mug and carefully placed it in the drying rack, then hurried to open the front door.