

CHAPTER 1

Mother. Only one word cut through the noise of a New York afternoon. The rest of my neighbor Carrie's monologue was lost to me as a Packard ambulance raced past us along Fifth Avenue, siren screaming and bright red gumball light flashing. On its oversize tires, the Packard looked like a white scarab beetle, slicing a path through Manhattan's congested Upper East Side. Our view of wide and pulsating Fifth Avenue was flanked by a parade of elms now in full leaf. When the shriek of the sirens had faded, we turned our attention back to each other, two women seated on a wooden bench at the playground near the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Egyptian wing. Carrie, a red-headed, doe-eyed girl with a pin-up body and an alabaster face, scrunched up her pretty features. "Those ambulances are awfully loud, aren't they?" she noted. "Indeed." She glanced uptown, as if they might suddenly start rolling down Fifth Avenue by the dozen, like the tanks during the Victory Parade in '45, nine years back. "Is it just me or did they get louder after the war?"

"Could be," I said. "I think they have, and it's really too much," she replied decisively, her heart-shaped chin rising a pinch. "The noise scares the children." She pulled on the large diamonds clipped to her earlobes as if to adjust her eardrums back to softer sounds. "They shouldn't let ambulances take this route to Lenox Hill, so close to the park. But I suppose, if someone dies on Fifth Avenue, someone dies on Fifth Avenue," she said with a sigh. "Even the rich have to meet their maker," I replied. "I suppose that's true," Carrie said, sounding doubtful. As a woman made of sunshine, never clouds, Carrie was the type of uplifted soul who always focused on life, not death. Part of her seemed quite sure that her husband could simply make a large bank transfer to the grim reaper in exchange for eternal life for the whole family—that is, the moneyed New York sort of life that they were already living. If eternity meant being a farmer's overburdened wife in one of the Dakotas or that state shaped like a mitten, then Carrie would surely take her last breath in that ambulance to Lenox Hill instead. At least she'd die in the correct postal zone. "What were you saying before the ambulance came?" I asked. "The sirens drowned you out." "Oh," Carrie replied, frowning as she thought back. "I was saying that our children are at a perfect age. Don't you love it? Don't you just love being a mother?" She looked out at her daughter, Alice, and my son Gerrit, trying to climb up the metal slide, squawking happily, their faces a mix of dirt, mucus, and joy. Next to us on the bench, my one-year-old, Peter, was tucked in a white cashmere blanket, sleeping with his head on my lap, wrapped up as tightly as the mummies in the Egyptian wing a few yards away. "Being a mother," I echoed, thinking how the sirens had seemed to amplify the word's impact. "And yes, of course," I added quickly. "Of course I do. I love it. There's nothing I love more." I stretched as much as I could in my heavy coat. April was proving no breath of spring. "We all love being mothers." "We do," she said firmly. "It *is* the greatest gift." In her teal green dress and matching coat, a child-friendly one-inch heel on her beige shoes, Carrie was a vision of a certain kind of femininity, her whole being screaming of spryness, full of the vivacity that I lacked. At twenty-seven, she was a full decade younger than I was, and suddenly she seemed even younger. "I remember when I was pregnant with Alice," Carrie continued, touching her flat midsection reflectively. "I was at the opera with Matthew, just a human beach ball taking in *Tosca*," she said, grinning, "and during intermission, a woman patted my stomach with a hand covered in diamonds—yellow diamonds, very

large— and said, ‘Isn’t it so wonderful? To be having a baby? Just think, when it’s born, you’ll never be alone again.’” Carrie cocked her head and moved her pretty red hair— shampoo advertisement hair— to the other side of her neck. “For the rest of my life I’ll always have someone at my side, or at least somewhere roaming the earth, who I’ve created. Never alone again,” she repeated. “Isn’t that just the most wonderful sentiment?” “Wonderful,” I replied quickly, adding an overly emphatic nod of the head. “You can rid yourself of a husband, or friends, and your parents die, but as long as you live, your children will always be tethered to you. The rope may get longer, but it never breaks.” “Never,” I repeated, digging my nails into the bench’s wooden slats. “I wasn’t expecting a revelatory moment at the opera,” Carrie went on, patting baby Peter, still sleeping soundly between us. “Frankly, I was a bit unnerved to be pulled to the theater in my eighth month of pregnancy, but the Maximillian Millses had invited us and we couldn’t say no to that, could we?” “Absolutely not,” I replied. My own husband would have made me accept an invitation from the Maximillian Millses even if I had been in active labor, the baby coming into the world as everyone howled at their jokes and nodded yes, please, for more canapés. No one ever declined an invitation from the Millses. “But that woman’s words made me feel . . . I don’t know, exactly.” Carrie looked up at the gray sky as if waiting for God to deliver the right adjective. “Peaceful. More peaceful than I had felt my whole pregnancy. It was a beautiful, comforting thing to think about. Never alone again” She eyed me to make sure I was still listening. “I’ve thought about it every day since, and Alice is two already,” she said, giving a wave to her daughter, her diamond tennis bracelets clinking. Alice’s flaxen hair was in her eyes, but she didn’t seem to notice, too busy playing in the dirt that stuck to her as if she were made of flypaper. “I never quite thought about motherhood that way.” I loosened the gray silk scarf around my neck, one of the last presents I remembered receiving from my own mother. After I married, she told me I had enough money to buy my own scarves. “That woman was my own angel Gabriel of sorts. It was the best moment of my pregnancy.” “Lovely,” I muttered again. My own pregnancies had only been heaven- sent during conception. The rest had been highlighted by vomiting, tears, and an excessive consumption of desserts from Glaser’s Bake Shop. I continued to pull at my scarf, suddenly conscious of feeling rather like Nathan Hale on the gallows as the executioner tightened his noose. “It is all such a blessing, isn’t it?” I said brightly, glancing over to see my older son poke himself in the face with a stick. As I watched, he stopped, pulled up his coat sleeve, held the stick out in front of him, and then turned to Alice. With a single precise movement, he jabbed her right in the eye. She screamed and fell backward, her little legs straight up in the air like a tipped calf’s. “A gift,” I added before we both jumped up.

I sprang forward ahead of Carrie, since my child was the offender, but remembered I had a sleeping baby on the bench and went back to pick him up before I scolded Gerrit. My motions were jerky, and Peter woke up abruptly. He blinked in surprise a few times, then howled. I left the toddlers to Carrie, who gently took the stick away from Gerrit while trying not to let her daughter bite his face in retaliation. I attempted to comfort Peter, holding him as tightly as I could manage, and took off my scarf with my other hand. It would be better off in my purse than around my neck. I hoisted the baby up, then went to yell at my other son as etiquette required when one two- year- old tried to maim another. I bent down to get closer to him. “Gerrit! No hitting! No poking! No sticks!” I shouted. “No violence!” What else could I add to make Carrie think I was the right kind of mother? “No mischief! No roughhousing! No moving at all!” Gerrit looked up at me, his face pink from the cold and the excitement of trying to murder his playmate, and said, “No.” He picked up another stick before I could lunge at him, and poked me hard in the leg, ripping my stocking. I clutched Peter even tighter, glad that I hadn’t ended up like a tipped calf

myself. “Oh, Rina, your stockings,” Carrie said, gripping Alice’s hand. I waved her off and peered at Alice. The child had emerged from the fray still fully sighted, but as I looked at her blue eyes I noticed the sky behind her had darkened by several shades— gone the color of concrete. Before I could panic, the baby panicked for me. A huge drop of water hit his fat cheek, surprising him. He started to howl and wiggle out of his folded blankets, like an animal under attack. As I hung on to him, I heard sharp little dings. Hail was bouncing at my feet. I clutched the baby to my breast and grabbed Gerrit’s hand. “Carrie!” I screamed, though she was only two feet away. “What should we do?” she said, looking from me to our bags open the bench, food and toys strewn everywhere. “Go inside the museum?” “With my monsters? We’ll end up in prison. Let’s try to get a taxi.” We threw our things into bags and purses while the toddlers cackled with glee and the baby wailed. As we rushed to Fifth Avenue, one of Peter’s blankets fell to the ground. Carrie turned back for it, as I could barely hold my children, and I yelled at her to leave it. “There will be no taxis left!” I shouted. At the corner of Eighty- fourth, we shot our arms up, but we were among dozens doing the same. “Watch it, kid!” a man barked as he tried to get to the curb. I looked down. Gerrit was stepping on the back of his shoes, perhaps accidentally, most likely not. “I’m terribly sorry,” I apologized as my purse slid down my arm. Some of its contents spilled out, a glass jar shattering. He stepped over the shards and whistled for a cab. As I kicked the glass off my feet, he muttered obscenities, then darted into the road and threw himself into a taxi, nearly upending an elderly woman. “I’ll cross the street!” Carrie shouted as she flung herself across Fifth Avenue, Alice’s hand in an iron grip. “Whoever hails a cab first, the other runs across and climbs in!” For ten minutes we tried, without success. I almost dropped the baby, and in my efforts to keep him off the pavement, flipped him horizontally and tucked him under my arm like a salami. A living, breathing, angry salami. Across the street, Carrie finally appeared as desperate as I felt. “Subway!” she shouted. We rushed to Lexington, then nearly rolled down the steps of the 86th Street station, barely able to squeeze through the turnstiles as the crowd surged toward the arriving train. Right before the car’s double doors opened, Gerrit squirmed free. I stuck out my leg to keep him from sprinting away, and in one swift motion, Carrie yanked him onto the train. With all three children wailing, food dripping in our expensive handbags, my stocking torn, our lipstick smeared, and our hair ruined, the subway doors shut in front of us. “I love being a mother,” I whispered as the train groaned to a start.