

SMOTHERING

by

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Chapter One

My mother sang the national anthem like she really meant it, but her voice was the only thing she didn't try to save. Margarine containers and twist ties filled her kitchen drawers, while collections of elastic bands on every doorknob were dangling testaments to her recycling abilities. Her used tissues, crumpled and shoved into pockets and sweater sleeves, multiplied almost as quickly as the number of artificial sweetener packets she stole from restaurants and deposited in her purse, awaiting the great saccharine shortage of the new millennium.

She used color-coded, dated labels on the mountains of leftovers crammed into her deep freeze: a quarter cup grated carrots. Two cups split pea soup. One piece lasagna. The only tag-free item was a tier of her wedding cake. It was wrapped in foil and tucked in the bottom left corner, awaiting what opportune moment and which unfortunate guests? Did she think antique carrot cake would come in handy? Would she serve twenty-six-year-old marzipan in a pinch?

I could only hope that other mothers were like her, a combination of idiosyncrasies and careful manners, wrapped in a department store wardrobe of navy, black and gray. Sensible shoes and pearl earrings. Restless hands and perennial hiccups.

I hoped that every mother was a knit-purl-knit-purl kind of woman, producing countless stitches of tiny sweater sleeves and collars for her non-existent grandchildren, *just in case*.

I looked past her annoying habits with the practiced disdain of a twenty-three-year-old daughter; a roll of the eyes or an ambivalent shrug performed on cue. I looked past the feminine hygiene products cushioning the cardboard walls of her care packages, and the spontaneous long distance etiquette lessons, which usually took place on my dime. I could even look past her cheerful insistence that anything could be fixed with a strand of dental floss or a piece of slightly chewed gum and a little ingenuity.

What I couldn't look past was her presence in my doorway at seven-thirty on a Thursday morning, suitcase in hand.

"Mom, what are you doing here?" I asked, aiming for a tone of pleasant surprise and missing the mark entirely.

"Claire," she murmured, dropping her Samsonite on the hallway floor with the unmistakable thud of impending doom.

She reached for me and I entered her embrace, immediately enveloped by the faint scent of rose water she'd worn since my memories began. Her familiar blue raincoat pressed against my T-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms, soaking me with the realization that she was no hallucination. She was bulkier than she'd been when I visited Omaha the previous Spring, no surprise, considering recent letters had revolved around middle-age spread and varicose veins, rather than who was marrying, divorcing and cheating on whom in my hometown.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" she asked, releasing her grip and peering past me, into the sloppy center of the one-bedroom apartment she'd never seen.

"Oh, right. Of course. Come on in," I said, glancing expectantly down the hallway and seeing only mottled beige carpeting and a shiny piece of what I hoped was a Top Ramen seasoning pouch. Painfully aware of apartment forty-one's active social life, however, I could almost guarantee it was a hastily discarded condom wrapper, a fitting welcome mat for his ever-revolving front door, but a definite turn-off for a sudden parental visit.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

"At home." Her tone was matter-of-fact, as though the news wasn't enough to bring me to my knees. "This is much smaller than I expected." She stepped across the threshold of number forty-three and onto my unswept, uneven wood floors. "Not that it's too small." She quickly added. "It's very compact. Very *cozy*."

Dad was still in Omaha? Who would protect me?

"Why didn't he come?" I rubbed my arms as a shiver that had nothing to do with my dampened clothing ran through me.

"He's working on some house projects. He couldn't get away."

What kind of projects would prevent a trip to his favorite city?

I glanced at Mom's solitary bag and was almost swept away by a sudden wave of giddiness. One bag wouldn't hold much more than two Weekender outfits. Maybe she'd only be in town for a couple of days!

Before my racing heart had a chance to sprint, a grim reality sunk in. Omaha to Portland was no weekend jaunt,

and though her luggage normally traveled in packs, one bag of her mix-and-match wardrobe could stretch beyond ordinary limits to a week's worth of clothing. *Minimum.*

"How long are you in town for?" My voice was surprisingly even.

"I'm not sure." She lifted her shoulders in an absent shrug.

Her hair was more gray than chestnut, and her trademark braid was coming undone. The flush of her cheeks highlighted her girlish freckles, while dark brown eyes gazed past me as she looked directly into my bedroom.

Dear God, no.

"Where are you, uh, staying?" I stammered, crossing suddenly shaking fingers behind my back.

"If it's all right with you, I thought I'd camp out here." She gave me a sorely misplaced smile of camaraderie. "Just us girls."

If it was all right with me? How was I supposed to say no? To hear her tell it, delivering me into the world had taken more time than most people spend on post-graduate degrees, and the reward of a screaming blue infant hadn't been quite substantial enough to warrant the effort. As far as she was concerned, I owed her. Of course, I wasn't her only offspring, and buried in that fact was a small seed of hope. There was an opportunity to unload her on an unsuspecting sibling, and I wasn't about to pass it up.

"What about Stephanie?" I asked. "She's dying for you to see her new place."

It wasn't entirely true, but my sister did have ample room to spare for matronly nesting. Never mind that she had always been the preferred child of the McLeod family, living up to her girlish and glittery name in every

possible way while I mastered the supporting role of "disappointment". Only a year separated us, but that year might as well have been a decade.

Steph was tall and slender from day one, with a sunny disposition balanced by rather stunning intelligence. Her strawberry blonde hair was a gift from our dad's end of the gene pool and it had been her crowning glory for her turns as cheerleader, debate team captain, and star of ambitiously overacted high school music theater productions.

While Stephanie basked in her polysyllables and soft consonants, I consistently managed to fulfill all of the duties and obligations of a name like Claire. I was Claire of the nondescript brown ponytail and combination skin. Claire of second-to-last chosen for any and every recess game. A nose-picking, scabby-kneed, reigning queen of anonymity, if anyone had taken the time to notice. Those six fateful letters on my birth certificate condemned me to a life of Plantar warts and lackluster grades, wide hips and the inevitable dowager's hump I was certain would spring overnight from a suspicious mole at the center of my back.

Steph was the star while I played a pale and featureless moon in the McLeod family, and I'd thought it would stay that way forever. Of course, that was before my beloved sister dropped the bomb.

"She's not still living with that woman, is she?" Mom asked, her lower lip drawn almost magnetically toward her chin in a abrupt frown.

"Alison?" I prompted. "Yes she is. They've been together two years, Mom."

My sister's girlfriend had taken a little getting used to. Physically, she was about as different from Steph as, well, as *I* was. After one brief encounter, a co-worker of mine dubbed her the ugly dyke-ling, which I resented, but never corrected. At times, it seemed weakness was my strongest trait.

I'd known Alison and I weren't on the same page the first time we spoke on the phone, (I'd told her I was Steph's sister and she said, "So am I", unaware that I was a blood relative and not a fellow club member), but I'd eventually fallen in like with her. Steph had never been happier and, regrettably, I'd never noticed anything missing from her seemingly stellar life until Alison filled what must have been a substantial void. For that, I could only support their relationship.

"You know, I still hear from Marco," Mom said, quietly.

I always had to bite back a "polo" when I heard my former brother-in-law's name.

"How is he?"

"Lonely. He wants her back." She smiled sadly.

Researching methods to increase his low sperm count had been a pet project of Mom's during the fourteen month marriage, not that she was one to butt in, or anything.

"I heard he got married again."

"Rebound," she snapped. "I don't give it a year."

"So, are you going to see Steph or not?"

"I don't think so," she said, biting her bottom lip.

"She's your daughter, Mom. Who cares if she's gay?"

"She isn't gay." Her gaze left mine as she crossed the room to brush dust from the coffee table with her fingertips.

"Uh, yes she is."

Mom had been horrified when Steph came out of the closet, and was apparently willing to wait as long as necessary for her to crawl back in. I even imagined her straightening coat hangers and donating outdated clothing to Goodwill in an effort to create a more spacious and welcoming environment for her errant daughter.

"You tell your sister that when she snaps out of this nonsense I'll come see her house."

"Snaps out of it? Mom, it's *genetic*."

"Don't be ridiculous." Her hands swept the tabletop erratically. "It's a phase she's going through. She's having a hard time right now, but it will pass. *Genetic*." She shook her head in disbelief. "Your father and I aren't lesbians, are we? Are you trying to tell me the whole McLeod family is just a big bunch of gays?"

"Maybe we should drop it," I suggested, knowing from vast experience and multiple migraines that we wouldn't get anywhere.

"Maybe we should," Mom murmured as she took off her raincoat and hung it on my brass coat rack, a seven-dollar bargain from an east-side garage sale. It rocked back and forth precariously for a moment, apparently as uncertain about welcoming her as I was, before settling on all four legs.

I watched Mom absorb the details of her surroundings; the bent slats of the venetian blinds covering my only window and saving me from a peeling-billboard view. The wilting fern on the sill, under or over-watered, I was never quite sure. The small dining table, covered with old magazines and ringed stains, a cracked sugar bowl and a collection of unpaid bills. Discarded sweaters, jackets,

and miscellaneous tote bags hanging on the backs of my mismatched chairs. I'd been planning to sand and paint them for almost two years, a project I could still get excited about for six to seven minutes at a time before abandoning it in favor of a *Full House* re-run or an undeserved nap.

I could almost feel her cringe at the cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling and wished I'd had the foresight to knock them down with a broom. As I glanced past her and into the kitchen, I noted dirty dishes filling the sink and counter tops piled with fast food wrappers before quickly turning away. I tried to look through her eyes at the crushed throw pillows on my brand new, yet terminally used, couch and the overpopulated ashtray next to the remote control. I'd quit smoking three months earlier and somehow forgotten to empty it.

"If I'd known you were coming . . ." I began.

"It would have looked very much the same," Mom finished with a short laugh. "I know what your bedroom used to look like, dear. Now you just have more room to spread it around."

Dad probably wouldn't have noticed the faint odor of cat urine I'd inherited from the previous tenants, but Mom's nose wrinkled with distaste.

"I like your, er . . .display," she offered, pointing toward my metal lunch box collection.

"Uh, thanks." I scratched my lower back and tried another approach to a prickly topic. "So, you don't know how long you're staying?"

"I've got all the time in the world." She perched uneasily on a corner of the couch, as though it was the lap of a perverted uncle.

"Great," I managed, through gritted teeth. I didn't want to panic, but if we were going to spend any length of time together, with no supervision, it was quite likely that one or both of us would require medication.

"Do you have any juice?" Mom asked.

"Sorry, no." Hell, I didn't even have toilet paper.

"What about tea?"

"I haven't been to the grocery store lately." I smiled wanly.

"What on earth do you drink around here?" she asked, toying with her watch strap.

"I usually grab a coffee on the way . . ."

"It would be cheaper to make it here, Claire."

"Thanks for the tip."

"You don't have to take that tone with me."

"I'm sorry, you've just caught me kind of off guard this morning." The understatement Olympics were beckoning.

"Why don't we have some breakfast? The food on my flight was horrid, and you look like you could use a good meal." She squinted at me. "Has your skin always looked this sallow? I know you were a rather yellow child, but . . . well, never mind that now." She stood and dusted off her backside, making no attempt to disguise the effort.

"What shall I make for breakfast?"

"Oh, God. What time is it?"

"Seven thirty-five."

"Shit! I've got to get ready for work!"

"Language, Claire," she warned, as I turned away.

I ran into my bedroom, cursing her under my breath. What kind of lunatic would "drop in" from halfway across the country? What kind of imbecile was I to let her in the front door?

Shaking my head, I pulled a pair of dirty jeans from the laundry hamper, relieved that, for once, I didn't have to worry about my wardrobe.

Casual Day was supposed to be the great equalizer at Alta Media, and while I wasn't sure how Neal came to the conclusion that denim was the key to a united staff, he'd had enough stupid ideas in the past two months to stop me from asking questions. Like the stained Levi's I slipped on to show I was a team player, Neal's master plan was bound to be full of wrinkles.

I found a reasonably clean red and white gingham blouse and a pair of oxfords, not exactly high fashion, but undeniably casual. I brushed my hair with a few savage strokes and briefly wondered why Dad hadn't joined Mom on her trip. Of course, it was possible that he'd suggested she take a vacation without him, but he loved Portland and made wistful plans to visit every time we spoke. He could have spent hours in Powell's Books, walked the riverfront, or saved his youngest daughter from a spiraling descent into hell.

Where was he?

Maybe Mom had literally nagged him to death and left him in his recliner with the hope that the paperboy or mailman would stumble across him and notify the authorities. Maybe the last words he heard were "Are you listening to me, Robert?" It was an unlikely scenario, but I couldn't rule it out entirely.

I checked my image in the mirror and smeared a perfumed magazine insert across my neck and wrists before applying eyeliner above and below my not-quite-hazel-but-a-far-cry-from-green eyes. Good enough.

I glanced at my watch and groaned.

"You're not wearing *that* to work, are you?" Mom asked when I met up with her in the kitchen. A grungy dishtowel was tucked into the waistband of her pants and she was already busy unloading dead perishables from my refrigerator and stacking them in a pile on the counter.

"It's Casual Day." I shrugged.

"Apparently."

"Listen, Mom. Could you try *not* to clean while I'm gone?" I asked. Less than fifteen minutes with her and I was ready to scream.

"I'm just getting rid of some of this rotten stuff." She paused before continuing, "Or did you want to keep it?"

"No." I bit my tongue. Barely.

"If you'd just put an open box of baking soda in here . . ." she murmured, digging further into the depths of the crisper for surprisingly limp produce. "You've got some eggs. Do you want me to make you an omelet?"

"No, thanks. I don't have time." Considering how long they'd been in there, I was surprised I didn't have chickens.

"Well, what are you going to eat?"

"I'll pick up a bagel on my way to work."

"Pick up a bagel," she scoffed. "You have time for breakfast. Now sit down and I'll whip something up."

"I can't. I'll be late."

"So, be late. I'll call them, or write you a note."

"This isn't junior high, Mom. Besides, I'm on probation."

She lost her grip on a mushy tomato, which splattered on the floor in a pulpy mess. "Probation?" she gasped, reaching for the general area of her heart.

For crying out loud.

"No, no. Not that kind. Probation at work. I've been late too many times."

"Don't you use an alarm clock?"

"What kind of a question is that?" Did she think I relied on some kind of internal, biological timepiece?

"You should set it at least half an hour earlier. Then you'd have time for breakfast and . . . er, *personal grooming*."

"Thank you."

"So, you're on probation." She planted her hands on her hips. "And if you're late again, what would they do?"

"Geez, I don't know. Neal might throw a temper tantrum, maybe lie down and beat his little fists and feet against the floor." I wouldn't put it past him.

"Who's Neal?"

"That miniature Mussolini Gord hired to take over the office."

"Short men have tall problems." Mom shook her head.

"So, you can't even stay for a piece of toast?"

"No bread, no toaster, no time."

"If you say so."

Her trademark sigh sparked an almost allergic reaction and I took a deep breath before speaking.

"When I get home, we'll have some dinner and you can fill me in on all the gossip from home. Like why Dad was willing to let you run footloose and fancy free across the country."

"What time will you be back?"

Suddenly, I was fourteen years old again. I half-expected a reminder to wear my retainer.

"Just after five. There's a grocery store about two blocks from here if you need anything. Just make yourself at home."

"I have some knitting to do." She pointed at the needles sticking out of her purse.

I'll bet. Since Steph was out of the heterosexual loop, the weight of prospective grandchildren lay on my rounded shoulders. No pressure, of course.

I grabbed my bag and walked toward the door.

"Claire?" Her voice was tentative and I turned toward her, hoping she wasn't going to open some menopausal floodgate. I didn't have time to deal with it.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Have you considered a perm?"

"No." So much for emotional breakthroughs.

"It might give your hair a touch more body. Not that it looks bad, but . . ." Her hands gestured vaguely around her head.

I took the high road and ignored her.

"So, I'll see you around five. Like I said, just make yourself at home. There's a spare key in the freezer." The same place she hid her own.

She offered me a little wave. "Have a nice day, dear."

I stepped out of the apartment and breathed a sigh of despair before heading for the stairs.

That was when it hit me.

Had I just given my mother license to rifle through my belongings? What if she found the petrified condoms in my underwear drawer? Of course, her visit wouldn't affect my sex life, which had been flatlining for half a year; but she didn't need to *know* that. What if she came across the

satin, leopard-print g-string I'd "won" at a bachelorette party, or stumbled upon my bank statement? Privacy was officially beyond my control. By five o'clock she would have inspected, perused and peeled away the layers of my life like an onion; no detail too personal, no observation too humiliating. In mere hours I would be as emotionally naked and vulnerable as the day I was born.

Casual Day, my ass.