

Chapter One

You've Arrived

Liv slowed as she approached the slate blue Victorian topped by a widow's walk. Two cars, a newer model Toyota and an older, faded tan Volvo, sat parked to one side. She peered up at the carved Celtic knot above the entry way and the sign that read *Síocháin*.

"Shee-ock-awn," she pronounced. It translated to peace. She could only hope.

She took in a deep breath as fearful questions tumbled over one another in her brain. What if the other women recognized her? What if she had come all this way to delve into her own psyche and found no one home? What if the Lexapro stopped working and she had a meltdown and couldn't get out of bed? Would they call local EMTs and have her committed? Would she be locked away just like...? Her palms dampened. Her heart quickened, and her stomach did a somersault. She felt as if her joints were held together by chewing gum.

A woman stood on the porch and waved. Liv parked her Lexus, the only thing of value she had left from her former life, and turned off the ignition. She gathered up her purse and the pillow she carried when traveling.

"Bree isn't here yet. We're waiting here on the porch in the shade."

The woman approached wearing a long pale green gauzy skirt and retro peasant style blouse that billowed at the shoulders. Her smile spread into her clear blue eyes. She had a sturdy figure and wore her long dark hair loose around her shoulders. Liv had always thought the style too young for a woman near her own age, but it worked for this woman. She reminded Liv of a gypsy.

"I'm Markova, but my friends call me Markie. Can I give you a hand with anything?"

"I'm Liv Zach...McKenna. McKenna," she repeated for emphasis. "I just have one bag. Thanks." Liv tucked the pillow under her arm and popped open the trunk to remove her suitcase. "Was I confused? I thought we were supposed to be here at four."

"We are. Bree must have gotten held up somewhere." Markie waited for Liv, then fell into step beside her. "This is a wonderful spot for a retreat. Don't you love the smell of the ocean?"

"Mmm. Yes." Truthfully, she could smell the ocean at home on Long Island. She had told herself the reason for this retreat was to have time to regroup and this was the most affordable way to do it. But if she were to be completely honest, she had just run away from home to hide for eight days.

Markie touched her arm. "Did you have a long drive?"

"About six hours." And Liv felt the last four in her muscles. It wasn't the drive that made her tense. It was life these days. Her body was in fight-or-flight mode most of the time. Probably, she assumed, even in sleep, if her restless nights and groggy mornings were any evidence. Even Markie's light touch caused her to startle.

"You must be tired." Markie held back to let Liv ascend the steps ahead of her. Another woman, rocking in a wicker chair, fanned herself with a magazine. "This is Andi Ryan," Markie said.

Andi offered a hand, which Liv accepted. "Liv McKenna."

"Hi. Have we met before?" Andi asked, studying Liv's face.

Liv pulled her hand away. "I don't think so." She smoothed her recently darkened and

shortened hair.

Andi shrugged. "You look familiar."

"I get that a lot." Liv heard the tremor in her voice and cleared her throat.

Unlike Markie, Andi was trim and petite, with short dark brown hair and hazel eyes. She wore form-fitting jeans and a snug T-shirt bearing an embroidered butterfly across the front. The outfit seemed a bit young for a woman over fifty. Liv ran a palm down her wrinkled khakis and plain white cotton blouse, feeling drab. Drab could be good, though. People didn't notice drab. It was like walking around in beige all of the time, able to become a part of the background, blend into the fabric. Disappear.

Markie sat in one of the high-backed wooden rockers and Liv took the other. "So Andi and I were just getting acquainted. Andi teaches school in Toms River, and I'm an artist. I live in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. What about you?"

"I work in a medical practice on Long Island."

"Doctor or nurse?" Markie asked.

"Neither, I'm afraid. I'm a receptionist. It must be wonderful to be an artist." In recent months, Liv had honed her skill of seamlessly changing the subject to steer the focus away from herself.

Markie shrugged. "It's all I know how to do."

Liv nodded. "What grade do you teach, Andi?"

"Sixth. I get them just before they turn." Andi tugged at the neckline of the t-shirt and blew down onto her chest.

"Turn?"

"Into the alien forms we call teenagers." Andi flagged the magazine in front of her. "Damned hot flashes. Where the devil is Bree? It has to be cooler inside the house."

Liv pulled the brochure about the retreat house from her purse. "I don't think so. According to this, there is no air conditioning. Just fans."

"What?" Andi bolted upright and reached over to snatch the brochure from Liv's fingers with such force, Liv blinked. "You have got to be kidding me. Oh, hell no. How did I miss that?" She fanned furiously with both the magazine and the brochure. "I'm going to die here."

"I know what you mean about hot flashes. I used to wake up in the middle of the night absolutely drenched. Get up and change my nightgown and the sheets. Sometimes twice. Have you tried phytoestrogens?" Markie asked.

"Phyto...what?" Andi wrinkled her forehead.

"Herbs. Natural estrogens. They really helped me. Soy, for example."

"You mean like in tofu? Blech. I can't swallow that stuff. It tastes like...well, there is no taste. Just texture. I could gag just thinking about it."

"You might try sage, then."

"Are you a homeopath?"

"Sort of. I prefer natural medicine, when possible. But you have to do what you think is best for you."

Liv sank back in her chair, letting herself fade from the conversation. She had developed a knack for becoming invisible while sitting right there in front of other people. A chameleon. If she were of a different culture, that could be her totem.

Andi glanced at her watch. "What are we going to do if this Bree doesn't show up? Maybe we should see if there are any vacancies at one of the motels in town. One with air conditioning."

Markie shrugged, seemingly unruffled. "I'm sure there's an explanation."

Liv stretched her legs and breathed in the ocean air. "I could sit right here all evening."

A plume of dust followed a sage green van up the driveway. The vehicle turned and lurched to a stop. A younger woman, probably early thirties, emerged. A soccer ball rolled out as she slid open the side door to retrieve a small suitcase. She set down her bag and chased the ball as it rolled down the sloping drive. After tossing the object back into the van, she shielded her eyes and gazed up at the house.

"Think that's Bree?" Andi asked.

The woman hesitated, then shoved her keys into a large purse and trekked up the drive to the porch, dragging the suitcase. She stopped at the bottom of the steps, curly red hair standing out in a wild halo, and with tiny hand-print smudges on her tan shorts and decorating her white tank top. "Hi." She breathed the greeting more than spoke it as if she had been holding her breath for a while.

"Hi," Markie said.

"Is this the women's retreat?"

"It's the New Beginnings retreat for women over fifty. I think you must be in the wrong place," Markie said.

The woman sighed. "No, I'm in the right place. I'm Cee Cee Carter." Her oversized canvas purse whomped against each step on an off-beat from the suitcase as she climbed up to join them.

"Have a seat. No one's here to open up yet." Andi motioned to the chair between herself and Markie.

Cee Cee dropped her purse onto the wooden floor with a clunk.

"What do you have in there?" Andi asked. "A Glock?"

"My kids like to hide stuff in my purse for me to find later. God only knows what's in there now." She bent and opened the canvas bag, removing a small metal Tonka dump truck—the source of the thunk—a tattered pink stuffed bunny, a half eaten banana, and a baggie of Cheerios.

"At least they packed you a lunch." Andi got up and paced, pulling the fabric of her shirt away from her body.

Cee Cee spit on a tissue and wiped furiously at a sticky-looking hand print on her left breast. "I gave the kids waffles for lunch. Now I feel like one of those fly strips."

"I remember those days." Liv smiled. "Fingerprints everywhere for years." She retreated into her memories, a luxury she didn't often afford herself. Sadness knifed her chest. She gave herself this one brief moment with Aaron when he was a baby. He loved to wear his food like body paint and would raise his little spattered arms when he had finished eating and shout, "Mama. Done."

Liv would wash him off before picking him up. Now she wished he would come to her covered in muck from head to toe, and she could walk into his open arms. She shook herself back to the present before she sank too far into the memory and the tears started.

"You don't look old enough to attend an over-fifty retreat," Markie said to the younger woman.

Cee Cee hesitated and then murmured, "I'm thirty-two."

Andi leaned forward. "Thirty-two? What are you doing here?"

"I...uh..." Cee Cee bit her lip. "My mother was registered. She couldn't make it, and since it was already paid for, I came. Ben—that's my husband—Ben and I have four kids. Sean

is nine, Benji is almost four, and the twin girls, Katie and Beth are eighteen months.” She blew at a strand of hair on her cheek. “I needed a break.”

“It’s good you came, then,” Markie said in a honey-smooth voice and with a kind smile.

Cee Cee looked up. “Really? You think I’ll be allowed to stay? I mean, I’m not fifty. I don’t want to disrupt the retreat for any of you.”

“Oh, please, disrupt,” Andi said. “Anything to take my mind off these damn heat surges. Hell will be a piece of cake after menopause. Are you sure there’s no air conditioning in there?” she asked, turning to Liv.

Liv nodded. “According to the brochure.” Liv was grateful for the distraction of Andi’s hot flashes and Cee Cee showing up. At least no one asked more questions of her. She willed herself to relax, rolling her shoulders to release the tension.

“Here’s comes another car,” Andi said.

They all watched as a shiny black Acura parked in the open space opposite the other four vehicles.

The driver climbed out and straightened her crisp white blouse that was neatly tucked into a pair of grey linen slacks. She was tall, maybe five-foot-ten, and wore her blond hair pulled back in a chignon, oozing class. She peered over the top of her sunglasses at the four of them, then straightened her shoulders and walked briskly up the drive. “Which of you is Bree Gilmore?”

“None of us,” Andi said. “We’re waiting for her.”

The new arrival glanced at her watch. “I was told to be here at four, and it’s four-forty-two now. I got delayed in traffic. Where is she?”

“We don’t know. You might want to have a seat.” Andi nodded toward the empty porch swing. “I’m Andi Ryan, by the way.”

“Julia Lane.” Julia stared at the swing and then at the women seated in the only chairs. Cee Cee jumped up. “I’ll take the swing, if you’d like to sit here.”

“Thank you.” Julia looped the strap of her purse over the arm of the vacated chair and sat, straight and stiff. “How long have you all been waiting?”

“I’ve been here since two-thirty.” Markie rearranged her skirt. “I came early to meditate on the beach and to commune with Gaia. I wanted to create a spiritual balance.”

Andi lifted her eyebrows and grinned. “I didn’t have anyone with whom to commune and, since I’m already balanced, I arrived at three-forty-five. And Liv got here shortly after I did. Then Cee Cee pulled in,” she said, nodding toward the younger woman. “We’re really not sure what happened to Bree.”

Julia pursed her lips. “Lovely. Are we just supposed to sit here and wait?”

“Seems that way.” Andi resumed fanning her blazing face with the magazine.

Markie removed a purple velvet pouch from a pocket in her skirt. “While we’re waiting, let me give you all a gift for the retreat. I took the opportunity on the beach to charge these crystals.” She offered each of the women a translucent pink shard of stone.

Andi turned the crystal over in her hand. “What is this?”

“Rose quartz. It promotes self-love and healing.”

Andi snorted. “I haven’t had to rely on self-love for a while, if you get my drift.”

“Oh, not that kind of self-love. Inner love and acceptance. Peace.” Markie smiled blissfully.

“Voodoo,” Julia said, handing the stone back to Markie.

Markie stared at the quartz in her palm, then shrugged and dropped it back into the

pouch.

“Thanks.” Cee Cee glanced at her purse and then tucked the stone into her pocket. “If I drop it in that abyss, I’ll never see it again. The thing’s like a black hole.”

Liv clutched the cool stone, enjoying the way its angular edges pressed into her palm. “Thank you,” she said to Markie. She found the other women to be warm, but Julia made the hairs on her arms prickle. She was rude and abrasive and, Liv thought, exuded an over-inflated sense of self-importance. Liv judged Julia as someone quick to judge. And she immediately felt remorse for having judged Julia at all, given what she herself had been through these past months.

“Does anyone have Bree’s cell phone number? We could call her,” Cee Cee suggested.

“I only have the office number,” Liv said. She glanced toward the front door. “Which will probably ring in there.”

Markie pushed up to her feet and descended the steps. “I’m going to look around. I’ll bet there’s a key hidden out here. Everyone hides a key in case of emergency.”

“You’re going to break in?” Julia stared down at her like a hawk eyeing prey.

“It’s not breaking in if you have a key.” Markie lifted rocks and planters to search beneath them.

Cee Cee joined her in the hunt. “We have a ceramic frog by the front steps where we hide a spare key.”

“I’m sure everyone’s fooled by that,” Julia muttered.

“Oh, lighten up,” Andi snapped. “It’s not like we’ve hatched a plan for murder. Yet.”

Julia blanched and stopped talking, but still managed to express an opinion with her sour expression. Liv watched the exchange with relief. Maybe Julia would be unlikable enough to keep the heat off of Liv. It had been bad enough being the pariah in her own social circles. Spending eight days in a house with four strangers and being the odd person out would be unbearable.

Cee Cee pushed on a large boulder. “Could someone give me a hand with this?”

Andi laughed. “If you can’t move it, I doubt anyone would hide a key under there.”

“Oh. Right. Good point.” Cee Cee returned to the porch and stared at the frame above the front door. “Some people put a spare key up above the door. Who’s the tallest?” She glanced around. “Julia?”

Julia glared as if Cee Cee had asked her to donate a kidney to a total stranger. “I am not participating in a break in. It’s against the law.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake.” Andi dragged a chair behind her and then climbed up on the seat. She had chosen the wicker rocker. It tilted precariously as she mounted it and stretched to reach the top of the ledge. “Bingo.” She held up a key. The chair rocked, and Andi grasped at air to keep from falling. Cee Cee steadied the chair while Liv reached to steady Andi.

“Thanks. All I need is to fall and break something,” Andi said. “Let’s see if this key works.”

“Stop.” The word wasn’t a request, it was a command.

They all turned to face Julia. Liv wondered if Julia may have been a prison warden at one time.

“What if there is an intrusion alarm?” Julia asked. “Have you even considered that possibility?”

Markie looked around. “I don’t think so. There are no signs in the windows or on the lawn. I say we go for it.” She climbed the steps.

Andi directed the key into the lock. “Don’t worry, Jules. We’ll tell the police you were an innocent bystander.”

“The name is Julia.”

“Sorry, Ju-li-a.” Andi turned the key and swung the door open. “We’re in, ladies. Oh, God. It’s stifling in here.” She led the procession into the house, turning on ceiling fans and opening windows as she went.

“Wow, look at this place.” Cee Cee stopped in the foyer and Liv nearly ran into her. “How beautiful, and it smells like cinnamon. What do think the name means? Syo-chain.”

“Shee-ock-awn,” Liv said. “It means ‘peace’.”

Cee Cee tilted her face toward Liv. “How did you know that?”

“I looked it up.” Liv settled her suitcase at the foot of the stairs. Liv was always Googling on the computer. Adam used to tease her that most women spent their time shopping online, and then said his checkbook should be grateful she only thirsted for knowledge. *His checkbook*. A familiar tiredness sucked the air out of her and her knees became weak. She wanted to lie down. Sleep had been her salvation much of the past year. “Do you think there’s a list of room assignments, or do we just find a room to settle in?”

“Let’s look around,” Andi said. “We can add snooping to our list of felonies.” She looked pointedly at Julia who ignored her.

They all startled when the phone rang.

“Maybe we should answer. It could be Bree.”

“Why would she call this phone when no one’s here?” Cee Cee asked.

“We’re here,” Andi said.

The answering machine kicked on. “Hello? Oh, I hope you ladies found the key and let yourselves in. This is Bree Gilmore. Hello?”

Markie picked up the phone. “Hi, Bree. This is Markova.” Pause. “Yes, we were wondering.” Pause. “Oh, my. I hope he’ll be okay.” Pause. “Yes, we will. Don’t worry about us. We’ll be fine.” Pause. “Okay, we’ll see you tomorrow.”

Markie set down the phone. “Bree’s brother was in a car accident last night in Baltimore. She’s still at the hospital waiting to see if he has to have surgery. She said there is plenty of food and that we should make ourselves at home for tonight. She hopes to be back by lunch tomorrow.”

“Is there a wine supply? Did she say?” Andi asked. “I need a drink.”

“Alcohol. Now there’s a solution for hot flashes,” Julia muttered.

Andi ignored the comment, her gaze directed on Markie.

“She didn’t say, but I’m sure if there is, we’ll find it. If there isn’t, we can go into town and pick up something,” Markie said. “Bree said she was glad we had the ingenuity to search for a key. She left in a hurry and didn’t have any of our cell numbers with her. She was about to call a neighbor and have him come and let us in. There are envelopes for each of us on her desk in the office next to the kitchen.”

The women trooped behind Markie. Five large manila envelopes were spread across the top of the oak desk, each bearing the name of a woman. Markie set hers aside and distributed the others. “Andi, here’s yours. Liv. Jules. Sorry, Jul-i-a. And...Ruth?” She gazed at Cee Cee. “I guess this is yours.”

“Ruth is my mom.” Cee Cee pressed the envelope to her chest as if it were a prize. “Thank you.”

As each woman opened her envelope to remove a key and a sheet of paper, Liv began to

laugh. All she could think of was the old TV show, *Mission Impossible*. The other women stared at her. It had been so long since Liv had allowed herself to just laugh—the gut-deep, laugh-until-you-cry laughter that clears the bits of worry and emotion one stores inside. Tears blurred her vision. She had no doubt it was anxiety rolling out of her, but it felt good all the same.

“Want to share the joke with the rest of us?” Andi asked.

“I’m sorry. I was thinking about *Mission Impossible*.” She lowered her voice. “Your mission, should you accept it...”

“I loved that show,” Markie said. “Hey, do you think these instructions will self-destruct in ten seconds?”

“I hope not. I need to know where to find the alcohol.” Andi turned the page over and then back again. “It’s not here.”

“Invisible ink,” Markie said. And she and Liv both laughed and snorted.

Julia shook her head and sighed with a tone of disgust.

Cee-Cee blinked in confusion.

Liv liked Markie. She was pleasant, soft-spoken, and earthy—the result of the hippie era colliding with new age philosophies. Andi was okay, too. A bit irritable, but that was understandable. She probably wasn’t getting much sleep. Liv liked the fact that Andi was outspoken—no hidden agenda there. Cee Cee tugged at Liv’s heart. She reminded her of Lauren, her own daughter, who had married and moved to London two months earlier. Liv missed her terribly. Cee Cee, still youthful and of child-bearing age, would be a breath of fresh air in this group. Then there was Julia. Liv drew in a breath and exhaled, releasing bad karma. If she were still a practicing Catholic, she would have made the sign of the cross.

“Here’s a room list.” Julia picked up a paper from the desk. “I’m in the Rose Room. God, I hope it’s not pink.” She handed the list to Andi and strode back toward the foyer.

“Maybe the room was named for a black rose,” Andi said, and they all chuckled. “Okay, I’m going to find the Lavender Room, and then I’ll see about dinner.”

“I love to cook. I’ll help,” Cee Cee offered.

Each woman set off with her room assignment and luggage in hand.

Liv found the Jasmine Room on the eastern end of the house on the third floor. The window afforded a view of the water. Pale yellow walls and a white ceiling welcomed her like one of those cartoon smiley faces. A spread on the bed bore a matching white and yellow floral design. Everything about the cheery room stood in sharp contrast to Liv’s insides. The medication her doctor had prescribed helped, but she still had moments of anxiety that took her feet out from under her.

The laughing jag earlier had felt good, but she knew it was prompted by stress and was nothing more than a release bordering on hysteria. Still, it was better than sobbing or throwing things. A week ago, she had come to the realization that she and Adam had both received prison sentences. He was serving his behind bars in a white collar facility in upstate New York, which may actually be easier than her sentence served in public. At least in jail, the inmates were on equal ground. Liv had learned how quickly friends could become enemies or, even worse, indifferent strangers. Her world had crumbled so fast, she had barely had time to duck for cover.

She opened the window and stood gazing out at the calm green waters of the Atlantic Ocean. She breathed in and exhaled, repeating the process a few times—a technique taught by her therapist and intended to help her relax. It was working. That and the Lexapro. And maybe this place. She shoved her fingers into her pocket and withdrew the pale pink crystal. She had been raised with strict religious teaching, but right now she would take all the help the universe

could offer. After holding the glass up to the light, she placed the quartz on the windowsill with the hope it would dispel the self-loathing that gnawed at her.

With her divorce final, her maiden name restored, and a new haircut and color, Liv was starting to find a new identity. That's what had drawn her to this retreat—*Embracing the New You: Reinventing Yourself After Fifty*.

She picked up the booklet that lay on the nightstand beside the bed. The cover of the brochure bore the image of a Celtic knot and the word *Síocháin*. A yellow sticky note read: *Welcome, Liv! You've arrived!*