

CHAPTER 1

Everyone hated a fat woman, but none more than she hated herself.

Alice knew this to be true. Today's proof? She, along with six other substantial women, stood in the parking lot avoiding each other, as though their abundance of flesh might transfer from body to body, despite all waiting to board the bus for the same reason: "the unique opportunity to spend an entire month exploring ways to bring yourself into balance."

Balance, as written in the *Waisted* brochure, implied weighing less. The virtually memorized pamphlet tucked in Alice's jeans pocket promised a new life. The women scuffled in the leaves in the parking lot of a designated Dunkin' Donuts—a meeting place Alice suspected, for no good reason, had been chosen with deliberate irony. She pushed away thoughts of mean-spirited motivation, chalking up her suspicion to nerves and rising hints of buyer's remorse.

The thick smell of donuts blew around with the scent of fall leaves. As Alice shuffled from her right to left foot, pulling her suede jacket tight against the wind, a redheaded white woman approached with an outstretched hand.

"I'm Daphne." Being much shorter, she had to look up at Alice. "And nervous as hell."

Before Alice could do more than shake Daphne's hand, a uniformed woman came into view, self-importance emanating from her stiff shoulders to the black pen she clicked on and off.

"No talking, ladies. Line up, tell me who you are, and then march on board." She checked names against a paper fastened to a red clipboard. One at a time, the women climbed the steps of a repurposed school bus.

After the last participant dragged her crazy-wide thighs up the stairs as though this ascension were an Olympian event, the woman in charge marched aboard.

“Listen up. I’m the driver. Here are your rules.” Though she wore no cap, an invisible one seemed perched on her head. “You will have five minutes for any last texts or emails that you wish to send. After that, you will give me your cell phones and wallets. Tell your loved ones you’ll speak to them in four weeks. Until that time—”

Daphne, her voice breaking, raised her hand. “What if—”

The stern woman held up a hand. “No exceptions will be made. Every one of you signed agreements containing this information. You will be allowed to write letters. This is not meant as punishment; it’s your first step in freedom from your past. From this moment on, you concentrate on yourselves and no one else.”

Alice stared at her phone, pulled up the keyboard, and then closed the screen. She repeated the exercise three times until shutting off the device. She’d already sent all the explanations to her husband that she could muster. To her parents as well. Additional messages wouldn’t help justify her actions.

The driver walked down the aisle, hand out. When receiving each phone, she peeled off a sticker—a small name tag, it turned out—and placed it on the back of the device. “To ensure you get the right phone back,” she explained.

After handing over her phone, Alice unfolded the creased and much-read brochure.

“Waisted: Where You Discover You Can,” the luminous cover announced.

A photo of a sprawling mansion, rays of sun shining through clouds and dappling the windows with sparkling promise, covered the front. Adirondack chairs dotted the green lawn. Giant sunflowers waved from a garden in the distance. Muscular women with strong-looking legs lay on straw mats.

An avalanche of fancy words for slimming down drew her, once again, like a magic potion. Idealized photos revealed attractive, plump women in yoga positions, diving into a pool, and sitting cross-legged in circles. Alice read again the quote she’d highlighted in yellow. “‘If there is no struggle, there is no progress.’—Frederick Douglass.”

She pushed away thoughts about the brief paragraph regarding filming for educational purposes.

None of the women sat far from the front of the bus, though nobody shared any of the bench seats. They only darted covert glances at one another. As though imitating the brochure, they formed a virtual UNICEF poster of heavy women: white, black, Hispanic, Korean, and Indian. And then there was Alice, representing mixed race, though who knew into which category they'd slotted her.

Alice tried to ignore her period cramps and the nausea brought on by exhaust fumes. Perhaps the first test of fortitude "as you embark upon a journey of inner exploration to reevaluate your lives and learn how the mind-body connection affects your body," was this bumpy ride to the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. After traveling for hours, Alice wanted to separate from both her outer and inner explorers. Sleep threatened to overtake her, the day having begun with an early train ride from Boston to Springfield.

Alice needed food, water, and ibuprofen.

The women surrounding her were dressed as though they were headed to a brunch attended by friends they wanted to impress. Without phones, zoning out with headphones and a playlist was impossible. A dark-skinned woman with red glasses clutched an unread paperback, but most of them simply gazed out the window.

After three hours, they left the highway and turned onto a two-lane state road. Neither homes nor businesses appeared on either side. The area seemed deserted.

The driver made a sharp left, though no identifying marker beckoned from anywhere, and steered the bus up a narrow paved road. After driving up as though on the ascent of a roller coaster, the ride evened out as the road gave way to tamped-down dirt. They slowed to a crawl along a single-lane road bordered by a low rock wall until reaching an open area fenced in by barbed wire. Here the bus entered a road bisecting a magnificent field strewn with fiery maple leaves until resuming its journey to the top of a long circular driveway.

Alice put a hand to her heart as the vehicle shuddered to a stop. From this vantage point, high up a mountain, she beheld the breathtaking view: multiple valleys colored by a riot of October colors.

"You've arrived." The driver's sardonic grin unnerved Alice. "Enjoy."

Across two football fields' worth of grass loomed a yellow mansion, topped with a copper-topped cupolaed roof. A vast white porch curved around the building.

The women exited the bus and walked the long brick path leading to a set of broad perfectly painted brown stairs.

Hanging from a porch beam swung a cryptic wooden sign.

Welcome to Privation.