

Prologue

She hadn't meant to kill him. She remembers it as still photographs in motion, like a flip book: the struggle, reaching for something—anything—on the mantle, the surprisingly soft thump as the leaded crystal connected with his skull, the heavy finality of his body slumping on the wood floor. She remembers how she'd thought bone should be harder, stronger, like steel, and how it seemed too easy to knock out a man. She remembers Chris's face, long and white, as he stood in the doorway and stared at the body in the living room. His mouth opened, the baseball bat hanging like a failed punch line at his side. He said something—she doesn't remember what—and she shrugged, thinking he was being melodramatic.

She remembers reaching for the phone and telling Chris to get some water. She'd seen that in the movies, that cold water would wake an unconscious person. She remembers Chris's hand on her wrist, lowering the phone back into the cradle with a barely audible click. It's incredible how such a small sound could have such a resonating effect, cleanly dividing their lives in half. After all, it was just a click, like the soft closing of a door. Or the dry-firing of a gun.

CHAPTER ONE

Maggie

The clack of fingers tapping the keyboard kept beat with the top-forty Muzak playing at low volume. The combination comforted Maggie, the tap-tap-tap of a tinny bass line beat. Sometimes, when a song came on the car radio that Maggie heard at least twice a day, she mentally added the clicking, like a calming metronome.

“Riley Martin is here. She wants you, not me.” Linda Crawford rapped her orthopedic shoe gently against Maggie’s chair, her lip curled.

Maggie studied her coworker, the only other nurse in the pediatrician’s office. Linda was shaped like a beach ball, with a mound of permed blond hair and a permanent sneer. She was in her fifties, and a chronic shoulder injury gave her the wafting odor of IcyHot. Maggie wasn’t surprised most of the kids asked for her instead. She stood and took the file from Linda’s outstretched hand. Quick, easy last appointment of the day.

In the examination room, Riley, a towheaded, spectacled five-year-old, sat giggling on the table. Her father, tall and broad, stood next to her and held her hand. Maggie saw the unabashed love of fathers for their little girls every day, but she’d learned to push down the quick stab in her center. The most staid of men folded like circus performers at the prodding of a child, but the girls, more than the boys, had that ignition effect. The girls, more than the boys, seemed to take that for granted.

“Hi, Riley. Gearing up for kindergarten?” Maggie donned a pair of rubber gloves and opened the file, scanning for due vaccinations.

“Yes. But Markie isn’t going with me to kindergarten. Daddy says I have to leave him home.” A tired, well-worn brown rabbit sat in her lap, and she rubbed the petal pink silk on his inner ear.

“Ah, well, you know what? I heard rabbits are really very smart. I don’t think they even need kindergarten!” Maggie gathered a pre-filled syringe, tapped it once, and met Mr. Martin’s gaze over Riley’s head. He gave her a wry grin as she swabbed Riley’s arm with alcohol. “Just a DTaP today, no big deal. It’s not even a real shot, just a little booster. Riley, tell me, are you going on vacation this year?”

Riley launched into a long-winded description of Disney World, and while she was talking, Maggie snuck the needle into her bicep. As Maggie pushed the plunger down gently, Riley gasped.

Maggie laughed. “You barely noticed it! It was the smallest pinch. I told you, just a booster!” She pinched Riley’s chin and slipped a Band-Aid over the puncture wound.

As Maggie removed her gloves and tossed them in the trash, she caught Pete Martin’s eye. He gave her a wink. She smiled back, but as she left the exam room, she rolled her eyes. Pete Martin was over six feet tall, with salt and pepper hair and a quick, easy smile that he showered on women all over town.

She tossed Riley’s folder in the To-be-filed bin. Penelope, one of the young, blond twenty-something receptionists, snatched it up. She was sucking on a lollipop, filling the office with the syrupy, juvenile perfume of a grape Blow Pop.

“Riley didn’t ask for you. Pete did.” She twisted her mouth and raised her eyebrows, and Maggie couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh, come on. I swear, Fridays are like well-visit Dad day.”

Maggie shook her head as she turned off her computer for the day. The wall clock above her desk read 3:55. She heard Charlene’s words in the back of her mind. *Pretty girls know they’re pretty.* Her mother’s voice had a tendency to sneak into Maggie’s consciousness at inopportune moments, a measured timbre with a cultivated borderline British accent that Maggie abhorred. Whenever Charlene spoke, Maggie wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her. *You were born and raised in New Jersey, home of the worst accent in America.* “Good night, Penelope.”

“I’m not far behind you.” She wagged her fingers in Maggie’s direction and packed up her bag. “Have a good weekend!”

Maggie waved to Linda, hunched over her computer, and stopped in the doorway of Dr. Tantella’s office to say good night. He was so engrossed in the mounds of paper on his desk, he gave her a noncommittal grunt and a quick dismissive flick of his wrist.

As she opened the door to her black Volkswagen and climbed into the driver’s seat, Maggie thought about Penelope’s words. She’d heard it before, though not usually so matter-of-fact. Penelope, with her soup-can blond curls and rounded doe eyes, had probably heard the same things growing up and viewed Maggie as a sort of kin. Maggie wondered if Penelope had a Charlene whispering in her ear. *Shhh, don’t protest, just say thank you.*

The worst part was, Maggie often found her mother was right. Pretty girls *do* know they’re pretty. Even if they’re never told or they never see it in a mirror, the world teaches them. People give them free coffee and appreciative smiles, hold open doors and lend them

quarters at the vending machine. She tied her long blond hair in a ponytail and started the car. She was digging in her purse for gum when she heard a rap on the window. Her head snapped up, and for a second, all she saw was the white, straight-toothed smile of Pete Martin. She pressed the button to roll down her window.

“I just wanted to say thanks for being so nice. To Riley.” His voice, smooth as butter, filled the car as he leaned in her open window. He smelled sharp, like citrus.

Maggie’s finger twitched over the *up* button. “No problem. She’s a lovely girl.”

“Last appointment of the day?”

“Yep, headed home. Have a good night.”

“Well, we have to bring Riley’s brother in next week. Will you be in on Wednesday?”

“I’m here every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, Mr. Martin.”

“You can call me Pete, you know.”

“Dr. Tantella insists on last names. It draws a line, I guess.” She gave a shrug and a polite, thin-lipped smile.

“Okay, then I’ll see you next Wednesday.” He backed up and held up his hand in a friendly half-wave.

Maggie rolled up her window and watched him jog back to his car. *Yes, pretty girls know they’re pretty. They know because the world tells them.*

“Chris!” Maggie called as the door slammed behind her.

The house was empty. He’d been avoiding her, staying later at work, not returning her text messages. In the quiet, when he wasn’t there to crowd her thoughts or flip her emotions,

she acknowledged that she didn't blame him. Only in his absence could she admit her role in their growing divide.

The irony was, in his absence, she loved him. She loved the way he'd pause in the kitchen doorway, leaning against the molding, to watch her cook dinner—when she did. She loved the gentle slope of his neck into his shoulder and the muscle that had formed there from years of manual labor. She loved his dark, curly hair and green eyes, a striking contrast to his wicked, toothy smile. The devil's smile, Maggie's sister had always called it. Because when he flashed it, he could do “whatever the devil he pleased.”

Maggie loved the slow way he moved through life, his mind chronicling what he didn't say, the way he never rushed to fill silence. His shyness was often mistaken by strangers—or Charlene and Phillip—for stupidity, but she knew better. In his absence, she loved him. In his presence, she found that she struggled to like him anymore.

Forgiveness is a skill one learns only by being deeply hurt. Charlene had murmured that as she folded Phillip's golf shirts into an aluminum Rimowa. The memory startled Maggie.

She picked up her cell phone and texted Chris. *Coming home for dinner?*

Not *when*; she knew better. It was Friday, and Maggie felt restless, a pulsing in her chest, and a thickness in her throat. She wandered the house.

Before she could change her mind, she sent him another message. *Do you want to go to Anabelle's?*

Then she waited. Anabelle's, on their side of the Susquehanna, in Harrisburg city, was a small Italian BYOB they had discovered years earlier. It had only ten tables, and one waiter who took their order with only a head nod, never writing anything down. They'd often wondered if

he could speak English. They'd fallen in love with the atmosphere, but through the years, they'd gone back for the cannelloni. They called it *their place*.

She opened the fridge and closed it. Unloaded the dishwasher, folded a load of whites, and at eight, she texted Mika. *Where are you guys?*

Unlike Chris, Mika texted back immediately. *At the hut, come meet us!!!!*

She noticed her texts to Chris had gone unread. The pulsing edginess in her chest bloomed into anger. She wondered where and what he was doing. *Tracy*. The word stuck in the back of her throat. Until Tracy, she hadn't known words could taste like anything, but *Tracy* always tasted like whiskey—a thin, caustic Wild Turkey. Bottom shelf.

Maggie grabbed a black shirt with a plunging neckline and matched it with a pair of skinny jeans. Wardrobe of the non-mom, because that's what she was and probably would be forever. Not a mom. Her belly was flat from not bearing children. Her skin, never stretched, was a smooth expanse of peach. Painted toenails, impeccable manicures, bikini waxes, and expensive haircuts were the things that had replaced child-rearing.

Helen and Mika were both single, so their Friday and Saturday nights were for finding dates. Maggie and Mika were freshman roommates, a haphazard pairing that rarely worked. In their case, it was kismet—two similar souls. Mika was shorter and slighter than Maggie, but they both emanated the cool chill of pretty girls.

They had tried to join the same sorority their sophomore year, but neither girl was selected during rush. Later, Mika, who'd always had more grit than Maggie, found one of the sisters drunk at a fraternity party and convinced her to say why. Apparently the bubbly, friendly

blondes of Zeta Omega had thought them *snobs*. Maybe that was true for Mika, whose confidence never seemed to falter. She drifted through life as though she was doing the world a favor by being there. But Maggie just never knew the right thing to say, choosing instead to say nothing.

Maggie joined Mika and Helen every other week, although lately, when she and Chris got a movie and made popcorn, she found herself thinking about what the girls were doing, which guys they were talking to, or what numbers they were getting.

By the time Maggie got there, the Hut was jumping with throngs of sweaty twenty-somethings dancing to pulsing, loud music. The rough floor, in dire need of a refinish, was slick with spilt beer, and the air smelled like wet wood. The walls were adorned with neon beer signs, framed newspaper articles about local high school football heroes, a large mounted buck's head, and random state license plates. The tension in Maggie's shoulders released, and she closed her eyes. *Sometimes a girl just needs the comfort of her favorite dive bar.* She found Mika at their usual table. Helen was in the bathroom.

Mika warned, "She's in rare form tonight."

"Why?"

Mika shrugged. Helen had been a transplant to their all girls' college, and she'd become Maggie's biology lab partner. Helen was too smart for her own good and, like them, found herself nearly friendless at twenty years old, a by-product of being raised alone by an iron-fisted grandmother. Helen drank too much and slept with strange men on a regular basis, a practice that started in college and continued longer than it should have. They made an unlikely threesome.

Maggie looked around the room and made eye contact with a tall, broad-shouldered man next to the pool tables. He smiled slowly, and her heart thumped. *This is why I come here. To*

feel loved. Instantly she pushed the thought down. *Well, that's silly.* Her phone buzzed in her back pocket, and when she pulled it out, Chris's text showed on her locked display.

Just got this, sorry. Went out after work with the crew. Should I come home now?

She made a disgusted sound and tossed the phone into her purse without unlocking it. The text would show to Chris as unread. That seemed to be their pattern: half-hearted overtures that fell flat between them, the failure itself compounding resentment. *How long can you chip away at something until it finally breaks?*

Maggie tapped the table and then shoved herself up. "Do you want another drink?"

When Mika shook her head, Maggie turned, colliding into someone. She looked up, meeting the stranger's gaze. He gave her the same slow, sexy grin. *Now that's a devil's smile.*

"I'm Logan," he said. Instead of shaking her hand, he touched her arm on the pretense of leaning in to make himself heard over the music. He smelled like vanilla and something earthy, like musk.

Chris always smelled of cologne. *Well, when he doesn't smell of perfume.* She wrinkled her nose at the thought.

"Something I said?" asked Logan, raising his eyebrows.

Maggie shook her head, vowing to put Chris out of her mind for a few hours. She motioned for Logan to accompany her to the bar. She held up two fingers to the bartender. He pushed two beer bottles, slick with sweat, across the scratched wood top. She took a long pull from hers, and Logan watched her. She liked how she felt, showing off for a man.

Logan gave her a lazy grin and tossed his credit card down on the bar. "You're married?" He held her left hand and gently tapped her diamond ring. His hand was warm and soft, and it lingered, his thumb running up and down her palm until she pulled away.

“Yes... but he’s... we’re...” She couldn’t explain what she didn’t understand. “He cheated on me. We’re not the greatest anymore.”

“When did this happen?” Logan asked.

It struck her as funny that they were having an incredibly intimate conversation at full volume, trying to be heard over the thrumming beat. “Two years ago.” She shrugged. *Eh, no big deal. My husband slept with his secretary. Of all the fucking clichés.*

“I’ll bet he regrets that.” Logan leaned in.

His dark hair tickled her cheek, his breath a sugary combination of beer and peppermint. For a moment, Maggie thought about what it would be like to kiss him. About how that beer and peppermint would pop on her tongue, sweet and bitter. About how hard his chest would feel naked under her nails as they formed half-moon indentations in his skin. *Does he have chest hair like Chris does?*

“If he did, he didn’t show it.” She waved her hand around in a circle. *Change the subject.*

But Logan didn’t change the subject. “Why would anyone cheat on you?”

The pick-up line was contrived, and she rolled her eyes. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Oh, you’re beautiful. But I think you know that.”

“Don’t you know? For every beautiful woman, there’s a man out there who’s sick and tired of putting up with her shit.”

And that was how it all started.

The texts came at all hours of the day and night. With each trill of her phone, she’d smile. Chris never questioned her, either because he didn’t care or because he assumed it was Helen or Mika.

At first they were generic: *I miss your laugh* or *I want to see you* or *I want to kiss you*. Later, after she'd started confiding in him: *I hate that you're alone again tonight* or *does Chris know how lucky he is?*

That night at the bar, they hadn't kissed. Flirted, yes. Technically, had Maggie cheated on her husband? No. But she felt like a kid again, sending notes in junior high. Back before cell phones, a folded note would make its way across the room, and she had known it was for her. Scrawled in boyish handwriting was *Meet me after school*. Memories of fumbling kisses, with her back against the rough brick school, and the inexperienced thrusting of tongues that made her gag.

Now the boy was Logan, and the idea was tantalizing. She thought about that constantly, the initial contact of a first kiss and the soft give of his lower lip between her teeth. She thought about the deep white scar under his chin. *Where had he gotten it?* She wanted to run her fingernail along the raised flesh as her lips grazed the hollow between his neck and his ear, his breath hot on her cheek.

She saved all the texts in a file on her phone but deleted them from her incoming messages, just in case. She didn't even remember giving Logan her number, but both Helen and Mika had denied having any part in that. Maggie chalked it up to having too much to drink.

When the first one had come, it said, *Hello, beautiful. I'm not sick of you. In fact, I can't get you off my mind.*

Her palms had sweat, not with excitement, but with fear. *Who the hell wrote that?* Then, with a flash, she remembered and wrote back. *I'm spoken for, you know. Not very gentlemanly.*

He'd replied, *I'm not having very gentlemanly thoughts about you.*

And much later: *Can we meet up again?*

That one gave her pause because she had no plans to avenge Chris's affair. After a year of marriage counseling, they had decided to move forward, not back.

Dr. Deets's words came back to her. "You can't change the past, but you can change how your past impacts your future."

She remembered the family counselor's small, almost childlike frame folded into an oversized red leather chair, his thin legs effeminately crossed. His relentless throat clearing and nasally, know-it-all drone had made Maggie's eye twitch. He talked about control and loss of control. She waved him off and refused to go back. *Pompous. Arrogant.*

The idea of seeing Logan again sent a current through her spine and down her legs.

Maybe? Let's just chat for now.

Tease.

She would wonder later what would have happened if she hadn't played with him. But she was having too much fun.

"Right, honey?" Chris was looking at Maggie, his hand on her knee. His voice brought her back to the present.

He and Maggie were at the nursing home, visiting Chris's mom, Gale, like they did every Sunday. Five years earlier, Gale had been the victim of a stroke that left her mostly paralyzed and mute. Chris's dad had already died in a car accident, so his mom was all he had left.

"What? I'm sorry." Maggie shook her head, loosening the cobwebs.

Gale slumped sideways in her wheelchair, her white hair a patchy halo of fuzz that barely covered the crown of her head. She always wore the same white dressing gown and peep-toed bedroom slippers, her toenails a shocking shade of pink that never seemed to fade or chip.

Maggie spent a large part of every visit analyzing her toenail polish. What was it that made it so resilient? The lack of any foot activity? That must have something to do with it. She couldn't figure out who painted them. The nurses? Seemed unlikely with their proficient manner, clipped sentences, and clicking pens.

Chris laughed heartily, phony and loud. "Your head is in the clouds lately! I was telling Ma that we'd talked about trying for another baby."

Her head snapped up. "What? We never said that. Chris, she can't hear you anyway." She regretted saying that when his face transformed and hardened with... What? Anger, embarrassment?

Then he said softly, to her, not his mom, "We did say that, a few weeks ago. Remember?"

Chris had come home from happy hour one Friday night, half-drunk on whiskey and talking a mile a minute. If she hadn't known him, she would have sworn he was on something. He insisted that he could tell that that time would be different; they would get pregnant and the baby would live. She nodded while she made dinner, sick to death of the conversation. He pressed against her backside, his hand sliding up the front of her shirt to clumsily fondle her breast. As if sex was in their rotation. The initiative was whiskey fueled, and that pissed her off. She shrugged him off until he stomped away, angry at her, angry at the world.

"Now isn't the time to talk about this." Maggie blew out a breath, and Gale moaned softly from her chair—not out of pain or need but because that was just what Gale did.

When they got up to leave, they mechanically kissed her cheek good-bye, and the nurse wheeled her away. Back to her room or maybe to dinner. They didn't ask, and no one told them.

"We did say we would try again soon," he said about five minutes into the drive home.

He'd rested his right hand on the console between them, and Maggie stared at it, thinking about how she used to love his hands. Large with square, neatly trimmed nails. For a second, she remembered how his hands used to feel on her body.

"We didn't say that, Chris, you said that. You were drunk and wanted to get laid. Which is disgusting that you would use a baby to get laid."

"Okay, well first," he began, his jaw working, "it has been a ridiculously long time. Second, I had no intention of 'using' a baby. Yes, I was drunk, but the alcohol made me say what I really want."

"You really want to try for another baby?" Maggie was incredulous. Hadn't that fight ended over a year ago, when they'd lost the fourth one?

"Yes. I do."

Maggie listened to the steady hum of the wheels on the highway. As they pulled in the driveway, he opened his mouth. Maggie held her breath, the air in the car thick with unmet expectations. Her phone trilled. She picked it up and looked at the screen.

What are you wearing?

She smiled and typed back. Chris glanced over, but the spell was broken, the wall resurrected. Maggie tapped his hand lightly before climbing out of the car.

"Pizza?" she asked, and he nodded. That was their Sunday ritual.