

CHAPTER ONE

The candles have burned down to nothing and neither of them has bothered to replace them.

Maggie doesn't mind. She likes the kitchen like this, low light, dishes still on the table, David's tie already off and slung over the back of his chair, his sleeves rolled to the elbow like he's settling in for the night instead of finishing up. Outside, the neighborhood is doing what it always does at this hour, going quiet block by block, porch lights clicking on in sequence like a countdown, somebody's sprinkler ticking against a fence two yards over. It's the kind of street her mother approved of on sight, the kind with a homeowners association and a very specific opinion about mailbox color, and Maggie used to find that suffocating before she found it, unexpectedly, kind of sweet. Safe. A place David wanted, and so a place she'd wanted too, once she let herself.

"Girl or boy, I still think Sunday," David says, apropos of nothing, and Maggie throws a piece of bread at him across the table.

"You said that about last week's game too."

"I have a system."

"You have a guess with a nice jacket on."

"It's not a guess. It's an instinct." He catches the bread out of the air and eats it, entirely unbothered, grinning at her the way he's grinned at her since their second date, back when she still half expected him to get bored of her family's dinners and their endless unspoken rules about which fork and which topics. He never did. If anything he'd leaned into it, learned her mother's rules better than Maggie herself had, disarmed Eleanor Stockton within two visits with nothing but good manners and a genuine, unshakeable calm that made her family's careful world feel, for the first time in Maggie's life, survivable.

"Instincts don't lie, Mags."

"Your instincts told you the Sox would win the pennant in April."

"One bad call in an otherwise flawless record."

"You called the Herrera trade a disaster."

"It was a disaster. For eleven days. Then it wasn't. Doesn't count against me."

"Everything counts against you. That's how records work."

"Harsh, coming from the woman currently eating my leftover risotto."

She looks down at her plate, caught, and he laughs, delighted with himself in a way she has never once found tiring in six years, the specific delight of a man who likes being married to someone sharp enough to keep up with him.

Dinner is long finished, plates pushed aside, and this is her favorite part of any night lately, the after, when it's just candle wax and his hand finding its way to the curve of her stomach like it's greeting somebody it already loves. The baby kicks, hard, right under his palm, and David laughs again, delighted, the same delighted every single time even though it's happened a hundred times now and will happen a hundred more before March.

"She agrees with me," he says. "Sunday."

"She has no idea what day it is. She doesn't even know what a day is."

"Smartest kid in the world and she already agrees with her dad. Explain that."

"Luck."

"Genetics."

"You're impossible."

"You married impossible. On purpose. In front of witnesses." He leans across the table, kisses her, unhurried, like they have every night in the world left to spend exactly like this one. "Six months ago today, actually."

"You remembered."

"I have a system for that too."

"Your systems are getting suspiciously good."

"I've had good material to work with." His thumb traces slow, absent circles against her stomach, and for a moment neither of them says anything at all, just sits in the quiet, in the candle wax and the settling house and the small, perfect ordinariness of a Tuesday that neither of them has any reason yet to know is the last one they'll ever get.

She's still laughing, still halfway through telling him his system needs work, when the back door comes off its hinges.

It doesn't creak. Doesn't give any warning at all. One second it's a door, ordinary and closed, and the next it simply stops existing, wood and metal shrieking apart in a sound too big for eleven o'clock on a Tuesday, too big for their kitchen, too big for anything in the entire careful architecture of their life.

David is up out of his chair before Maggie's mind catches up to what's happening, faster than she's ever seen him move, putting his body between her and the sound without a single second of hesitation, like some animal part of him already understood, before his conscious mind did, exactly what was required of him in this moment.

There isn't time to be afraid. That's the part nobody ever tells you, the part none of the movies get right. Fear needs a beat to build in, a runway, some moment of dawning realization before it takes hold. There is no beat here. There is only what happens, arriving all at once, faster than any single emotion could keep pace with.

Three men come through where the door used to be. Maybe four. The number will slide in Maggie's memory for the rest of her life, never quite settling, never quite still, no matter how many times a detective asks her to try to pin it down.

"Where's the safe," one of them says, flat, bored, like this is a formality he's required to observe before getting to the part he actually came for.

David doesn't answer that. David says her name instead, one syllable, sharp, a warning or a promise or both at once, and it will be the last full word she ever hears him say.

The bat comes out of the dark already swinging.

It's wrapped tight in barbed wire, and for one obscene half second the wire catches the kitchen light, glints, almost pretty, before it connects with the side of David's skull with a sound Maggie has no words for, not then, not ever, a wet and final sound that ends every single thing she thought she knew about the shape of the rest of her life. He goes down wrong, all at once, no bracing, no catching himself, because there is nothing left in that half of his head to tell the rest of his body how to fall.

Blood and worse hit the wall behind him in a pattern she will see, unwanted, behind her closed eyes for the rest of however long she has left to live.

She doesn't scream.

She'll wonder about that later, in the hospital, in the long gray months after, why the scream never came, and she'll never fully land on an answer except that maybe some very old, very deep part of her already understood, in that instant, that screaming was a thing for a world where screaming still helped anybody.

A hand closes hard in her hair.

She's on the kitchen floor before she registers being pulled there, cheek against tile that was warm from the oven an hour ago and is already going cold, and a boot finds her stomach once, twice, someone's voice shouting something about the safe, the jewelry, where is it, and she cannot answer because David handled that, David always handled that, and the word *handled* arrives in her mind already past tense, and she doesn't understand yet, not fully, why it sounds so final.

She curls around the only thing worth curling around.

It isn't enough. It was never going to be enough. Not her money, not her name, not six years spent learning precisely how the human body breaks and precisely how to stop it from breaking further, none of it amounts to anything at all against a boot and a barbed wire bat and men who have clearly done this before, who move through her home with the bored efficiency of people executing a job rather than committing a crime. One of them is already upstairs, she can hear it, drawers being pulled and dumped, methodical, unhurried, like time itself has agreed to slow down and give them exactly as long as they need.

Somewhere very far away, she can already smell smoke.

Heat arrives before flame does. Then the orange, crawling fast up the hallway wall like it's in a hurry to finish whatever the bat started, and someone is dragging her, or she's crawling, she genuinely doesn't know which and will never know which, out through a door that used to open onto the garden she planted herself the spring they moved in, tomato plants she'll never harvest, a trellis David built badly and lovingly on a Saturday afternoon two summers

ago, the two of them arguing cheerfully about whether it was level while the neighbor's dog watched from the fence line.

Grass. Cold, ordinary grass, under a sky gone the wrong color where her roof used to be.

David doesn't come out behind her.

She waits. She keeps waiting long after waiting stops meaning anything, past the point where hope is a reasonable thing to still be holding onto, watching orange light climb higher against a black sky, listening to sirens that seem to take a lifetime to arrive and then arrive all at once, until a stranger in a uniform is kneeling over her, saying words that don't make it all the way into her, and somewhere beneath ribs that are very clearly, very obviously broken, something else goes still that had been moving only minutes before and isn't moving anymore. A small, private earthquake nobody standing over her can see or measure.

She doesn't remember the ambulance.

She wakes two days later in a room that smells like antiseptic and cut flowers somebody sent out of obligation rather than comfort, machines keeping soft, patient time somewhere to her left, and there is a doctor standing at the foot of her bed who won't quite meet her eyes, professional courtesy failing him in a way it has clearly never failed him before. He is young. Younger than her, maybe. He has the posture of a man who has delivered difficult news dozens of times and has never once gotten used to it, and something about that, absurdly, makes her want to comfort him instead of the other way around.

Before he says a single word, Maggie Stockton already knows.

There is no version of whatever comes out of his mouth next that leaves her still pregnant. She'd known it on the grass, under that wrong colored sky, in the exact instant that small internal earthquake went still and didn't start again. Her body had told her the truth long before any doctor found the nerve to.

She closes her eyes and waits for him to say it anyway, because apparently that's the job now, hers and his both. Waiting for the rest of the world to slowly, carefully, professionally catch up to what she already knows, in the particular cruel arithmetic of a life that has just subtracted, in the space of

maybe ninety seconds, both the man she married and the daughter she hadn't even finished naming.

"Mrs. Stockton," the doctor says, and clears his throat, and begins.

She doesn't hear most of it. She's already somewhere else, already standing in a kitchen that no longer exists, watching a man who no longer exists guess, one more time, that the baby who no longer exists agrees with him.

Sunday, she thinks, and it is the first time grief arrives with a shape instead of only a sound, and it will not be the last.

CHAPTER TWO

Four months is long enough for people to stop bringing casseroles and start bringing opinions instead.

Maggie has learned to recognize the shift by now, the way sympathy has a shelf life and starts curdling into something closer to impatience right around the ninety day mark, as though everyone around her set a quiet, unspoken timer the night of the funeral and has been checking it against her progress ever since.

Her mother arrives unannounced on a Tuesday, which Maggie has come to understand is Eleanor Stockton's preferred method of intervention, showing up rather than calling, so there's no chance of being turned away at the door.

"You should be doing something with your hands again," Eleanor says, setting her purse down on the counter like she's planning to stay a while, surveying the small apartment with an expression she's clearly working hard to keep neutral. "Painting. Needlepoint. Something."

"I operated on brains for a living, Mom. I don't think needlepoint is really the scale I'm used to working at."

"You know what I mean."

"I know exactly what you mean." Maggie doesn't offer her mother coffee. Doesn't offer her a seat. Some petty, exhausted part of her wants this visit to be as short as possible. "I'll think about it."

"There's a support group. Dr. Bellamy's group, downtown, Thursdays. Structured. Evidence based." Eleanor produces a pamphlet from her purse like a magician pulling a card, already creased from having clearly been carried around for weeks, waiting for the right opening. "It might help to be around other people who understand."

"Other people whose husbands got their skulls caved in with a barbed wire bat while they watched?" Maggie keeps her voice level, almost pleasant, which she's found unsettles her mother far more than shouting ever would. "That's a fairly specific support group, Mom. I doubt Dr. Bellamy's Thursday circle has the numbers."

Eleanor flinches, just slightly, just enough. "You don't have to be crude about it."

"I'm not being crude. I'm being accurate. There's a difference, and it seems to be the thing this family struggles with most." Maggie crosses her arms. "I'll think about the group. I'm not promising anything."

She doesn't tell her mother that she already knows she isn't going. She's found, in four months, that promising to think about things is a language her family understands and accepts far more easily than the truth, which is that Maggie has no interest in sitting in a circle of folding chairs describing her grief to strangers on a schedule.

Eleanor leaves eventually, pamphlet abandoned on the counter next to a stack of unopened mail Maggie has been avoiding for a week, insurance correspondence mostly, forms requiring an itemized account of everything lost in the fire, an exercise in cataloguing her entire former life down to appliance model numbers and the approximate value of a wedding dress she'll never wear again for any occasion that matters. She'd started the list once. Gotten three items in, the crib they hadn't even set up yet, David's father's watch, a photo album from their wedding, and stopped, because somewhere around item four the exercise had stopped feeling like paperwork and started feeling like something closer to grief itself, wearing a very boring disguise.

She's learned, in four months, that grief doesn't come in waves the way the books all promised her it would. Waves have a rhythm to them, a build and a break and a pull back out to sea, something almost merciful in the regularity of it, a shape a person could learn to predict and brace for. This isn't that. This is static, constant, a low continuous hum underneath absolutely everything she does. Brushing her teeth. Signing the residency withdrawal paperwork she left sitting on the counter for six full days before she could make herself open it. Standing in the shower until the water runs cold and then standing there a while longer anyway, because getting out

means starting the next part of the day, and she hasn't found a version of the next part of any day that she actually wants to start.

And then, without warning, the static sharpens into something with teeth. Usually at two in the morning. Usually the instant her hand finds the empty half of the bed before her mind has caught up to why it's empty, that half second of reaching before memory arrives and closes the door on her again, every single night, like the cruelest possible rerun.

She's stopped reaching for him. Mostly.

The apartment itself is small and anonymous and exactly what she asked the realtor for, three weeks after the fire, standing in an office that smelled like burnt coffee, saying the word "anonymous" out loud like it was a real, biddable feature a person could request off a list. No wraparound porch. No garden she planted herself. No room that used to be a nursery before it became ash, before the fire marshal walked her through what was left of it with a clipboard and a carefully neutral expression, cataloguing losses she couldn't bring herself to itemize out loud even for him.

Her family calls it "the transition place," as though she's suspended between two versions of a life that both still exist somewhere, fully formed, patiently waiting for her to climb back into whichever one she prefers. As though transition implies a destination. As though there's a version of her old life still standing anywhere, ready to be reoccupied like a house with the furniture under sheets.

She isn't going back to either.

The residency withdrawal letter sat unopened on her counter for six days before she finally read it, a program director's careful, professional concern dressed up in language about leaves of absence and doors that remain open, as if six years of eighty hour weeks and a scalpel steady enough to be trusted inside another person's skull were something she could simply pause and resume on a schedule that suited her recovery, like a gym membership. She read it once. Felt nothing at all, which frightened her more than feeling something would have. Put a half empty glass of wine on top of it afterward so the paper wouldn't blow off the counter when she left the window cracked, and hasn't touched either the letter or the glass since.

She's started drinking around four in the afternoon most days now. Not enough to name, not yet, not enough to require the kind of intervention her

mother's careful visits are clearly circling toward with their pamphlets and their support groups and their gentle, relentless suggestions. Just enough that the static gets quieter. Just enough that she can look down at her own hands, steady as ever, disturbingly steady, without spending the next twenty minutes thinking about everything those hands used to be trusted to do, and everything they failed, that night, to protect.

Tonight it's a bar three towns over, the kind of place nobody from her old life would ever willingly set foot inside, and that is precisely the appeal. Cracked vinyl booths. A jukebox that hasn't been updated since before she was born. A bartender with more tattoos than Maggie has scars, which is genuinely saying something these days, who pours without asking a single follow up question, which Maggie has come to understand is the closest thing to mercy this particular corner of the world has to offer her right now.

Nobody here knows she used to be Dr. Stockton. Nobody here looks at her like she might shatter if they're not sufficiently careful with their words, the way everyone in her old life does now, the way even David's parents do when she manages to force herself through a dinner with them, all of them handling her like she's something recently broken and expensively repaired, not to be trusted with any weight at all.

She likes it that way.

She orders a drink, then a second one, and works hard, with the particular discipline she used to reserve for exam prep and surgical technique, at not thinking about David's hand resting warm against her stomach. At not thinking about a due date in March that a baby who liked to disagree with everyone's guesses except her father's will never actually arrive to meet. At not thinking about a future, whole and specific and already half planned out in nursery paint samples still sitting in a box in her mother's garage, that got wiped clean off a kitchen wall she will never see standing again.

She almost succeeds.

She's three drinks in, working steadily on a fourth, staring at the amber light coming through her glass and thinking about absolutely nothing, which has become its own kind of accomplishment, when the bar door opens behind her, letting in a burst of cooler night air and a handful of voices she doesn't recognize yet, doesn't know yet, has no reason yet to suspect are

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about to become the only thing standing between the rest of her numb, static life and whatever, terrifyingly, comes after it.

She doesn't turn around. Orders a fifth drink instead, and keeps her eyes on the amber light, and doesn't yet know she's about