

Chapter One

Anna was jolted awake to the sound of alarms blaring. As she took a few moments to get her bearings, she saw smoke seeping into her room from under her door. She made her way out of bed and to her door; she pressed the back of her hand against the handle. The heat woke her up even more, but it wasn't scalding.

"There's still time," she whispered, her heart hammering in her chest.

She dropped to her knees and yanked the cover of her bed to the ground with her. On her descent, she caught the time on the alarm clock that rested on her bedside table: 3:22 A.M. Anna army crawled her way to her bathroom, forever grateful that she ended up with the master bedroom.

She haphazardly turned on the shower, water sputtering out of the nozzle at full force as it came to life. Making quick work, she soaked the cover as quickly as she could and pulled it over herself. The weight of the sopping wet fabric was surprising, but nothing compared to the way the fear accumulated between her shoulders and weighed them down.

Anna threw her door open, heat a physical force that pushed her back. She held the blanket above her in a way that mimicked kids pretending to be ghosts on Halloween. The less time she spent inhaling the smoke the better, but she needed to take in her surroundings. The staircase caught her eye; the flames were growing and creeping higher. Orange, ashy smog cast her childhood home in a dense fog that obscured most details.

Making her way to her sister Millie's door, she banged loudly and without care. "Millie! Millie, get up! The house -" Anna coughed, smoke clogging her airway. "The house is on fire!"

Before waiting for a response, Anna turned and rushed to their parents' room down the hall. The door was wide open, yawning into the room. The lamps were still on and through the smoke, Anna could see the window open to the night air. Both of her parents were gone.

"Anna!" Millie's voice was already ragged from the toxic air.

Anna draped the soggy blanket over her twin so they were huddled together underneath it. "I'm here,"

"What now?"

"Now we get out!"

Anna cast one last glance at the bedroom and then brought her and her sister down to the floor. They crawled under the blanket together as they made their escape. The stairs proved challenging, debris of their lives was raining down around them and not making their journey

easy. But Anna led them onward, through the heavy smoke and ever encroaching flames, afraid that every inch they moved would mean disaster.

Any relief Anna may have felt when she took her first breath of fresh air was replaced by a suffocating dread when she saw the scene. The family car was gone and instead of tire marks marring the driveway, a sick trickle of blood rested there. The small stream originated from a crumpled lump on the ground.

As the twins made their way to relative safety, neighbors rushed to them to corral them away from the scene. Blue and red lights flashed, sirens wailed, people cried. Ms. Gimble, one of the girls' favorite neighbors, broke from the crowd and pulled them into a tight embrace. She led them away from that lump on the ground and called for the paramedics with vigor.

She wasn't fast enough to keep Anna from seeing, though. The fragile looking lump on their driveway was their mother. Half of her bed sheet was wrapped around her ankle; the other half dangled from her second story window as it waited to be gobbled up by the flames. Her head cracked open like a dainty eggshell.

When the girls settled into the ambulance, Anna heard a strange sound.

"Call it! Time of death: 3:29 A.M." An unknown voice seemingly screamed only for Anna to hear.

Her mother was dead on arrival. They were calling her time of death. There was no saving her or getting better now.

How could this be happening?

Their father was missing, the family car with him.

How could this be happening?

Their home was gone, in ruins.

How could this be happening?

Questions were thrown the twins' way while they were checked out, but no words seemed to come to them. Only one thought echoed in Anna's head: *how could this be happening?*

Chapter Two

Abraham Webber had poured the last 25 years into being a cop; 16 of those years were spent earning his station as a homicide detective. He was damn good at his job too – never too invested, just concerned enough. But in 25 years, he had never faced something like this.

Magnolia, or Maggie as he called her, was Abraham's childhood best friend. They were inseparable until about 20 years ago. 21 to be exact, but who was counting?

Maggie couldn't have fallen from that window. Abraham concluded this as he scratched his head, fingers meeting scalp with the way his hairline was declining and squinted his tired eyes in thought.

No, she *definitely* couldn't have fallen from that window. He had observed every inch of her – of the scene. She was in a beautiful nightdress that was decorated with floral patterns and her blood. The right strap was broken, and the top of her nightdress had come down during her final moments. The snapped dress now exposed her chest, and for a brief moment Abraham forgot she was gone. He lost a chunk of time as he was entranced by the perfection of her silky white breast.

He shook his head to clear the thought from his mind and continued to take in the scene.

The tear in Maggie's night gown had exposed much of her body, revealing a grizzly bruise that ran from her right hip to just below her belly button. Finding himself distracted by her milky complexion, Abraham found his eyes trailing back to the window of the charred house.

She was nearly unrecognizable with the damage that the concrete had dealt her face. Abraham had seen that kind of damage before when he investigated suicides and murders – this was the kind of damage that came from hitting the ground headfirst.

He took in the sheet again. Tangled around her ankle and hanging from the window. Why would she abandon her children in the burning house and opt to escape from the window? It didn't seem logical and that didn't seem like the Maggie he knew.

Her blonde hair was drenched with her blood and fanned out in a strange imitation of a halo. He couldn't help the near hysterical laughter that escaped him as he recalled one of the Halloween nights that Abraham and Maggie had spent together. They'd sat in some dingey diner for hours – laughing, joking, talking. She'd been dressed as an angel but had wanted to be a devil to celebrate her favorite holiday. Maggie thought that would be more fitting. Abraham, without thinking, squirted the bottle of ketchup that he'd been holding right into her hair. The condiment drenched her locks like an eerie foreshadowing of this moment. The only difference was that back then, they were both laughing.

“Detective Webber?” A cop that Abraham recognized but couldn't recall the name of broke him from his memory.

Abe cleared his throat. “Yes, son?” When you got this old, everyone was a ‘son’.

“We think – Well... It may be easier to just show you. Come with me?”

Abraham gestured to the CSI team to cover Maggie up, and he turned his back, not wanting to see that sheet block her face. He followed the cop without saying a word.

They made their way into what was once a family home. It looked like this might have been the living room and inside were four officers and the chief of fire clustered around a large window.

The chief acknowledged him with a dip of his chin and nodded towards the window. “We think this is where it started,” he said.

Abe took in the details. The floor, walls, and ceiling were the darkest in this area. The walls were nearly gone, and the window was blown out; scraps of blue drapes still clung to the charred bar. This spot was the most affected by the flames – it would make sense that the disaster began here.

His thoughts cycled and finally settled on Maggie’s twins. He knew they’d be at the hospital by now, but he also knew that the night had been long. He had questions and he hoped that Anna and Mille may have answers, but he wanted to give them a few days to rest before he began bombarding them with questions about their parents.

According to the neighbors that he had already spoken to, the Rickby’s were a tight-knit family: they loved each other and loved the community. He heard that Don, Maggie’s husband, was often gone, though. Neighbors all said that they assumed that he must travel for work.

Abraham had a strong suspicion that that was not the case. The Rickby brothers were fairly common to see around the station, and not because they were upstanding citizens. The family was just... off.

Although it probably wasn’t smart to be on this case, Abe had to take it.

He wanted nothing else but to see Don Rickby rot in prison.

Chapter 3

“Hi! I’m Dr. Harris,” Lynn walked into the examine room with his eye intentionally on his clipboard.

He’d just seen Millie Rickby, she was shaken up but not hurt. He knew the girls were twins. He also knew that his general appearance – lean, tall, and some would call “dreamy” - had an... effect on the younger female patient’s.

“Now wait a sec...” Lynn squinted his eyes and checked his clipboard again for emphasis. “Didn’t I just see you?”

The tension in the girl’s shoulders drained – mission accomplished. This was a blessing and curse, Lynn had decided long ago. He could simultaneously put them at ease and on edge. He threw in a small chuckle just to sweeten the deal.

“How is Millie?” Anna finally asked.

“Millie is going to be fine. Probably thanks to you – that was very brave of you.” Lynn was also a sibling, used to caring for others. He was genuinely impressed by the seventeen-year-old’s bravery. “Can we take a look at you, though?”

Anna nodded and Lynn moved closer to take her vitals. Everything was normal – she was lucky. Maybe she was also smart. That move with the soaked blanket was a good one. He wanted to tell her, but when he glanced at his patient, she was already asleep.

Sleep sounds good. Lynn thought as he exited the room.

He was pulling a double today – tonight, he guessed – and was on hour 32 at the hospital. Sleep would be ideal but wouldn't come for another few hours. So, he would have to settle for a measly 15 minutes of a break.

Before he had even stepped outside, Lynn could smell the cigarette smoke beckoning him outside. His own pack suddenly felt heavy in his pocket.

Maybe it was hypocritical – being a doctor and smoking. But Lynn never claimed to be a saint. And this habit seemed to act like a prerequisite for being in the medical field as at any given time he could find a number of his coworkers standing outside, stealing the same 15 minutes that he was going to.

His lighter flicked to life and he lit the end of his cigarette.

“I’m gonna stop after this shift...” he mumbled around the object in his mouth, like he did during every shift.

Chapter Four

Rachel had worked with Lynn for the last six years. The hospital, Mayberry Medical Center, had a high turnover rate. While others came and went, Lynn and Rachel remained.

As the two that seemed content enough to stay, their friendship was bound to form. So, it was no surprise that they had probably clocked more hours going to the bar together than they did actually working. They were more than drinking buddies though – Rachel is always the one to help Lynn with his foster siblings and Lynn is no stranger to being a handy man for Rachel’s apartment.

They were friends. Very good friends. Which is why Rachel has never said *anything* to Lynn about the way she felt about him. At any given moment, Lynn has three women and one man pining for him, Rachel wasn’t interested in adding to that. She knew it stressed him out.

She also knew that she had to get back inside; it was her turn to check the vitals. But she just needed a breath, and *he* had just walked outside.

The weather was gorgeous, and he only added the view. The breeze was a paid actor as it ruffled his hair and brought that feeling of crisp September air towards Rachel as she contemplated lighting *another* cigarette just for an excuse to talk to him.

“Hey, Rach,” Lynn said, tossing a tired smile her way.

God, he looks tired. Rachel thought as he rubbed his eyes and let his cigarette dangle precariously from his lips. “How’s the shift going?” She asked.

“As good as it can,” he replied.

“When are you off?”

“Hmm...” Lynn checked his watch. “Two hours. I’m gonna try to knock out as soon as I get home. I’ve got volunteer clinic work tomorrow and then I’m helping my parents at the rehab center the day after.”

“Busy, busy...” Rachel mused.

“You know me. I can’t sit still.”

“I think you just don’t want to.”

Rachel couldn’t help but admire the way that he shrugged and began to pivot to take in the scenery again. He was so stunning that it was unfair. “I know you’re tired, I am too but would you wanna grab a couple drinks after work?” She asked.

He perked up at the offer. “That sounds amazing,”

“See you in a bit, then!” Rachel smiled, nearly bubbling over with excitement.