

CHAPTER ONE



maria

Bienville, Mississippi, 2010

LAUGHTER. It was the laughter she would remember, years later, when she thought about that moment, even though she couldn't hear it. They were too far away, or perhaps *she* was too far away, tucked beneath the canopy and sheltered from the sun, listening to the waves roll onto the shore as they tried to lull her to sleep in chorus with the gulls that soared overhead. Her family danced along the beach, her husband crashing through the surf with a daughter tucked under each arm, their laughter searching for her over the expanse of sand. It was useless; it never found her; and as the image of her family faded from her mind, panic took its place.

7:30 A.M.

That couldn't be right. Her alarm was set for 6:30 and it hadn't gone off yet. She reached across the bed for her husband, but the sheets were abandoned and cold. Why didn't he wake her up? She rubbed her eyes and took another look at the clock.

7:31 A.M.

The shower was running in the bathroom. She thought she'd

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managed to rein in her frustration, but the door slammed against the wall when she pushed it open.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

Her husband wiped away the droplets of water from the shower door and smiled at her. “I thought you were taking the day off,” he said. “So I let you sleep in.”

A thousand things were spinning through her head—kids, school, work, hair, clothes, teeth—but she couldn’t stop hearing, *I thought you were taking the day off*. When had she ever just *taken a day off*?

Her husband’s smile faded back into oblivion behind the fog of the tempered shower glass as Maria got to work with a toothbrush in one hand and a hairbrush in the other. She was thankful she could no longer see him. It was impossible to stay mad at Will when she could see his face.

By the time she got her teeth brushed and her hair wrangled into a ponytail, there were a dozen spiky grays sticking out of her head at all angles, but there was no use trying to tame them. There was no time for hair spray; no time for makeup, though she could have used a gallon of concealer for the bags around her eyes; no time for the cocoa butter belly lotion that was supposed to have prevented the stretch marks that were already streaked across her belly. No one expected these things from her anymore. Makeup and hair spray were for single women or newlyweds, not a pregnant mother of two with a full-time job and a husband whose work hours stretched long into the night.

“Did you wake the girls up?” she asked, but she was already on her way out the door. She could hear her husband mumbling something about letting all of them sleep in, as she waddled down the hallway like a beleaguered penguin. This pregnancy was nothing like the other two, though she couldn’t say why. There were no complications, and chromosomally their unborn son was

perfect; they had the results of genetic testing to prove it. But there was an uneasiness that had clung to her throughout this pregnancy, like she hadn't appreciated what she'd been given and was pushing her luck thinking she could pull this off at her age. Forty felt too old.

Emily was already awake. She sat like a statue in her toddler bed, and Maria could smell the urine before she even reached her daughter's side. She pulled back the waistband of the soaked pajama bottoms, knowing what she'd find.

"Why aren't you wearing your Pull-Ups, baby?"

"I'm sorry, Mommy." Emily's lip trembled as tears filled her mahogany-colored eyes. Maria wanted to feel sorry for her, but it was the third time in three days that her daughter had taken off her bedtime Pull-Ups, and there was no time for pity. "I'm a big girl. I don't wear diapers."

"Okay." Maria kissed the top of her daughter's head as she pulled her off the bed with more force than she'd intended. "Don't cry. It was just an accident." The urine spot on the mattress was bigger than seemed possible and was an unpleasant reminder that she'd forgotten to put on the waterproof mattress cover when she'd changed the sheets the previous night. Just one more thing to deal with after work.

She was wiping the urine off her daughter when Will walked into the bathroom. He was going on about a car servicing appointment that was scheduled for that afternoon.

"Three o'clock," he said. "And you can get a rental if you can't stay. Just let them know when you get there."

"Three?" she mumbled. "That's not great timing." Did she already know about this? It seemed like something she would have put in her calendar, but her memory was unreliable these days. Pregnancy brain. That's what people called it, but she didn't remember battling with her mind like this during her previous

pregnancies. Maybe she'd already cleared out her afternoon schedule and had just forgotten.

"It's okay if you can't make it," Will continued. "I can do it early next week, after I get back from the conference."

"No, it's fine. I can do it." Maria shrugged it off, as if one more thing on her plate wouldn't break her, as if she wasn't about to crumple under the weight of her responsibilities, as if she hadn't forgotten that her husband would be gone to a medical conference for the next two days. "Can you help me get Charlotte ready?" she said, filling the sink with water and tossing the wipes into the toilet before remembering they weren't flushable.

"Sorry, hon," Will said. "I can't this morning. I have an eight o'clock patient scheduled."

Maria paused for two seconds, time she didn't have to spare, amazed at how effortlessly her husband could pawn off the responsibility of their kids onto her. Was this the nature of all men?

"I have an eight o'clock patient, too," she said, but Will was too smart to follow her down that road. It was an ill-fated path. So instead of reminding her that his eight o'clock patient was sitting in the operating room with a team of medical staff who were all anticipating his arrival, whereas her eight o'clock patient was sitting in a cozy waiting room with music and coffee—maybe even doughnuts if her secretary had thought to pick some up—he leaned down and kissed her belly.

"Yuck."

They both turned at the same time to see their five-year-old standing in the doorway, pointing toward the sink, where Maria was dipping her little sister's backside into the water.

"I'm not brushing my teeth there."

Will laughed and leaned over to land a kiss on Charlotte's head before he walked out the door. "I don't blame you, baby."

"Not helpful," Maria called out to him as he disappeared down

the hallway. She could hear him laughing as he descended the stairs and she felt the tension briefly lift from her chest. Her husband's laughter always did that to her, eased her worries, though she still felt envious that he would get to drive to work in silence. Just once, she wanted to experience that. She wanted to know what it felt like to leave her husband behind to fight the battles she fought every morning.

Charlotte's hair was a mess of tangles, and Maria didn't realize she was talking about cutting it all off until her three-year-old offered to help. "I can cut really good," Emily said, looking up at Maria with pleading eyes.

"I know you can, baby, but you're not cutting your sister's hair."

Maria tossed the brush onto the counter and gathered Charlotte's hair into a tangled mess that somewhat resembled a ponytail.

"Why not?" Emily whined.

"Because you'll cut my ear off!" Charlotte screamed, covering her ears with her hands, backing away from her sister, and almost falling into the bathtub. "And then I'll bleed to death!"

"Mommy, I won't do that!" Emily was scrounging through the bathroom drawers in search of a pair of scissors, pulling out empty toothpaste tubes and broken headbands and long-lost hair bows, while Maria trailed behind her with the brush.

"Enough!" she yelled, slamming one of the drawers shut to get their attention. "No one's cutting anyone's hair. Or ears. Or anything else. We have to be out of this house in five minutes, so downstairs now."

She caught Charlotte rolling her eyes before she turned off the light and wondered where a kindergartner would pick up that habit.

The dishes hadn't been run the previous night, so Maria picked out two of the least filthy plastic bowls she could find and wiped them down with a damp paper towel before dropping them onto

the counter. She was trying to remember the last time she'd been grocery shopping—the pantry shelves were almost barren—when Charlotte startled her from behind.

“Annabelle’s mommy makes her a proper breakfast every morning.”

“Is that so?” Maria could feel her eyes rolling, before she stopped herself halfway through. At least now she knew where her daughter picked it up.

“Yes,” Charlotte replied. “Eggs and bacon and toast. And always fruit.”

“Annabelle’s going to have cholesterol problems by the time she’s ten,” Maria mumbled, ripping open a package of Pop-Tarts and throwing one into each bowl before handing them to her daughters. “And I give you fruit. These are *blueberry* Pop-Tarts. Now go hop into the car and I’ll help buckle you up in just a minute.”

“But I need lunch, Mommy.” Charlotte spun around as she spoke, dropping her Pop-Tart onto the floor. Maria picked it up and brushed it off before placing it back in the bowl. The crumbs on the floor would have to wait until after work.

“There’s money in your lunch account, sweetie. Just get a school lunch today.”

“But there’s a field trip. Mrs. Nelson said to pack a lunch. And you need to sign the paper.”

“What?” Maria snatched Charlotte’s backpack off the kitchen counter and dug through the pile of loose papers and food wrappers and sweatshirts that hadn’t been cleaned out in weeks. “Why didn’t you tell me about this last night?”

“It’s in my take-home folder. You’re supposed to look in my take-home folder every night.”

The unsigned permission slip was at the front of a stack of neglected papers that must have been sent home daily for the past few weeks. It was decorated with sticky tabs and highlighter

marks showing Maria exactly where her signature was required, along with a reminder stapled to the top, also colorfully highlighted, that the children would need a sack lunch.

She pulled the bread off the shelf in the refrigerator and mumbled a profanity under her breath that she hoped her daughters didn't hear. There were only two pieces left, besides the end pieces, which she tossed into the garbage, and as she was slathering peanut butter across the bread, Charlotte gasped.

"Mommy! No peanut butter!"

Maria jumped, almost dropping the knife into the sink, and turned to her daughter. "I thought you liked peanut butter."

"Jackson can't have peanuts, so nobody can bring peanut butter for snack or lunch."

Maria thought about all the boxes of peanut butter crackers she'd sent to school with Charlotte over the last few months and wondered where they all went. There was probably a letter in the take-home folder informing the parents about Jackson's peanut allergy, and she expected Mrs. Nelson found her quite obnoxious. Or hopefully just oblivious. She could feel Charlotte's eyes following her as she reached into the garbage and pulled out the end pieces of bread.

"I'm not eating that!" Charlotte screeched.

"They're still in the bag," Maria replied. "They haven't touched anything in the garbage. They're fine."

"Ew!" Emily scrunched up her nose and looked at her sister. "You have to eat garbage."

"I'm not eating that, Mommy!"

"I have nothing else." Maria waved her hand up and down the length of the open refrigerator in front of them. "We're almost on Empty here, sweetie. It's this or nothing."

"Nothing," Charlotte said, with her hands crossed firmly across her chest.

“I can’t send you to school with nothing.” Maria held the two end pieces in one hand and rifled through the back of the refrigerator for something to put on them, eventually pulling out an old jar of jelly. She wondered if jelly ever expired. “Strawberry?”

By the time the trio made their way out the door, Maria was already fifteen minutes late for her first patient of the day and both of her daughters were mad at her about something, though she couldn’t remember what. She was too busy running through a checklist in her mind of what she needed to get done before the weekend: groceries, laundry, dishes, bills, and the baby who was due any day now. She couldn’t forget about him, and while she’d never been one to shy away from a challenge, she couldn’t even begin to imagine how she was going to pull this off.

Her husband had offered to hire a nanny to get the kids to and from school and to fix dinner for them on weeknights, maybe even run some laundry and straighten up the house. But what kind of a mother couldn’t do those things for her own children? Something would have to give. She couldn’t hold it together forever, and if she didn’t make some changes soon, Maria knew the dam was going to break and there’d be no salvaging what was waiting downstream.

CHAPTER TWO



SORRY I'M LATE." Maria bustled through the front door of her psychiatry clinic, the chilled April wind clinging to her like an uninvited guest and following her into the office. Rachel was sitting at her desk, clicking away at her computer, while the melody of soft jazz and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air around them with a warmth that instantly melted away Maria's anxieties.

"That smells so good," she said. "I can't wait to drink real coffee again."

"Soon," her secretary said. "And you're not late. Your eight o'clock canceled this morning and you don't have another patient scheduled until nine."

Maria hesitated, wanting to tell Rachel how helpful that information would have been half an hour earlier, but instead she just smiled and shrugged off the maternity coat she was no longer able to button. Her secretary was more forgetful these days, too, though her reasons were different than Maria's.

As she entered her private office, Maria threw her coat onto an empty chair and sat down to scroll through the list of patients she had scheduled for the day. Her last patient was scheduled for two o'clock, giving her just enough time to get to the car appointment her husband had been talking about, the one that had long since slipped her mind. Her nine o'clock was a new patient, and she

was scanning through the limited information they had about her when Rachel walked in.

“Here you go.” The thick southern drawl of Rachel’s words and the scent of her imitation Armani perfume lingered in the air as she leaned over to place a cup of decaffeinated coffee in front of Maria. Her auburn hair was perfectly rolled and sprayed into place, and her makeup was impeccable. Maria felt like a troll next to her.

“Thanks.”

She could feel Rachel’s eyes lingering on her swollen belly. It was always an odd dance between them when it came to Maria’s pregnancy. Six months earlier, Rachel had found her ten-month-old son lying lifeless in his crib. Maria could still hear the screams that rang through the phone that morning when Rachel’s neighbor informed her that the unthinkable had happened.

“No problem,” Rachel replied, her eyes unwavering. “How’s the little guy doing?”

“He’s good,” Maria said, patting her belly. At the time of Jonathan’s death, she’d been just three months pregnant and had barely managed to share the news with her husband. Out of respect for Rachel, she’d kept the baby a secret until she’d started to show, and she was always far too overwhelmed with guilt to ever celebrate the news they were having a boy.

The chime of the front door saved her from another awkward conversation, and as Rachel retreated to the front office, Maria finished scanning over her notes.

Sylvia Woolf. Twenty-three-year-old woman complaining of new onset depression. No referral from a primary care physician. No insurance on file. Cash paying patient.

Sylvia was the embodiment of major depressive disorder. If there were an illustration to go along with the definition of the word *depression*, it would have been her picture. She was forgetta-

ble, the kind of person who was described with words like *average* and *ordinary*, because no one could remember the color of her hair or how tall she stood or if she had an accent.

“So, what brings you in today?” Maria asked, smiling as she settled herself into the chair behind her desk. Sylvia’s hair hung like a limp, washed-out shower curtain, and her vacant, expressionless eyes were lost in the swirling pattern of the throw rug on Maria’s office floor. She was too busy picking at her cuticles and gnawing on her fingernails to notice her doctor watching her, and Maria couldn’t help but wonder if she was getting a glimpse into her future with teenage daughters. She was so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she jumped when Sylvia spoke.

“I need to talk to you about something.”

“Okay,” Maria said, shifting in her chair before uncrossing and recrossing her legs. “What would you like to talk about?”

“I’m not here because I’m depressed. I’m here because I need to talk to you about something.” Sylvia’s attention was no longer stuck on the rug between them. Her posture had straightened, her nail-picking had ceased, and the confidence that was so obviously lacking when she first sat down was now almost physical between them. She looked like a different woman. “You’re probably going to think I’m crazy when I say this, but I need you to promise me that you won’t have me locked up in a psych hospital.”

“I don’t . . . I mean, I can’t promise that . . .” After a deep breath, Maria cleared her throat and leaned back in her chair, grasping for an air of professionalism. “It’s harder than you think to get admitted to a psych hospital these days. Insurance companies won’t pay unless you threaten to kill yourself, or someone else, and it doesn’t do much good in the long run.”

“I’m not going to hurt anyone,” Sylvia replied. “And I’m not depressed. I’m here because God brought me back for a special purpose.”

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“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’ve been through all of this before,” Sylvia continued. “I’ve already lived this life, and I was brought back here by God to fulfill a very special purpose.”

It was an unexpected turn, a setback Maria hadn’t anticipated, as Sylvia drove their conversation down a path riddled with religious delusions. “Are you saying that God brought you back from the future?”

“Exactly,” Sylvia replied. “I know this sounds crazy, and you probably think I belong in the hospital, but I need you to hear me out and just try to consider the possibility. You have no idea how difficult it is to prove that you’ve come back from the future. It seems like it should be easy, right? But no matter what I tell you is going to happen, we’ll have to wait for it to happen before you’ll believe me.”

Sylvia’s pause was filled with expectation, so Maria nodded accordingly, but diagnoses were streaming through her head like the credits of a movie.

“So I have no way to prove myself to you,” she continued, “but I know about things that are going to happen to people.”

“Sometimes life can get pretty confusing,” Maria said, echoing the same worn-out words she’d been using for years. Psychosis would be the official diagnosis on paper for now, but she would have to follow Sylvia closely to rule out specific causes. She was so busy jotting down her thoughts—*Rule out bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder*—that Sylvia’s voice startled her again.

“I’m not confused,” she said. “Not anymore. The dreams finally make sense, but I just couldn’t do it.”

“Do what?”

“Save those people from that tornado.”

Maria nodded. There it was. The catalyst to Sylvia’s delu-

sions. There was nothing like a tornado to drag them out of hiding. If there was anything that could act as tinder to ignite religious delusions, it was a natural disaster, and there was no shortage of coverage on the F5 tornado that had swept through their area and left seventeen people dead. Add to that the unending news coverage to satisfy a nation full of people who were fascinated by death and you had the perfect recipe for a forest fire.

"It's hard, isn't it?" Maria said. "When the news is constantly replaying those horrible images over and over. Sometimes, when people have bad depression, the things that happen around them, that have absolutely nothing to do with them, start to feel very personal. And sometimes, with depression, you can start to feel like *you're* responsible for the bad things that are happening. It can even be hard to figure out what's real and what's not. But listen to me, Sylvia. You are not responsible for anything that happened to anyone during that tornado."

"I knew it was coming, Dr. Forssmann, and I didn't do anything about it because I was selfish. And now all those people who died, their blood is on my hands."

"It's not your fault," Maria said. "There's something I can give you to make these thoughts that you're having go away. There's medicine that will help with the . . ." She hesitated long enough to remind herself not to say delusions. "The bad thoughts you've been having."

"Medicine can't fix this." Sylvia shut her eyes, walking her fingers from her temples to her forehead, kneading the skin along the way. "I know you can't see that, but I have to tell you what happened that day." Maria nodded for her to continue, but Sylvia wasn't waiting for her approval.

"There was a young couple hiding in the closet together during the storm. Shelby Whitten and John Ambers. They were twenty-five years old, they'd just gotten engaged, and they were riding out

the storm together buried in some pillows and blankets. The tornado tore apart their house, and by the time it was over, John had been thrown into the field next door and Shelby had been buried under the rubble. Rescue crews found John right away, unconscious, with some broken bones, but at least he was still breathing. Shelby was dug out a few hours later and pronounced dead on the scene.”

“Sylvia, I think—”

“Please, Dr. Forssmann.” She held her hand up between them. “Please let me finish. I let Shelby die because, two years from now, I’ll meet John and we’ll fall in love and get married and live happily ever after. That’s the way it would have happened if I didn’t know about the tornado. The way it happened the first time, when I *didn’t* know. But this time I knew, and I didn’t do anything to warn those people because *I* wanted to be the one with him, not Shelby. And this time I just won’t be able to bear it. The screams from his nightmares about that night. I won’t be able to look him in the eye when he talks about all that suffering, and I’ll never be able to forgive myself for that selfish decision that cost so many lives.”

Sylvia’s expression was a mixture of sorrow and resolve, as her eyes rose up to meet Maria’s.

“Don’t you see now? It’s important to always do the right thing, even if you have to suffer the consequences. I made the wrong choice. God had a plan for me, but I chose selfishly, so now I’m here to make up for it. I’m here because something else happened in my life that I was powerless to stop all those years ago, and I won’t let it happen again.”

Sylvia’s story swirled through Maria’s head as she traced over the names John and Shelby on the notepad in her lap, wondering if those people ever existed and contemplating her next move. There was no talking away this illness, no therapy that could reverse the course of her psychosis. Sylvia would need medication.

“What is it that you plan to stop?” Maria asked.

“Something bad. I’m here to save you, Dr. Forssmann. I’m here to protect you and your baby.”

The air went stale as Maria forced it into her lungs before she choked out her next words. “Protect us from what?”

“The first time I was here, our lives intersected in an unimaginable way, and you ended up being someone very important to me. Now I finally understand why. I know from that past how much you worry about your son, but if you listen to me, he’s going to grow up to be a happy and healthy boy.”

“I guess I worry as much as the next mom.” Her voice was unwavering, but Maria’s heart pounded against her chest as Sylvia’s words, so confident and sure, reached a place inside of her that was so rarely exposed. No one knew about the fears she harbored for her son, not even her husband.

“Your pregnancy is not cursed,” Sylvia continued. “Not anymore. But you have to listen to me. Stay away from Rachel. There’s a laptop of hers in that storage unit you share with her that needs to get to the police, but don’t go there until after your baby is born.”

A flush of heat washed over Maria’s body before it landed in her face, the sweat from her neck dripping down her back as she struggled to maintain her composure. Sylvia was delusional and rambling and psychotic, and Maria was reading too much into her words. But how did she know about the storage unit? And how did she know Maria was worried about her son?

The prescriptions she handed to Sylvia were barely legible, and Maria wasn’t even sure she’d signed them, but she pushed them into Sylvia’s hands as she rose from her chair.

“Thank you for your concern, Sylvia. I don’t want you to worry about me, though. I want you to get these prescriptions filled so we can get you feeling better right away.”

Sylvia placed her hand over Maria’s arm, her composure a

marked contrast to Maria's uneasiness. If someone who didn't know better walked in at that moment, Maria would have been mistaken for the patient and Sylvia for the doctor. "Dr. Forssmann," she said, "if you don't listen to me, something bad is going to happen. You'll see."

"Just get those meds and start taking them." Maria pushed her way past Sylvia and yanked the door open before ushering her out. "And I'll see you back next month."

It was unfamiliar territory, being flustered by a patient. Most of her patients had at least a decent respect for personal boundaries and wouldn't dare make cryptic comments about her unborn child. Psychotic or not, it seemed grossly inappropriate. She watched from the doorway as Rachel tried to schedule a follow-up appointment, but Sylvia was talking over her, reciting some kind of poem. It wasn't until she heard "forgive us our sins and purify us" that she knew it had to be scripture from the Bible.

Sylvia was sick, probably even sick enough for the hospital, but Maria watched in culpable silence as her patient slipped through the front door and out of their lives forever.

CHAPTER THREE



HAD SHE KNOWN THAT SUICIDE WAS ever on Sylvia's radar, Maria would have done things much differently. The benefit of hindsight and a night of sleep gave her a clearer vision of how her actions, or inactions, had sent her patient to an early grave. She was tired. Her mind, once sharp and perceptive, was now dull and bogged down with menial and inconsequential tasks: car appointments, school field trips, soiled bedsheets. She couldn't focus on the important things and couldn't forgive herself for failing her patient.

Her hands trembled as she slid them off the counter and out of view of the receptionist who greeted her with a forced smile. She somehow stumbled through an awkward explanation of who she was and what she was doing at the police station, and the woman pointed her to a vacant waiting room where rows of blue plastic chairs sat in stark contrast to the whitewashed concrete walls. The room wasn't designed for comfort, but Maria didn't wait long.

"Dr. Forssmann?" A ruddy-faced, stout officer entered, his grip solid and his hands rough and calloused. "I'm Detective Andrews," he said. "Thanks for coming by." They snaked through the station to the detective's spacious and well-adorned office, where an empty wingback chair awaited her. "Can I get you something to drink? Coffee?"

“No, thank you.” Maria patted her ripe, pregnant belly. If she was about to be exposed as a second-rate psychiatrist, she could at least make herself out to be a decent parent. “No caffeine for me,” she said. “Maybe a cup of water?”

With a curt nod the detective left her to her angst, her mind churning through what-ifs and whys as her eyes scanned the overabundance of commendation awards on his walls. He was a military man at one time, and quite distinguished, with certificates and medals landscaping his walls and spilling over to his bookcase. It was her first time in a detective’s office, and while she wasn’t naive about suicides, she’d certainly never had to answer for the actions of her patients—or her treatment of them—until now.

The door creaked over the sound of the detective’s labored breathing as he kicked it shut behind him, a mug in each hand. Maria inhaled the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, watching longingly as he placed the steaming mug in front of his own chair. A stained cup of lukewarm tap water found its way to her hands before the detective settled his stocky frame behind a faux mahogany desk. He was a large man, likely solid muscle in his youth, but as he eased onto his chair, an aged and neglected belly protruded over his pants and his shirt collar squeezed his neck like a tourniquet.

“Thanks for coming in on such short notice,” he said. “I assume you know what this is about?”

Maria clutched her mug with clumsy hands, looking for an empty spot on the desk between them. “You have some questions for me about one of my patients,” she said. “I mean, one of my former patients.”

“Sylvia Woolf,” he replied. “She passed away last night . . . But I’m guessing you already knew?”

Maria nodded.

“We’re trying to find out a little more about her state of mind

the last time you saw her,” he continued. “Maybe she said something that stuck with you? Something out of the ordinary?”

“Do you mean something that would have clued me in to the fact that she was suicidal?” The tremor in her hands had spread to her voice, and Maria knew better than to continue.

I just messed up.

Was that a good enough excuse? She teetered on the edge of tears before she clutched the mug of stale, coffee-flavored water from the desk and forced a sip. The hardened lines coursing through the detective’s face finally softened.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I hate to question you like this after everything you’ve been through with your secretary.” He glanced at the notes on the edge of his desk. “Ms. Tillman?”

“You know Rachel?”

“No, but I searched her records before I called you in and found the information about her son.”

Maria shifted in her chair, the mention of Rachel’s name stabbing at her conscience. She had no reason to distrust her secretary, but Sylvia’s warning to steer clear of her hadn’t been forgotten. *Stay away from Rachel.* That tiny seed she’d planted, however outrageous it sounded, was already starting to sprout.

“I didn’t ask her to come in,” the detective continued. “I thought I’d talk to you first, see if we can get some of this straightened out so we can wrap up the investigation, and maybe she won’t have to come in at all.”

Investigation. It didn’t matter how she turned it, Maria couldn’t get the word to fit into her mind. It had sharp edges that jutted out beyond the margins of her comprehension, and the more she repeated it, the more foreign it sounded. Why was there an investigation into Sylvia’s suicide? Were they suspecting foul play? The detective smiled as if her thoughts had been broadcast throughout the room.

“You’re not a suspect,” he said, but the crooked smile on his face offered little relief for her festering guilt. Sylvia’s death was a crime of negligence, a failure of Maria to do what she had been entrusted to do, and whether her clinical judgment was being called into question or not, it was her complacency that gave Sylvia the chance to act.

“I guess I’ve just never seen such a thorough investigation into a suicide.”

“We don’t normally go to these lengths with an obvious suicide. And, to tell you the truth, it’s not really her death we’re investigating.” He leaned forward and rested his burly forearms on the top of his desk. “It’s the letter she left.”

“What letter?”

“We found it on her kitchen counter, stamped and sealed, ready to go. She was planning to mail it to you before she died. I’m not sure why it never found its way to the mailbox.”

“I can’t imagine why she would write me a letter. What does it say?”

“I guess you could call it a suicide note. I can’t discuss it, though.” The detective’s shoulders sagged, almost imperceptibly, as he contemplated his response. “It’s considered evidence.”

“Evidence of what?” she asked. “Maybe if you let me read it . . .”

“I can’t.” He pulled his arms from the desk before crossing them over his chest, weighing his options and clearly tempted to let her read it. She could see, from the way he watched her, that he wanted her to read the letter. “When you saw her in your office yesterday,” he said, “did she seem like she was concerned about you? Like she was trying to warn you about something?”

I’m here to save you, Dr. Forssmann.

“She had some warnings,” Maria said, as the detective pulled a notebook from his top drawer and flipped to an empty page, pen in hand, ready to record her memories. “But I’m sorry,” she contin-

ued. "I can't discuss her appointment without a subpoena. Patient confidentiality laws."

"I understand, and we'll get one if we think we need it, but maybe you could just give me some details about Sylvia's behavior *outside* of the doctor-patient setting." He leaned over his open notebook, the empty blue lines eager to be filled. "Did you see her interact with other patients in the waiting room? Or with your secretary, Rachel? Anything you can tell me would be helpful."

It was a memory she was reluctant to revisit, the cryptic warnings and odd behaviors that were such obvious symptoms of Sylvia's illness but also were the very things that forced Maria to usher her out the door. "She quoted some Bible verse to Rachel before she left."

"Do you know what verse it was?"

Maria shook her head, embarrassed that her shameful lack of biblical knowledge was about to be exposed, wishing she'd paid more attention all those years ago.

"Do you remember what you thought it meant? Anything would be helpful."

"It was something about God forgiving you for your sins. Or asking for God's forgiveness. Something like that. I just don't remember."

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

"That sounds like it," she said.

"It's from the first book of John."

His voice was apologetic, almost empathetic, like he understood the humiliation of being the only kid in Sunday school class to forget his Bible verses, but Maria was impressed by his knowledge, if not a bit jealous. By ten years old, and taking her father's lead, she was a Sunday school dropout, and whatever paltry knowledge she

took from those classes didn't survive past year fifteen. "You sound like a biblical scholar, Detective Andrews."

His laughter filled the air, spiraling around them as the tension began to unravel. "My wife would have a field day with that one. She's been trying for over twenty-five years to get me to church." He leaned over his desk as the laughter died down and lowered his voice. "The only reason I know that is because it was in the letter. And please, call me Walt."

A kinship wound its way around them as she got a glimpse into the detective's private life; the adversities of their professions were more similar than she could have imagined. They both saw people at their worst, sometimes damaged beyond salvation, and their stories were woven into their cores, making them who and what they were as much as the diplomas and awards that hung from their walls.

"I'm sorry about this, Dr. Forssmann. I know it's unpleasant."

"I understand," she said. "And you can call me Maria."

His smile was tinged with an unexpected sadness as he nodded his head and straightened the notebook on his desk. There was something itching at the surface of his thoughts, something he knew better than to say. He jotted something down in his notebook, the blue lines disappearing under the black strokes of his pen, before he pulled his eyes up to meet hers.

"I have a personal question for you, Maria, if you don't mind. Do you and Rachel share a storage unit somewhere?"

It was such a trivial bit of information, and had Sylvia not mentioned it one day earlier, on the very day she killed herself, Maria might have brushed off the question. But it had gnawed at her deep into the night and right through her dreams the previous evening, long after she'd crawled into bed alone, wishing her husband good night over the phone from their bed to his hotel room.

"She put that in the letter, didn't she?" Maria said. "I still can't figure out how she knew it, though."

“So, she was right?”

“Not exactly. My husband and I have a unit that we gave Rachel a key to a while back. Her boyfriend at the time had racked up some credit card debt in her name, and he took off shortly after the baby was born. We felt bad for her because she couldn't afford the apartment she was in and had to downsize to a studio, so we let her put some of her furniture in there.”

“Has she been there recently?”

“I have no idea. I never go there, and she has her own key. Is there something in particular you're looking for?”

She already knew the answer, of course: the laptop. It must have made its way into the letter, along with other things the detective wouldn't be divulging. Did he know that she'd been instructed to get the laptop to him, or that she'd been warned to stay away from Rachel, or that the fears she'd been having for her unborn son were seemingly validated by Sylvia? She was hoping she might get her hands on that laptop, if it even existed, and she had a feeling that if the detective got to it first, she'd lose her chance.

“There's nothing in particular that we're looking for,” the detective continued, “but I wouldn't mind taking a look through the unit if you're okay with that.”

“I guess,” Maria said. “But I don't have a key on me.”

“Do you think you could get it to me by Monday?”

“Sure,” she muttered, certain there would be no time to go snooping through the storage unit before the end of the weekend. There was never any time.

“That'd be great. I'll be out of town this weekend, but I'll go through it early next week if you can get the key here by then. The lady at the front desk can get you a consent to search form on your way out. If you could just sign that for me now, that'd make it easier.”

Despite the flippancy of his request, it seemed like something she should discuss with a lawyer, or at least her husband,

but the hour was growing late, and one glance at her swollen ankles was enough to convince her she didn't have the energy to argue logistics.

"Just one more thing," he said, "and then I promise I'll let you go."

Maria nodded for him to continue.

"Did the police ever question Rachel, or anyone, about her son's death?"

"Of course not," she said, remembering that the coroner who'd performed Jonathan's autopsy had called it a classic case of sudden infant death syndrome. There had never been any mention of foul play. "Why would they investigate that?"

"Sometimes the police will do a preliminary investigation into accidental and natural-cause deaths. I didn't see one when I checked the case file, but I just thought I'd ask."

"I guess I can't be sure, but I think Rachel would have told me if she was investigated." Maria couldn't think straight. *Had* Rachel been investigated? She couldn't even remember what she'd had for breakfast that morning, let alone what Rachel had told her six months earlier about her son's death. Maybe she'd just assumed there was no investigation because, in addition to being her secretary, Rachel was also her friend. She could never believe her capable of hurting her own child.

"What about the baby's father?" the detective continued. "Was he around? Or did Rachel have a boyfriend around the time her son died?"

"Nick," Maria said. He'd been just one in a long line of on-and-off relationships that defined Rachel's adult life, a tradition that ended shortly after her son's death. "Nick Turner was the baby's father. He was in and out of Rachel's life, but he went back to New Orleans, where he was from, before Jonathan died. You don't think he had something to do with it, do you?"

"No," he replied. "We're not investigating anyone for anything at this point. I'm just trying to be thorough." He paused as he studied Maria's face, the same itch surfacing in his thoughts and tempting him to scratch it. "I'm sorry I can't let you read the letter, but I want you to know that Sylvia thought very highly of you. She didn't blame you for any of this."

"Thank you," she said. "Do I ever get to read it?"

"Of course." The detective rose from his chair and made his way around the desk. "It's yours. We'll close the investigation in a couple of weeks, once we get the autopsy report and finish up with the details, and then I'll give you a call, so you can pick it up."

He was by her side with a hand extended before she could attempt to hoist herself from the chair. There was a gentleness to his strength that she'd missed when they first met. "Looks like it could be any day now," he said, glancing down at her belly. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"It's a boy." She rubbed the bulge of baby beneath her maternity dress. "We already have two girls, so I think we'll have our hands full."

The pained smile that broke across his face didn't escape her. "Do you have a name picked out yet?"

"Not that I'm telling anyone."

"Oh, come on," he said, winking as he helped her from the chair. "I won't leak it."

Maria had known her son's name since the first flutter of his existence, like the universe had named him long before he was given to her, but she hadn't even shared it with her husband yet, certain he would veto her choice. Only the journal in her nightstand drawer knew that secret.

"I'm sorry. My lips are sealed on this one."

Walt steadied his frame against the fake mahogany desk, another battle taking shape in his mind.

"It's Blaise," he finally said. "Isn't it?"