

PROLOGUE

South Jersey Shore, 1972

Marley Booker twisted her shoulder to get a better look at the bruise left by her husband's fist. Her eyes welled up as she prodded the plum-colored skin with a manicured nail. With an angry shake of her head, she cursed Leland knowing it would be days before the telltale signs of his temper vanished from her pale arm. Reaching into her closet for a long-sleeved blouse, she paused for a moment to consider showing up at the country club in a sleeveless shirt. That would teach him, shocking all the old biddies with a glimpse into the darker side of their charming golf instructor. But pride took hold and her common sense prevailed. All her well-crafted efforts to create the illusion of a perfect family would be gone in a heartbeat if the members saw what Leland had done to her.

Before heading downstairs, Marley peered into the guest bedroom and saw the unmade bed. A few hours earlier she pretended not to hear when Leland slipped into their room for a fresh change of clothes. She picked up his wrinkled shirt from the floor and pressed it to her face, drawing in the musky smell of her husband's cologne. Despite all that passed between them since, she could still remember the thrill down her spine when they first met. She smiled to think of the rednecks hanging out at that bar, staring at them. Small wonder a fight didn't break out, her slow dancing with a black man like that. Hugging his shirt to her breast, she imagined Leland coming home at the end of the day with flowers, telling her he was sorry for losing his temper. They would put the girls to bed early and have make-up sex that would light up every nerve in her body. After that, on the surface at least, everything would return to normal.

Catching a glance of reality in the mirror, her smile faded. Marley stared at her image, pondering her present situation. Eight weeks now, not much time before

she had to make a decision. She was trapped between getting rid of her unborn baby or losing her husband. Leland was not perfect, but she tallied up all he provided and weighed that against the distant voice of her Sunday Bible School. Marley reckoned Leland was her better option.

“Mama, will you fix my hair?”

Marley turned to see Lissa, fully dressed and holding a hairbrush in her outstretched hands.

“Sure, darlin’.” Marley took the brush and pulled Lissa close.

She watched as Lissa’s eyes scanned the guest room, taking in the unmade bed and Leland’s dirty clothes. She wondered, not for the first time, how much the child knew. Scraping back Lissa’s wild hair, she caught the mass in a rubber band. Lissa turned to face her and Marley stroked her firstborn’s cheek, white fingers against amber skin.

“In a few years you’ll be fighting the boys off with a stick,” she said.

“I don’t like boys,” Lissa replied. She squirmed away from Marley’s touch.

“Where’s your sister?”

“She’s still in her pajamas.”

“Do Mama a favor and help her while I fix breakfast, okay?”

Lissa nodded and padded back to the girls’ room. Marley took one look at the bed, decided to leave the covers as they were, and headed downstairs.

Standing before the open refrigerator, Marley frowned in annoyance. She’d specifically asked the babysitter to pick up some groceries at Gordon’s, but the teenager apparently had forgotten. After grabbing the carton of orange juice, Marley filled three glasses and placed them on the table. She set the cereal boxes out, lit her first cigarette of the day, and leaned against the counter, waiting for the coffee to brew.

The night had done nothing to relieve the heat wave. Marley cranked the knob on the air conditioner to full blast and turned on the radio. The forecast was for another hazy, hot and humid day, temperatures into the 90s.

As Marley sat down with her coffee, her two children appeared, arguing as usual. Robin stuck her tongue out at Lissa and grabbed her glass with both hands. After one mouthful she dribbled the juice back. "This tastes funny," she said.

"Jean forgot to buy apple juice," Marley said. "Orange is all we've got. After breakfast we'll go shopping. Now mind your manners. Ladies don't spit." Marley watched as both girls drank, then raised her glass and took a sip. She grimaced.

"Damn, it's spoiled," she said. "You can leave the rest. Now run and play while I clean up."

The first wave of cramps hit as she loaded the dishwasher. Doubling over, she grabbed the edge of the sink. Lissa's high-pitched voice rose above the sound of Robin retching in the other room.

"Mama, Robin's sick!"

At the sight of Robin curled on the floor, her rosy cheek lying in a pool of vomit, Marley dropped to her knees and gathered the little girl in her arms. Fear gripped her chest as Robin's skin turned blue. Lissa stood several paces back, eyes wide in panic, both hands covering her mouth as her rib cage contracted and heaved.

Marley tried to keep her voice calm, but the sound that came out rang with urgency. "Lissa, run and get a wet towel for your sister." Fighting her own nausea, she stroked her younger daughter's hair, murmuring, "I'm right here, sugar." As Marley reached out for the towel that Lissa offered, another wave of convulsive cramps hit. She closed her eyes, thinking about the baby.

Robin whimpered and Marley glanced down to see a thin stream of white foam seeping between the little girl's closed lips. She gathered Robin in her arms,

willing her unsteady legs to hold. After she placed the unconscious Robin in the car, Marley returned to the house where she found Lissa bent over the toilet. A moan of protest escaped Lissa's lips as Marley grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to her feet. She wiped the sweat from the child's brow, bent down, and whispered, "Please Lissa, don't make me carry you."

Lissa nodded, fresh beads of sweat blooming on her face as she clasped her mother's hand.

Fifteen minutes later, Marley brought the car to a screeching halt inches away from the double doors of the hospital's emergency room. A nurse at the reception desk looked up as Marley staggered in with Robin in her arms.

The words tumbled out of Marley's mouth. "My other daughter . . . Lissa . . . in the car."

The nurse jumped forward, but was too late to catch Marley as she slumped to the floor.

CHAPTER ONE

Marley Booker and her children were dead and there was nothing I could do about it. That's what I told Adam Bennett, the law student who called to ask me about the three murders that happened forty years ago.

"I was their babysitter," I said. "I don't see how I can help you. Now please don't bother me again."

As I was about to hang up, I heard Adam say, "Leland Booker is an innocent man. He has spent more than half his life in jail for a crime he didn't commit. I think this is important, Ms. Jankowski."

I brought the receiver back to my ear. A few moments of silence hung between us as I considered his words. Adam had explained that he picked the Booker murders for a class assignment, something he called a Criminal Defender Clinic. As part of his research he wanted to talk about my time with the family. In the end I decided Adam was on a fool's mission, and though I agreed with him that Leland wasn't a murderer, there was no use getting involved. After a few beats, I sharply denied Adam's request and slammed down the phone.

I slept badly that night, waking to a sense of guilt, my sheets damp with sweat. Rising, I stepped into the shower, hoping to wash the residue of my dream away. After toweling off I paused to study my reflection in the mirror. Dark circles under my eyes gave me a haunted look. Pressing my palms against both sides of my neck, I lifted the loose skin. A younger self stared back at me and I thought—not for the first time—about making an appointment with a plastic surgeon. I was wise enough to know that nothing could restore my youth, but at that moment I would have given anything to turn back the hands of time and prevent the murders of Marley Booker and those precious girls.

When the phone rang, I checked the caller ID. Lacking the energy to debate the issue with Adam again, I decided to let the machine answer his call.

"Jean, are you there? I know it's early but I wanted to catch you before you leave for work. I'm going to be down on the Jersey shore next weekend, and I'd like to meet over a cup of coffee. I've got some new information about the case that I think might interest you. Call me, okay?"

It was a nice try, but Adam would have to do better than that.

Classes at Northwood High were scheduled to start in less than two weeks. In the rush to prepare for the influx of new students, I put Adam Bennett out of my mind. Car keys in hand, I was about to run out for groceries when the doorbell rang. Standing before me was a young man in a suit that looked too pricy for one of those guys canvassing to save my soul. A leather messenger bag with his initials, AKB, was slung over his shoulder. Adam gave me a vaguely familiar grin, letting me know that in our little dance he had just gained the upper hand.

"I told you to leave me alone," I said.

"Mr. Booker said you would help."

It surprised me to hear that Leland sent Adam. After all, we both had secrets that were best kept in the shadows of the past. A gray squirrel dashed across my lawn, scurrying up a black oak where he stopped and looked around. His tail twitched some kind of warning before he bounded up the trunk and disappeared in the branches. The distraction gave me time to think.

"I didn't know the Bookers very well," I lied. "And I can't add to what I told the detectives at the time. Unfortunately, you caught me as I was on my way out, so if you don't mind . . ."

"I'll wait until you get back." Adam's grin was infectious. I couldn't help but smile back at him.

"You're wasting your time," I said.

"Leland Booker spent half his life in prison for a crime he didn't commit. What are a few hours of my time compared to that?"

Something shifted inside, and I felt my resolve slipping. I found myself nodding at him.