

## CHAPTER 1

### *Tia*

Happiness at someone else's expense came at a price. Tia had imagined judgment from the first kiss that she and Nathan shared. All year she'd waited to be punished for being in love, and in truth, she believed that whatever consequences came her way would be deserved.

She felt vaguely queasy from the late Sunday lunch she and Nathan had just shared. They'd ordered far too many courses; buttery appetizers, overdressed salad, and marbled meat roiled in her stomach. Black Forest cake had left her mouth pasty with sugar and chocolate. Each time Nathan patted his thickening middle with chagrin, she worried that she'd become Nathan's accomplice in more than one sin.

Since childhood, she'd hated heavy food. Instead of sharing this lunch, she wished they could have waited until tomorrow to see each other, when they could sit on a blanket watching fireworks explode on the Esplanade and listening to the Boston Pops. The Fourth of July was a holiday without the burden of expectations; a perfect celebration for them.

Nathan squeezed her hand as they walked toward her apartment. His obvious pride delighted her. She was twenty-four, he was

thirty-seven, and this was the first time she'd been loved by a man of substance. Each time they met, she discovered new love-struck traits—details she'd never admit to anyone, like the way his hands seemed more like a cowboy's than a professor's. Qualities that might seem ordinary to someone who'd grown up with a father, Tia added to her list of Nathan lore.

Last week, he'd seemed like Superman when he came over carrying a toolbox, planning to install a showerhead that sprayed more than a weak stream. Attached to the handle was a card where he'd written, "This is for you to keep here."

The words made Tia feel as though he'd use it again.

No present could have pleased her more.

Mostly, she found Nathan perfect. Muscled arms. A wide back. His sardonic New York edge, delivered with a crooked smile—worlds away from the street humor of the South Boston boys of her youth—cracked her up, while his innate competence wrapped her in a thick blanket of security. Nathan's too-rare presence oxygenated her blood. When she ran her thumb up and down each of his fingers, the universe existed in that physical connection. Her life had shrunk to being with him.

She'd spent many hours crying during this year of Nathan. A man with a family couldn't spare a whole lot of attention.

When they reached the two-family house where she lived, Nathan circled her from behind. She leaned back and caught his kiss on the side of her neck. He ran his hands down the length of her body. "I never tire of touching you," he said.

"I hope that never changes."

"People always change." A look of discomfort crossed his face as he disengaged from her. "You deserve so much."

Did he think she deserved having him with her always? Tia put the key in the door. She comforted herself with the thought that he believed her worthy.

The moment they entered her apartment, Tia raced to the bathroom; lately she always needed the bathroom. Afterward, she spent a long time drying her hands and straightening an out-of-place an-

tique perfume bottle he'd bought her. She was constantly rearranging things, trying to make the pink crystal fit in with her Ikea-ware and her mother's castoffs. Tia's apartment became a stage set when Nathan visited. She spent hours before he arrived seeing every book, decoration, and poster through his eyes.

Nathan offered her a glass of wine when she joined him in the living room. "Listen to this one," he said. "I used an old Groucho line today—I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member—to illustrate a point, and a student asked me who Groucho Marx was."

Tia put out a refusing palm for the wine. "No thanks. I'm not in the mood."

"It made me feel about a hundred years old. Now, tell me the absolute truth: You know who Groucho Marx was, right?" He pushed the glass toward her. "At least taste it. It's probably the smoothest Merlot you'll ever have."

When she didn't have wine at lunch, he hadn't commented. "I'm in the mood for a Pepsi," she'd said. Maybe he thought she was acting like a teenager and he found it cute. Sometimes it bothered her, the things he found cute.

"*You Bet Your Life*," she said. "*Duck Soup. A Night at the Opera.*"

"Thank you. My faith in young people is restored."

"There aren't that many years between us." She hated when he dwelled on their age difference. "God knows I'm older than your students."

"And sharper," he said.

"That's right—don't forget."

The moment she shared her news, their romance would change forever, not that it had ever had been sustainable as it was. From the first time they slept together and he'd blurted out, "I'm crazy about you," she'd wanted more. First she'd wanted him in her bed all the time, and then she wanted the ring on his finger to be from her. When her need for him hit full throttle, she wanted the crease in his

pants to be put there by a dry cleaner she'd chosen, his shirt to smell of detergent she'd chosen.

Tia looked straight at him. "I'm pregnant."

He stood with his hand still extended, the wine sloshing against the edge of the glass like a riptide.

Tia reached for the glass. "You're going to drop it." She put it next to his on the coffee table.

"So that's why you didn't drink with dinner," he said.

He delivered the words slowly, so slowly it terrified Tia. Despite knowing how unlikely it was, she wanted to see a shy smile—a TV smile followed by a movie-style kiss. She put a hand over her still-flat belly, nausea welling again. She pushed away thoughts of Nathan's wife. Much as she tried, Tia couldn't stop thinking of Juliette—where she was, where she believed her husband had gone—but early on, he'd made it clear that topic was off-limits.

"How long have you known?" he asked.

"A few days. I wanted to tell you in person."

He nodded, finished his wine, and then sat. He laced his fingers and leaned over until his arms rested on his legs. He glanced up at her, looking stern, like the professor he was. "You're going to take care of it, right?"

Tia sank into the armchair across from the couch. "Take care of it?"

"Of course, take care of it." He closed his eyes for one moment. When he opened them, he sat up straighter. "What else can we do? What else makes sense?"

"I can have it." She wouldn't cry. If nothing else good in this damned world happened tonight, she'd keep from crying.

"Alone? Like your mother?" Nathan ran his hand over his chin. "You of all people know what a hard road that is, right, sweetheart?"

"Where are you going to be? Are you planning to die? Disappear?" Behind her brave front, Tia shrank to walnut size. She knew where Nathan would be. He'd be in his beautiful house with Juliette. The wife. The wife she'd once spied on. The wife who looked like sun and sky, whose blonde shine had blinded Tia.

“I’ll pay for whatever you need to take care of . . .”

“Take care of, take care of,” Tia mimicked. “Take care of what?” She wanted to force him to say the word *abortion*.

“My sons are so young.”

Tia clutched the arm of the chair. She craved the forbidden wine.

“I can’t stretch between two families. Please. Look at what this means,” he begged.

Dry skin peeled from her cracked thumb as she wrung her hands. Already this pregnancy had changed her, somehow drying her out while also making her pee twice an hour.

Nathan came and put his arms around her. “Pregnancy makes women romanticize things. You think after seeing the baby, fatherly love will overwhelm me and I’ll change my mind. But I can’t. I’m not leaving my family. Wasn’t I always straight about that?”

Oh God. He was crying.

His family.

She’d thought she was having his family.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Finally she spoke. “I can’t do it, Nathan. What you’re asking—I can’t.”

Nathan drew away. “I’m sorry, but there’s no possible way we can be together, Tia. Please. Take care of this. It’s the best thing for both of us. Honestly.”

By her sixth month of pregnancy, discomfort had become Tia’s new normal. Once upon a time so skinny that people pressed milkshakes on her, now she lumbered. She stuck a cushion behind her as she sat on the couch, surrounded by begging letters, photos, and essays from couples hungry for her baby.

Tia had refused to “take care of this,” as Nathan wanted. St. Peter’s nuns and Tia’s mother had done too good a job. She couldn’t rid herself of the pregnancy for fear of being haunted into the afterlife, and she couldn’t find the courage to hold her child in this life, so here she was, six months pregnant, choosing a mother and father for her baby.

Picking adoptive parents, she was faced with impossible choices. She sorted through hundreds of letters from men and women desperate for the baby growing inside her. Potential mothers and fathers swam before her until she could barely remember who was the librarian from Fall River and which was the couple reminiscent of her scariest Sunday school teachers. They all promised nurturing love, backyards the size of Minnesota, and Ivy League schools.

After three cups of sugary mint tea, missing coffee more with each sip, Tia narrowed the choices to the three most likely couples. She sifted through their pictures and letters, and then laid them out like tarot cards. Then, with the fear of continuing to face this task hastening her decision, she picked the man and woman she deemed most likely to be good parents. She balanced their photos on her big belly and then moved them around like paper dolls, acting out everything they'd said during the phone conversation she'd had with them, both of them sounding so sure of themselves, so smart and together.

"Hello, Tia," she imagined Paper Caroline's voice squeaking. "I want your baby. I'm a pathologist researching children's cancer. My husband has a very large family, and he's always been drawn to children."

"Tell her about being a counselor at Paul Newman's camp. What's the name? You know. The one for kids with cancer?" Paper Peter laid a gentle hand on saintly Paper Caroline's arm.

"The Hole in the Wall Gang." Paper Caroline bowed her head so as not to appear boastful.

A month later, when Caroline and Peter learned it was a girl, they told Tia they were naming the baby Savannah. An idiotic name. Tia called the baby inside her Honor, her mother's middle name—also an idiotic name, but it wasn't meant to be used out of utero, and besides, idiotic or not, it certainly beat Savannah. Why not simply call her Britney and be done with it? If she wasn't so busy caring for her ailing mother, she'd choose new parents for her daughter.

Tia stumbled as she fumed over the choice, bumping into a food

cart in the hall of the hospice that had become her mother's home. Clumsiness was Tia's companion. Clumsiness, the constant need to pee, and a life of seclusion. She'd gone from existing for Nathan's visits, to carrying a relentless reminder of him. Each time she stroked her stomach, she felt as though she were caressing him. Hard as she tried, she couldn't replace sadness with hate.

Her mother was the only person with whom she spent time. Every other friend from her past—except for Robin, in California, too far away to visit—thought she'd gone to Arizona for a year to work on a master's in gerontology, based on her work with the elderly. In reality, she moved to Jamaica Plain, an entirely different sort of neighborhood from Southie.

Unlike her old neighborhood, where she'd see people she knew on every street, Jamaica Plain was always in flux—a mix not just of ethnicity and race, but of class, culture, and age. Her only acquaintance was the librarian, with whom she had a nodding *hi, how are you*, relationship. JP was an easy place to remain anonymous.

She'd wanted to be where nobody knew her name. Being the object of gossip or pity wasn't in her plans. Her mother's savings supported both of them—Tia rarely left the house. Life became mainlining novels, watching TV, and caring for her mother, who'd moved in with Tia until her pain overcame Tia's nursing ability.

She crept into her mother's room on angel feet. That's what her mother had called it when Tia the child tried to sneak into the kitchen for extra cookies. "Sweet one, mothers can hear their children, even when they use their angel feet."

Though Tia tried to pretend otherwise, her mother lay dying as Tia's baby grew.

"Mom?" she whispered.

The room remained silent. Tia dug her nails into her palms and bent over the bed, watching until she saw the slight rise and fall of her mother's chest. Her mother was only forty-nine. Liver cancer had overtaken her in a matter of months, although Tia suspected her mother had hidden the truth for some time.

Her mother had been in hospice for twenty-three days. Maybe

the younger you were when you became sick, the longer you held on, or maybe twenty-three days was average, normal—whatever you'd call the amount of time from entering a hospice until you died. She couldn't bring herself to find out. Perhaps if she had a sister or brother who'd team up with her, she'd have the courage to ask such a vulgar question, but it had always been just the two of them, Tia and her mother.

Dying could be such a long process, which surprised Tia. You'd think that working with the elderly would have taught her more about death and dying, but she'd provided senior recreation, not counseling. Word games were her specialty. In her work world, a client didn't show up for Scrabble, and the next thing you knew, he or she was dead.

You didn't see the person die.

Losing her mother seemed impossible, as though someone planned to cut the string that held Tia to earth. She'd be floating without ballast. Tia had none of the usual family: no aunts, no uncles, no cousins—her mother filled all those roles.

Tia settled into the chair next to her mother's bed. She wondered why, when they so stressed comfort, the hospice didn't provide chairs where a pregnant woman could sit pain free. She slipped a paperback from her tote: a mystery so simple that even if she retained only a quarter of what she read, she could still track the plot. Her mother's copy of *Jane Eyre*, complete with the magical happy ending, was in her bag, but she saved that to read aloud to her mother after supper.

Her mother opened her eyes. "Been here long, sweetheart?" She reached for Tia's hand. "Tired?"

Tia ran a hand over her large belly. "Always."

"You don't have to come here every night, you know."

Her mother repeated this daily. It was her version of "I'm worried about you."

"Tired isn't life threatening."

"When you're pregnant—"

"When you're pregnant, it's what you are. Remember?" Tia asked.



“Was it like that for you? Did I drive you crazy even before I was born?”

Her mother struggled to sit up. Tia offered a hand for leverage and then tucked pillows behind her mother’s back. Her mother’s skin, once such a pretty, pink-tinged white—pale Irish skin that burned with one wink from the sun; that was how her mother described herself—now looked mean yellow against the sheets.

“I remember everything about being pregnant,” her mother said. “Are you going to be able to forget?”

“Mom, please don’t,” Tia said.

“I have to, honey.” Her mother retrieved her glasses from the metal tray attached to the bed. Once the wire rims were firmly in place, she looked healthier. Glasses, jewelry, and other accoutrements seemed like totems against death. Tia constantly bought bright trinkets to cheer her mother. Electric blue beads threaded onto silver cord clanked around her mother’s wrist. “They match your eyes,” Tia had said, after buying them the previous week.

“Why don’t I get you some ice water?” Tia said.

“Don’t run away. Listen to me. You need to face how sorry you’ll be if you go through with this.”

*This* was the word her mother used to describe Tia’s plan to give up her baby for adoption.

“I’d be a horrible mother,” Tia said.

“You think that now. Wait until you hold your baby.”

Each skirmish in her mother’s battle to stop the adoption made Tia feel worse. Every reason Tia laid out sounded lamer than the last.

“I’ll be a bad mother.”

“I don’t have enough money.”

“I’m too ashamed of not knowing who the father is.”

Rather than telling her mother the truth, Tia pretended to be a woman who’d slept with too many men and, thus, didn’t know the identity of her baby’s father. The horror of that lie was still better than the truth. She couldn’t bear telling her mother she’d been sleeping with a married man—and had tried to steal him.

Everything she said sounded ridiculous. Maybe she’d be a bad

mother, God knows she had no money, and immature should be her middle name, but if that were all it took to give up a baby, the world would be filled with orphans.

Tia caressed her belly. *Sweet little baby, I'm sorry.*

Tia had grown up in the wake of her father's vanishing. In a vacuum of knowledge, her mother assumed he'd chosen a life with another woman—living a life with more fun and liquor than Tia's puritanical mother would accept. In her mother's estimation, sleeping with a married man was a sin only exceeded by abortion.

Without the truth, Tia could offer no reasoning that would make sense. How could she admit that she was giving up a child whose existence would remind her of a man she loved, but could never have? How could Tia say this to her mother when Tia had no idea if she was being the most selfish she'd ever been, or the most selfless?

"The baby will have a better life than I'll ever be able to give her," Tia said. "Really, Mom. You saw their letter, the pictures. The baby will have good parents."

Her mother's eyes watered. Tia's mother never cried. Not when Tia broke her leg so badly that the bone stuck out. Not when she found out about the cancer. And not when Tia's father left—at least, not in front of Tia.

"I'm sorry." Her mother blinked, and the tears disappeared.

"Sorry? God, you've done nothing wrong."

Her mother folded her arms and clutched her elbows. "I must have done something awful to have you believe your baby will do better without you. Do you think your life at this moment is as well as you'll ever do? Don't you see that your future lies in front of you?"

Tia shrugged as though she were a child shutting down against shame, aching at the thought that she might let her mother die thinking she'd failed in raising her.

"Mom, it's not that."

"Then what?"

"I just don't think it's my path." Tia covered her belly with both hands. Every lie she told felt as though she were pushing her mother

further away, now when they needed closeness more than ever. “I don’t think she’s meant to be mine.”

“Please don’t make your decision yet. Something’s tormenting you, and I know it’s not what you’re telling me. That’s okay. But believe me, if you pick giving in to your pain over choosing your baby, you’ll never recover from either.”