

Chapter One

Before

The decision to kill herself brought her peace. Everything would be quiet, and warm and soft. She could sleep, just sleep forever. Never again would she hide in the dark when the landlord banged on the door for the rent she couldn't pay.

Or climb out a window again, to take off. Again.

She wouldn't have to give blow jobs to some sweaty john to buy food. Or the pills, the pills she needed more than food.

The pills that made everything quiet, even the pain.

Maybe she'd even go to heaven, like it looked in the books in Bible study where everything was fluffy white clouds and golden light and everyone smiled.

Maybe she'd go to hell, with all the fire and the screaming and eternal damnation.

Taking a life, even your own, was a big sin according to the Reverend Horace Greenspan, the recipient of her first BJ—payment and penance when he'd caught her lip-locked with Wayne Kyle Ribbet, and Wayne Kyle's hand under her shirt.

The experience had taught her, at age twelve, it was better to receive than give payment for such tedious services.

Still, suicide ranked as a bigger sin than blowing some grunting asshole for traveling money or a handful of Oxy. So maybe she'd go to hell.

But wasn't she there already?

Sick, half the time sick, and her skin on fire. Sleeping in her car more often than in a bed. Driving from one crap town to the next.

Trading sex in steamy alleys for pills.

It wasn't going to get better, not ever. She'd finally accepted that.

So she'd take the pills, enough of the pills so the quiet went on and on and on.

But before she did, she had to decide whether to take her little boy with her. Wouldn't he be better off, too?

She shifted her gaze to the rearview mirror to watch him. He sat in his grubby Spider-Man pj's, half-asleep as he munched from a bag of Fritos she'd grabbed from a machine when she'd pumped all but the last few dollars of her money into the gas tank. They kept him quiet, and she needed the quiet.

She hadn't had time—or just hadn't thought—to grab anything when she'd scooped him out of bed. She had money—nearly gone now—and pills—far too few of them—stuffed in her purse.

They didn't have much anyway, and what they did she'd shoved into a trash bag weeks before. She had another couple of outfits for the kid—nothing clean. But she'd nearly gotten busted trying to lift a T-shirt and jeans for him from a Walmart in Birmingham.

If she got busted, they'd take her kid, and he was the only thing completely hers. She'd wanted the best for him, hadn't she? She'd tried, hadn't she? Five years of trying after the asshole who got her pregnant told her to fuck off.

She'd done her best, but it wasn't enough. Never enough.

And the kid was no prize, she had to admit. Whiny and clingy, Christ knew, carrying on so she'd lost babysitters when she'd tried serving drinks or stripping it off in some hellhole.

But she loved the little son of a bitch, and he loved her.

"I'm thirsty, Mommy."

Thirsty, hungry, tired, not tired. Always something. She'd seen motherhood as something holy once. Until she'd learned it was nothing but constant drudgery, demands, disappointments.

And she wasn't good enough, just like everyone had told her all her damn life.

She slowed enough to pass the bottle of Cherry Coke between the seats. "Drink this."

"Don't like that! Don't like it! I want orange soda pop! I want it! You're a bad mommy!"

"Don't say that. Now, don't you say that. You know it hurts my feelings."

"Bad Mommy, Bad Mommy. I'm thirsty!"

"Okay, okay! I'll get you a drink when I find a place to stop."

"Thirsty." The whine cut through her brain like a buzz saw. "Thirsty *now!*"

"I know, baby darling. We'll stop soon. How about we sing a song?" God, her head felt like a soggy apple full of worms.

If she could be sure, absolutely sure, she'd die from it, she'd swerve into an oncoming car and be done.

Instead, she started singing "The Wheels on the Bus." And when he sang with her, she was, for a moment, almost happy.

She'd put one of her pills in his drink, that's what she'd do. He'd sleep—she'd given him a portion of a pill before when she'd needed him to sleep. But she'd give him a whole one, and wouldn't he just drift away to heaven?

He could have a puppy, and friends to play with, and all the toys he wanted. Orange soda pop by the gallon.

Little boys, even bratty ones, didn't go to hell.

She pulled off the highway and hunted up a twenty-four-hour mart. She parked well back from the lights where insects swarmed in clouds.

"You have to stay in the car. If you don't, I can't get you a drink. You stay in the car now, you hear? Be quiet, be good, and I'll get you some candy, too."

"I want Skittles!"

"Then Skittles it'll be."

The lights inside were so bright they burned her eyes, but she got him an orange Fanta and Skittles. She thought about sliding the candy into her purse, but she was too damn tired to bother.

It left her with less than a dollar in change, but she wouldn't need money where she was going anyway.

As she crossed back to the car, she dug out a pill from the zipped pocket in her purse. Thinking of puppies and toys and her baby darling giggling with the angels, she popped the tab and slipped it into the can.

This was best for both of them.

He smiled at her—sweet, sweet smile—and bounced on the seat when she came back.

"I love you, baby darling."

"I love you, Mommy. Did you get my Skittles? Did ya? Are we going on another 'venture?"

"Yeah, I got 'em, and yeah, you bet. The biggest adventure yet. And when we get there, there'll be angels and flowers and puppy dogs."

"Can I have a puppy? Can I, can I, can I? I want a puppy now!"

"You can have all the puppies."

She looked back at him as he slurped some of the drink through the straw she'd stuck in the pop top. Her little towheaded man. He'd grown inside her, come out of her. She'd given up everything for him.

No one in her life had ever loved her as he did.

And she'd ruined it.

Windows open to the hot, thick air, she drove, not back to the highway, but aimlessly. Somewhere in Louisiana. Somewhere, but it didn't matter. She drove, just drove with the sweaty air blowing around her. Away from the strip malls, away from the lights.

He sang, but after a while his voice had that sleepy slur to it.

"Go to sleep now, baby darling. Just go to sleep now."

He'd be better off, better off, wouldn't he be better off?

Tears tracked down her cheeks as she took a pill for herself.

She'd find a place, a dark, quiet place. She'd down the rest of the pills, then climb in the back with her baby boy. They'd go to heaven together.

God wouldn't take her away from her baby darling or him from her. He'd go to heaven, so she would, too. The God in Bible study had a long white beard, kind eyes. Light poured right out of his fingertips.

That was the way to heaven.

And she saw a light instead of the dark. It seemed to shine above a small white church sitting by itself on a little hill. Flowers bloomed around it, and grass grew neat and smooth.

She could smell it all through the open window.

Dazed, half dreaming, she stopped the car. This was heaven, or close enough. Close enough for her baby darling.

She carried him to it like an offering to the kind-eyed God with his white beard, to the angels with their spread wings and soft smiles.

He stirred as she laid him down by the door, whined for her.

"You sleep now, my baby darling. Just sleep."

She stroked him awhile until he settled. He hadn't had enough of the drink, she thought, not enough to take him all the way to those angels and puppies. But maybe this was the best. Close to heaven, under the light, with flowers all around.

She walked back to the car that smelled of candy and sweat. He'd spilled the drink, she saw now, when he'd fallen asleep, and the Skittles were scattered over the back seat like colorful confetti.

He was in God's hands now.

She drove away, drove and drove with her mind floating on the drug. Happy now, no pain. So light, so light. She sang to him, forgetting he no longer sat in the back seat.

Her head didn't hurt now, and her hands didn't want to shake. Not with the night wind blowing over her face, through her hair. And the pill doing its magic.

Was she going to meet her friends? She couldn't quite remember.

What classes did she have in the morning?

It didn't matter, nothing mattered now.

When she saw the lake, and the moonlight on it, she sighed. There, of course. That's where she needed to go.

Like a baptism. A cleansing on the way to heaven.

Thrilled, she punched the gas and drove into the water. As the car started to sink, so slowly, she smiled, and closed her eyes.

Now

Her name was Mary Kate Covino. She was twenty-five, an assistant marketing manager at Dowell and Associates. She'd started there straight out of college, and had climbed a couple of rungs since.

She liked her job.

She mostly liked her life, even though her jerk of a boyfriend had dumped her right before the romantic getaway she'd planned—meticulously—like a campaign.

Yesterday? The day before? She couldn't be sure. Everything blurred. It was June—June something—2061.

She had a younger sister, Tara, a grad student at Carnegie Mellon. Tara was the smart one. And an older brother, Carter, the clever one. He'd just gotten engaged to Rhonda.

She had a roommate, Cleo—like another sister—and they shared a two-bedroom apartment on the Lower West Side.

She'd grown up in Queens, and though her parents had divorced when she'd been eleven, they'd all been pretty civilized about it. Both her parents had remarried—no stepsibs—but their second round was okay. Everybody stayed chill.

Her maternal grandparents—Gran and Pop—had given her a puppy for her sixth birthday. Best present ever. Lulu lived a happy life until the age of fourteen when she'd just gone to sleep and hadn't woken up again.

She liked to dance, liked sappy, romantic vids, preferred sweet wines to dry, and had a weakness for her paternal grandmother's—Nonna's—sugar cookies.

She reminded herself of all this and more—her first date, how she'd broken her ankle skiing (first and last time)—every day. Multiple times a day.

It was essential she remember who she was, where she came from, and all the pieces of her life.

Because sometimes everything got twisted and blurred and out of sync, and she started to believe him.

She'd been afraid he'd rape her. But he never touched her that way. Never touched her at all—not when she was awake.

She couldn't remember how she'd gotten here. The void opened up after Teeg ditched her, and all the shouting, and the bitching, her walking home from the bar, half-drunk, unhappy. Berating herself for haunting the damn stupid bar he owned, putting in hours helping out four, even five nights a damn stupid week.

For nothing but one of his killer smiles.

Then she'd woken up here, feeling sick, her head pounding. In the dark, chained up—like something in a horror vid—in a dark room with a cot.

Then he'd come, the man, looking like someone's pale and bookish uncle.

He turned on a single light so she saw it was a basement, windowless, with concrete floors and walls of pargeted stone. He had sparkling blue eyes and snow-white hair.

He set a tray holding a bowl of soup, a cup of tea on the cot and just beamed at her.

"You're awake. Are you feeling better, Mommy?"

An accent, a twangy southern one with a child's cadence. She needed to remember that, but in the moment, she'd known only panic.

She'd begged him to let her go, wept, pulled against the shackles on her right wrist, left ankle.

He ignored her, simply went to a cupboard and took out clothes. He set them, neatly folded, on the bed.

"I know you haven't been feeling good, but I'm going to take care of you. Then you'll take care of me. That's what mommies do. They take care of their little boys."

While she wept, screamed, demanded to know what he wanted, begged him to let her go, he just kept smiling with those sparkling eyes.

"I made you soup and tea, all by myself. You'll feel better when you eat. I looked and looked for you. Now here you are, and we can be together again. You can be a good mommy."

Something came into those eyes that frightened her more than the dark, than the shackles.

"You're going to be a good mommy and take care of me the way you're supposed to this time. I made you soup, so you eat it! Or you'll be sorry."

Terrified, she eased down on the cot, picked up the spoon. It was lukewarm and bland, but it soothed her raw throat.

"You're supposed to say *thank you*! You have to tell me I'm a good boy!"

"Thank you. I—I don't know your name."

She thought he'd kill her then. His face turned red, his eyes wild. His fisted hands pounded together.

"I'm your baby darling. Say it! Say it!"

"Baby darling. I'm sorry, I don't feel well. I'm scared."

"I was scared when you locked me in a room so you could do ugly things with men. I was scared when you gave me things to make me sleep so you could do them. I was scared when I woke up sick and you weren't there, and it was dark and I cried and cried."

"That wasn't me. Please, that wasn't me. I—you're older than me, so I can't be your mother. I didn't—"

"You go to hell for lying! To hell with the devil and the fire. You eat your soup and drink your tea or maybe I'll leave you all alone here like you left me."

She spooned up soup. "It's really good. You did a good job."

Like a light switch, he beamed. "All by myself."

"Thanks. Ah, there's no one here to help you?"

"You're here now, Mommy. I waited a long, long time. People were mean to me, and I cried for you, but you didn't come."

"I'm sorry. I . . . I couldn't find you. How did you find me?"

"I found three. Three's lucky, and one will be right. I'm tired now. It's my bedtime. When you're all better, you'll tuck me into bed like you should have before. And read me a story. And we'll sing songs."

He started toward the door. "The wheels on the bus go round and round." He looked back at her, the face of a man easily sixty singing in the voice of a child. "Good night, Mommy." That fierceness came back into his eyes. "*Say good night, baby darling!*"

"Good night, baby darling."

He closed the door behind him. She heard locks snap into place.

She heard other things in the timeless void of that windowless room. Voices, screaming, crying. Sometimes she thought the voices were her own, the screams her own, and sometimes she knew they weren't.

But when she called out, no one came.

Once she thought she heard banging on the wall across the room, but she was so tired.

She knew he put drugs in the food, but when she didn't eat, he turned off all the lights and left her in the dark until she did.

Sometimes he didn't speak with the child's voice, the accent, but with a man's. So reasonable, so definite.

One night, he didn't come at all, not with food, not to demand she change her clothes. She had three outfits to rotate. He didn't come to sit and smile that terrifying smile and ask for a song or a story.

She'd die here, slowly starving to death, alone, chained, trapped, because he'd forgotten her, or gotten hit by a car.

But no, no, someone had to be looking for her. She had friends and family. Someone was looking for her.

Her name was Mary Kate Covino. She was twenty-five.

As she went through her daily litany, she heard shouting—him. His voice high-pitched, like the bratty child he became when upset or angry. Then another voice . . . No, she realized, still his, but his man's voice. A coldly angry man's voice.

And the weeping, the begging. That was female.

She couldn't make out the words, just the sounds of anger and desperation.

She dragged herself over to the wall, pressed against it, hoping to hear. Or be heard.

"Please help me. Help me. Help me. I'm here. I'm Mary Kate, and I'm here."

Someone screamed. Something crashed. Then everything went quiet.

She beat her fists bloody on the wall, shouted for someone to help.

The door to her prison burst open. He stood there, eyes wild and mad, his face and clothes splattered with blood. And blood still dripping from the knife in his hand.

"Shut up!" He took a step toward her. "You shut the fuck up!" And another.

She didn't know where it came from, but she shouted out: "Baby darling!" And he stopped. "I heard terrible sounds, and I thought someone was hurting you. I couldn't get to you, baby darling. I couldn't protect you. Someone hurt my baby darling."

"She lied!"

"Who lied, baby darling?"

"She pretended to be Mommy, but she wasn't. She called me names and tried to hurt me. She slapped my face! But I hurt her. You go to hell when you lie, so she's gone to hell."

He'd killed someone, someone like her. Killed someone with the knife, and would kill her next.

Through the wild fear came a cold, hard will. One to survive.

"Oh, my poor baby darling. Can you take these . . . bracelets off so I can take care of you?"

Some of the mad fury seemed to die out of his eyes. But a kind of shrewdness replaced it. "She lied, and she's in hell. Remember what happens when you lie. Now you have to be quiet. Number one's in hell, so number two can clean up the mess. Mommy cleans up messes. Maybe you'll be lucky number three. But if you're not quiet, if you make my head hurt, you'll be unlucky."

"I could clean up for you."

"It's not your turn!"

He stomped out, and for the first time didn't shut and lock the door. Mary Kate shuffled over as close as she could. She couldn't reach the door, but at last she could see out of it.

A kind of corridor—stone walls, concrete floor—harshly lit. And another door almost directly across from hers. Bolted from the outside.

Number two? Another woman, another prisoner. She started to call out, but heard him coming back.

Survive, she reminded herself, and went back to the cot, sat.

He didn't have the knife now, but a tall cup. Some sort of protein shake, she thought. He'd pushed one on her before. Drugged. More drugs.

"Baby darling—"

"I don't have time now. She ruined everything. You drink this because it has nutrition."

"Why don't I make you something to eat? You must be hungry."

He looked at her, and she thought he seemed almost sane again. And when he spoke, his voice sounded calm and easy. "You're not ready." When he stroked a hand over her hair, she fought not to shudder.

"Not nearly. But I think you will be. I hope so."

She felt the quick pinch of the pressure syringe.

"I don't have time. You can drink this when you wake up. You have to be healthy. Lie down and go to sleep. I'm going to be very busy."

She started to fade when he walked to the door. And heard the bolt snap home when she melted down on the cot.

* * *

He had a plan. He always had a plan. And he had the tools.

With meticulous stitches—he was a meticulous man—he sewed the neck wound on the fraud. Over the wound he fastened a wide black velvet ribbon.

It looked, to his eye, rather fetching.

He'd already cut her hair before bringing her—with so much hope!—to this stage. Now he brushed it, used some of the product to style it properly.

He'd washed her, very carefully, so not a drop of blood remained, before he'd chosen the outfit.

While he worked, he had one of Mommy's songs playing.

"I'm coming up," he sang along with Pink, "so you better get this party started."

Once he had her dressed, he started on her makeup. He'd always loved watching her apply it. All the paints and powders and brushes.

He painted her nails—fingers and toes—a bright, happy blue. Her favorite color. He added the big hoop earrings, and he'd already added the other piercings, so fit studs into the second hole and the cartilage of her left ear.

And the little silver bar in her navel.

She'd liked shoes with high, high heels and pointy toes, even though she mostly wore tennis shoes. But he remembered how she'd looked at the high ones in store windows, and sometimes they went in so she could try them on.

Just pretending, baby darling, she'd told him. Just playing dress-up.

So he slipped her feet into ones she'd have wished for. A little tight, but it didn't matter.

And as a final tribute, spritzed her body with Party Girl, her favorite scent.

When he was done, when he'd done his very best, he took a picture of her. He'd frame it, keep it to remind him.

"You're not Mommy, but I wanted you to be. You shouldn't have lied, so you have to leave. If you hadn't, we could've been happy."

Number two and number three were sleeping. He hoped number two had learned a lesson—you had to learn your lessons—when he'd made her clean up the mess.

Tomorrow, he'd cut her hair the right way and give her the tattoo and the piercings. And she'd see all she had to do was be a good mommy, and stay with him always, take care of him always.

And they'd be happy forever.

But the Fake Mommy had to leave.

He rolled her out on the gurney—a man with a plan—out through the door and into the garage. After opening the cargo doors, he rolled her—with some effort—up the ramp into the van.

He secured the gurney—couldn't have it rolling around!—then got behind the wheel. Though it was disappointing, he'd known he would probably go through more than one before finding the *right* one, so he already knew where to take her.

He drove carefully out of the garage and waited until they doors rumbled down closed behind him.

It had to be far enough away from the home he and Mommy would make so the police didn't come knocking to ask questions. But not so far away he had to take too much time getting there.

Accidents happened.

It had to be quiet, with no one to see. Even at this time of night in New York, you had to know where to find quiet. So the little playground seemed perfect.

Children didn't play at three in the morning. No, they did not! Even if they had to sleep in the car because the mean landlord kicked them out, they didn't play so late.

He parked as close as he could, and worked quickly. He wore black, coveralls and booties over his shoes. A cap that covered his hair. He'd sealed his hands, but wore gloves, too. Nothing showed. Nothing at all.

He rolled the gurney right up to the bench where good mommies would watch their children play in the sunshine.

He laid her on it like she was sleeping, and put the sign he'd made with construction paper and black crayon over her folded hands.

It said what she was.

BAD MOMMY

He went back to the van and drove away. Drove back and into the garage, into the house.

He had the house because she'd left him. He had the house because she'd given him the deed and the keys and the codes and everything.

But he didn't want everything. He only wanted one thing.

His mommy.

In the quiet house he changed into his pajamas. He washed his hands and face and brushed his teeth like a good boy.

In the glow of the night light, he climbed into bed.

He fell asleep with a smile on his face and dreamed the dreams of the young and innocent.