

MAGGIE INSIDE OUT

A Novel

by

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CHAPTER 1

Most folks in Rosemont thought I was crazy. Many dismissed me as slow or stupid. In Katherine's eyes I was a project, a calling, another worthy challenge to overcome.

I was none of those, but I understood why people thought so. Whenever I found myself speaking to a stranger—and by stranger I mean anyone other than my sister or father—a barrage of thoughts raced through my mind, jostling for position. By the time I arranged them in a clear, concise order, the opportunity to communicate had flown south with the birds, leaving me standing in an empty room, hand on my cheek, naked words dancing on the tip of my tongue.

Just like at the hospital yesterday.

“You sure you’ll be okay, honey?” the nurse had asked, her tone rivaling that of a kindergarten teacher. One who really loved her work. “Your dad’ll be laid up at home for a while. He won’t be able to . . .” And then came the inevitable reaction: That horrible, *oh my dear, I must take pity on the poor thing* smile. “Why don’t I give Social Services a call, see if they could put you up someplace until he’s back on his feet?”

I’m forty years old! I wanted to scream. But I never screamed. People already thought I was nuts. If they saw me get angry, I’d probably be locked away in a padded room for my own

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protection. So I spoke softly, quietly, rarely with any expression, but always with the intent to keep things short so the words wouldn't get muddled on the way out.

"I'll be fine," is what I'd told the nurse.

Having a scar on my cheek doesn't make me an idiot, is what I should have said.

Hindsight remained a 20-20 affair.

I glanced at my shadowy reflection in the varnished tabletop and ran my fingertip down the line of bumpy red skin on my cheek. Over the years, its origin had sparked more rumors than my sister'd had high school dates. Old Man Greenberg, hardly one to talk of imperfections given his reputation as the town drunk, swore I'd been abducted by aliens and the scar was the result of their evil testing. He never said what he thought they were testing for. Mrs. Bell, a devout Jehovah's Witness who lived up the street, referred to it as a beauty mark gone bad. When I told her I'd lived the first eight years of my life without a sign of the thing, she just smiled.

I took a cola from the refrigerator and went into the living room. Dad was snoozing on the couch, snoring lightly. Sports magazines, the TV remote, and an open bag of chips cluttered the end table beside him.

My father's the one who got hurt would have been a proper response to the nurse, I realized as I pulled the afghan over his legs. I drank a few sips of cola and settled into the recliner. Fortunately, it didn't really matter what I'd said or hadn't said: Dad was home now, and he was going to be fine.

"His scrapes and bruises are superficial," the doctor had assured me, taking care not to stare at my cheek as he related the news. "The injury to his leg's a little more serious, though. He'll have to use a cane for a while."

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We'd rented one from the hospital, but getting Dad to use it was likely to take some clever maneuvering on my part. As a former detective, he hated to appear weak in any way, never mind he was lucky to be alive.

A thump came from the porch. As I pondered how I was going to fit another caring neighbor's casserole into the refrigerator ("We were so sorry to hear about your father . . ."), I remembered it was Friday. Our free and for the most part useless weekly *Illinois Action Advertiser* had arrived. Yippee. I took another sip of cola. If only I had remained so calm and collected yesterday, stayed put in the storeroom when I heard the commotion. Everything had happened so fast. One second I'd been unpacking canned vegetables, and the next . . .

"Concentrate." I could still hear the deputy delivering his order in no-nonsense terms as the medics strapped my father to a gurney. *Please*—spoken in a strained, almost desperate tone—followed only after he realized he was talking to me. "I know it's hard, Maggie, but could you tell me what you remember?"

I lay my head against the back of the chair and closed my eyes. I remembered hearing Dad raise his voice, something he rarely did to anyone, let alone a customer. In my mind's eye I watched myself walk slowly to the swinging doors that separated the stockroom from the store and peering over them to see what was happening. That's where the details blurred.

I must have stepped through the doors at the exact moment Bobby pulled his gun, that's why I couldn't remember it specifically. I had a very clear vision of another armed man standing in the outer doorway—a tall, lanky man in a ski mask, leather jacket, and torn jeans. I froze just long enough to make distant eye contact with him, then ducked behind the shelves and screamed for Dad to get down.

At least I think I screamed. I couldn't actually hear my voice when I replayed the scene in my mind. It might have coincided with the gunfire, but that part was fuzzy, too. All I saw clearly

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were the aftereffects, stark images burned into my mind: A boy in a ski mask lying on the floor by the check-out; Dad stumbling around him and falling down; blood; sandwiches and donuts scattered everywhere. And later, most vividly of all, the deputy's expression when he pulled off the mask, revealing Bobby Tyler's handsome young face. I'd wanted to scream when I recognized him, to cry and rave in disbelief. But all I'd been able to do was stare.

Bobby was Rosemont High's best basketball player ever. College scouts had crammed into our little gym from such prestigious universities as North Carolina, UCLA, and Indiana (the Hoosiers!), to watch him play. They wouldn't be coming around anymore. Not to see Bobby.

I rubbed my palms together and drew a ragged breath. If it hadn't been for me, Bobby might have escaped with his accomplice and I might be ringing up a sale of oat bran that very minute. We wouldn't have lost more than a couple hundred dollars in the robbery; late mornings, especially Thursdays, were the slowest times of the week.

Of course it was also possible Bobby or his partner would have opted to strike first, especially given the small amount in the cash register. Who was to say it couldn't have been my father's face I'd watched disappear inside that body bag?

I rubbed my goose bumpy arms and stood. As I crossed in front of the bookcase beside the window, Katherine's latest photo caught my eye. I turned away, but I still felt her watching me, like one of those eerie paintings in a horror movie or video game.

No secrets, Maggie, her wispy voice floated in my mind.

Some days it was hard to believe ten years had passed since she'd moved out. Other times, it felt like twenty. Regardless, every word of her farewell remained embedded in my mind. *I'm going away, Maggie, but I'm not leaving your life. Or Dad's. Don't forget, no secrets. I'll never be more than a phone call away.*

But she was. Two thousand miles away in San Francisco.

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The phone rang. I dug the handset out from under the bag of chips and hurried into the kitchen. “Hello?” I squeaked. I’d half-expected it to be Katherine—we connected that way sometimes—but whoever it was hung up.

Jitterbug flung a chorus of resounding peeps my way from his cage across the room. I let him out and stood by the window, staring through the foggy glass. Scattered snowflakes fell from the cloudy sky, the thin, powdery kind that froze into a crusty layer overnight.

Most likely, it was raining in San Francisco.

No secrets.

I sighed. Dad wouldn’t be pleased if he woke and heard me telling my sister about the robbery. Not that he didn’t love Kathy, as he continued to address her despite her corrections. (“It’s Katherine, Dad. *Please.*”) I knew he was as proud of her as any father could be. He just assumed taking care of the family was his responsibility. Whether that mind-set stemmed from Mother having abandoned us or the years he’d spent as a detective in Chicago remained open to debate, but it was probably a little of both.

My stomach gurgled. I filled a glass with water and drank half. Talking on the phone made me feel as if I were about to throw up. You’d think it would be easy, speaking to people without having to worry about them looking—or rather trying not to look—at my face. But it wasn’t. I set down the glass, grabbed the handset from the table, and keyed in Katherine’s number at *The Chronicle*. One ring, two. My throat felt dry, tight. Three. I rocked back and forth on my heels. Maybe I’d get her voice mail asking me to leave a message. I should have jotted down what I—

“Katherine Murray’s office. This is Christie. May I help you?”

Christie. Her voice was clear, assertive. She probably looked as confident as she sounded. I swallowed. “Yes. I want . . . may I speak with Katherine, please?”

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“Excuse me, I didn’t hear . . . oh, wait. Is that you, Maggie?”

Even when they couldn’t see me, they knew. The knot in my throat swelled. I finished the water and wiped my palms on my slacks. “Yes.” *Louder.* “This is Maggie. Could you put Katherine on the line, please?”

“She’s in a meeting right now. Can it wait?”

I could almost see Christie rolling her eyes. God forbid Katherine’s dimwitted sister would dare to interrupt such a busy day. “No,” I said, trying to match Christie’s assertiveness. The word came out firmly, at least to me.

She sighed. “All right, Maggie. Hold on. I’ll see if I can track her down.”

I heard a rustling of papers, the usual office chatter in the background. Working there would be like having a TV playing in every room, each one tuned to a different channel. Heels clacked on the floor; Christie was on the move. She said hello to a few people. Seconds later, three crisp raps—knuckles on wood—echoed in my ears.

“I know, but it’s your *sister*,” Christie’s voice announced in a muffled sort of panic.

More footsteps, these a little less sharp to my ear. Katherine wore high heels, but never spikes. “Maggie?” she finally said.

I fought off a last-second urge to hang up. “Hi. I’m sorry to bother you at work like this, but . . .” Good grief, where to begin?

“Maggie, I’m in a meeting here, for Christ’s sake.” She stopped to clear her throat.

“Sorry. Things are pretty hectic this morning. Is anything wrong?”

“Well . . . sort of.”

“Sort of?” She forced a tight laugh. “What was it Dad used to say? Out with it, girl. I don’t have all day here.”

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Actually, he still said it. I reached up, tugged gently on my earring. For some odd reason, the action helped me concentrate. “The store was robbed,” I said. “Dad got shot. Bobby’s dead.”

“What?”

I switched the phone to my other ear as my sister gasped for breath.

“Oh my God!” she squealed. “Is Dad all right? What do you mean, he got shot? Bobby who?” Her voice hedged somewhere between panic and disbelief. “What about you? Are you hurt? What in the world happened?”

My temples began to throb. I’d never been very good at processing multiple questions, mostly because I tried to replay them in my mind before answering so I could respond in the proper order, preferably without offending anyone.

“Maggie?”

I tugged on my earring. “Dad’ll be okay. It was Bobby Tyler, and no, I’m not hurt.” Now what was the last one? A grainy black and white image of Joe Friday popped into my mind. *Just the facts, ma’am*. “Bobby and another guy tried to hold up the store yesterday. Dad shot Bobby, and the other robber shot Dad in the leg and ran off.”

I awarded myself a mental pat on the back for being so concise. Meanwhile, Katherine seemed to have disappeared. “Katherine?” I could hear her voice, but it seemed distant, as if she were holding her hand over the mouthpiece, talking to someone else.

“Katherine!” Whoops. That was a little *too* loud.

“Sorry. I’m here. I’m just . . . this all seems so . . .”

“It’s not as scary as it sounds,” I said, once again trying to mimic Christie’s perky, confident tone. “Dad’s injuries, I mean. The bullet only grazed his leg.”

“His *bad* leg?”

“It’s not serious. Really. The store’s a mess, but nothing we can’t clean up.”

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“What about the robber Dad shot? Who did you say he was?”

“Bobby Tyler. You know, the basketball star.” Silence. “I guess you wouldn’t know, but he’s big news here in Rosemont. A lot of colleges are—were—interested in recruiting him.”

“Jesus. Why would a kid like that . . .” She sighed. “Never mind. I’ll take the first flight I can get. Tell Dad I’m on the way. Love you.”

“But you don’t have to—”

Click.

I hung up and slumped into a chair, wondering how I was going to tell Dad. I couldn’t simply faint away like the heroine of a Jane Austin novel.

It wasn’t that I didn’t enjoy my sister’s company; Dad and I always looked forward to her visits. But she had a way of dominating things. Assuming control. Dad called it her “take charge” personality. I called it driven. I sometimes thought of her as Katherine on the Heath, though *Wuthering Heights* was far from her cup of tea. And anglophile my sister was not. While I sat at home reading 19th century novels, Katherine took on the modern world.

She’d been all of fourteen when she hired on as an errand girl for the *Gazette*. That same summer, she was promoted to part-time reporter, and by the next year, well, I wondered how many sixteen-year-olds got front page bylines.

“It’s only a local paper,” she’d said, waving me off.

The *Gazette* served Rosemont and general surrounding communities, making it a local paper with a readership of fifty-some thousand.

A flutter of wings approached from behind. Turning, I saw Jitterbug soar toward my shoulder. “Don’t,” I pleaded, but he swooped down and landed with his usual lack of grace, cat-like claws digging into my brand new sweater.

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“Wouldn’t you rather have a puppy?” Katherine had asked, wrinkling her nose in a rare moment of confusion when I’d requested a cockatiel for Christmas a few years back.

“Birds are a lot less trouble,” I’d assured her.

A rather foolish assertion, as it had turned out.

Distracting the pesky critter with one hand, I captured him with the other before he could escape and consume another snack of living room drapes. I deposited him in his cage by the window, took another soda from the refrigerator and sat at the table, determined to ignore the latest outburst of protesting peeps.

What I couldn’t ignore was the reality of the moment. Ready or not, my sister was coming home.

CHAPTER 2

“She was calling from the car rental counter,” I told Dad as I hung up the phone. “She’ll be here within the hour, barring a traffic jam or something.” Things like that never happened when you wanted them to, of course.

“Okay,” Dad said. He’d taken the initial news of Katherine’s coming better than expected. Then again, he was on some pretty strong painkillers. He sat in his recliner, fiddling with the TV remote. The thirty-five-year-old chair, a parting gift from his buddies on the Chicago force, was his place of refuge. Its woven upholstery, once a bright plaid of browns, oranges, and yellows, had faded to the dingy color of dry leaves, and smelled rather like them, despite numerous shampoos.

“I don’t understand why she thought she had to drop everything to come here,” I said.

“Kathy does what she thinks she’s supposed to.”

I grabbed a pencil and the half-finished crossword off the end table, grateful he’d opted to forgo the customary *she means well* spiel. “I know,” I said, “but why does she always seems to think we need saving? We’re fine.”

He nodded vaguely, his attention still on the remote I’d purchased the week before. I thought the bigger numbers and buttons would help him navigate more easily, but he kept

forgetting to hit the enter key after selecting the channel number. “*You’re* fine,” I added, his inability to figure out electronic gadgets notwithstanding. “I mean, you will be.”

“Sure, honey,” he said. “Kathy just needs to see that for herself.”

The image of Bobby lying on the floor flashed in my mind again. I set the crossword in my lap, twisted the pencil end-to-end. Katherine would insist on hearing every single detail of the robbery a hundred times. Strikingly awful details that only seemed to worsen with time.

“She’s going to get on you about having that gun at the store,” I said.

He sighed. “Yeah, she’ll shake things up some, I expect.”

I hate the way she shakes things up, I wanted to say. Dad was the most terrific father in the world, God bless his heart, but there were some things he could never understand—like how it felt to have a sister who always had to be right no matter what, a sister who was so drop dead gorgeous and sparkingly intelligent that people wondered if *I* was adopted.

“Anyway, she won’t stay long,” he went on. “Once she’s satisfied things are okay here, she’ll head on back to San Francisco.”

Which could be anywhere from three days to a month. “I suppose,” I said. My pencil slipped, scribbled a crooked line across the center of the puzzle as I grabbed it back. “But she’s going to freak out about the gun. You *promised* to get rid of it.”

“If I’d kept that promise, she’d be coming for my funeral.” He aimed the remote at the TV and fired. He’d abandoned the channel numbers for the up and down arrows. Program snippets whizzed by like pages in a flipbook. “It always takes something drastic to wake people up. This’ll straighten her out. You’ll see.”

Dad’s cocky tone finally clued me in. He wasn’t dreading Katherine’s visit. He was looking forward to it so he could confront her with another chorus of “Our Founding Fathers” and what they’d intended regarding the right to bear arms.

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I went into the kitchen and made some lemonade while Autumn and Chance, the latest Ken and Barbie broadcasting duo from channel seven's late news, unveiled their predictions for Saturday's college games. They were a pair of discount retreads compared to Big Earl, whom, sadly, had gotten too big in the literal sense; amazing how twenty years of loyal service wasn't worth a plug nickel if your belly got fat.

Jitterbug, already in the midst of his nightly chatter routine, turned it up a notch. I drank a glass of lemonade and poured a little into his treat cup. He took a few swallows, resumed his peeping, and hopped onto my shoulder. I'd nearly finished cleaning his cage when a car door slammed out front. I stood there, frozen in the pause of anticipation that often grabs me when I've just finished a chapter in a well paced novel. Unfortunately, I couldn't close the cover and set it aside for another time because I was tired.

Katherine had arrived.

#

"Lemonade?" I asked, setting a glass in front of my sister before she could respond. The kitchen won first prize for Best Place to Gather whenever the two of us were alone. Food was a great distraction, and Jitterbug's performance of The Great Stretching Bird Head in front of his mirror provided an excellent sideshow.

Katherine turned her accepting smile in my direction. "Thanks." She took a sip of her drink and set it aside. "It's so good to see you, Maggie."

She'd said those exact words upon arrival an hour before, but we'd been with Dad then, so technically I suppose it didn't count. Nonetheless, I was struck with a lingering sense of déjà vu. *Why do we always exchange these silly pleasantries when you come home?* I wanted to ask. Instead, I returned her smile and said, "You, too."

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Thankfully, she remained seated, so at least we didn't have to hug again. Our hugs were more like awkward handshakes; Katherine acted as if she were afraid I'd break in half if she squeezed too hard. I wondered if that's what the psychiatrists had told her way back when, or whether she was worried that if she got *too* close my affliction would rub off on her.

It was funny—the odd sort of funny, I mean. I loved my sister, and I knew she loved me, but I couldn't believe such pretension was part of normal sibling relationships. If strangers were listening in, they'd probably guess years had passed since the two of us had been together, when in reality, it was rarely more than a few months.

I took an Oreo from the cookie jar and peeled it apart as an imaginary drum roll rang in my ears. Ladies and gentlemen, meet the Murray sisters: Snacks, half-hearted smiles, and small talk aplenty. I didn't have it in me to disappoint. "It's a good thing I got Dad to take down the Christmas lights last week, or they'd be up till summer," I said in my perkier tone of voice. Perky was everyone's favorite. As long as they thought I was happy, they were happy.

Katherine smiled again. "I can always count on you to look on the bright side."

I glanced toward the living room as I finished the cookie. Dad had dozed off in his chair about twenty minutes before with the aid of another pain pill, but I half expected some snide remark to come floating into the kitchen. I'd learned years ago that his fellow officers had their reasons for calling him Elephant Ears.

I waited another ten seconds, but my hoped-for distraction failed to materialize, unless Dad's snoring counted. Behind me, Jitterbug had tucked his head under his wing, deciding to call it a night. Was it really so bad to look on the bright side? I wondered, tossing the cover over his cage. Was that another one of my marvelous qualities that had driven our mother into a stranger's arms and out the door?

"Do you feel like talking about it, Maggie?"

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I walked to the window and stood there, staring at the neighbor's snow-drenched backyard, flat and void of vegetation, shimmering with the light from a full moon and a tapestry of stars. I imagined it as a giant ice rink and myself the only skater, circling round and round and round as Katherine watched from behind the safety of the glass between us. She smiled and waved as I zoomed by, but only if I fell would she rush out to join me.

"Maggie?" Katherine said again.

I knew her question referred to the episode at the store, but what if I ignored that and answered as if the *it* she'd been talking about was the eerie silence that cropped up whenever the two of us were alone together?

I shrugged, my gaze still focused on the make-believe rink. At least there was that one given: through all the ups and downs, I'd always managed to hold on to my sense of reality. While I might have dangled my toes over the edge of the rabbit hole a time or two, I had never come face-to-face with the big white bunny, far less allowed him to entice me into the vast abyss. I'd be lying, however, if I said I hadn't been tempted.

"If you want to," I said to Katherine. She would choose the path and I would follow; that's what she expected, what Dad expected, what everyone expected. And rightly so. Our strained relationship stemmed from my inability to confront our issues head on—my scar, Mother's leaving, Katherine having to look out for me all those years. "Do you think Dad will get in trouble?" I blurted out. "For shooting Bobby, I mean."

I turned just enough to see her shoulders rise. The quiet sigh was never a good sign, nor the long thinking pause that preceded her answer.

"From what he's told me so far, probably not, but . . ."

I couldn't take another pause. "They didn't find the gun," I finished briskly. The police had searched every inch around that counter but hadn't found a sign of Bobby's gun. But he must

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have had one; Dad would never have shot an unarmed man. A boy. Bobby Tyler hadn't lived long enough to become a man.

Katherine walked over to me and set her hand on my shoulder. It was a tentative touch, like a cat edging his way through a hole in the fence. "Close your eyes and think, Maggie." There was nothing tentative about Katherine's voice as she moved into her take-charge zone. "You came out of the storeroom and saw a man in a ski mask at the counter. Look closer at that image. *Did* you see a gun in his hand?"

The scene flashed in my mind again. "There was *something* in his hand. I'm almost positive it was a gun." What else would it have been? I should just say, yes, I saw it. Who would doubt me? "I know the guy standing in the doorway had one," I squeaked. "I'm absolutely certain about that."

"But did he come into the store? Even a step or two? What was Bobby doing? Did you *see* him point a gun at Dad?"

Images and sounds exploded in my head like cluster bombs in a war zone. Katherine called my name again amid a burst of flying shrapnel. "I don't know, all right?" I said shrilly. "I just don't know! Why does everyone have to keep asking me all these questions?"

I gasped. The voice hadn't sounded like mine, but I knew it must have been. I backed into the corner and squeezed my head in my hands. My heart was racing. Why hadn't I been able to stop the words from spilling out, or at least muffle the frantic tone of their delivery?

"Kathy!"

I leaned back at the sound of Dad's voice and rested my pounding head against the wall. *I could've been shot too, you know!* I wanted to say in my defense. But the words stuck in my throat as I watched my father hobble into the kitchen.

"What the hell's going on in here?" he snapped, glaring at Katherine.

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She let out a heavy sigh. “I’m just trying to find out what happened, Dad. For God’s sake, why do you always have to . . .”

Protect me, I finished silently as my sister’s voice trailed off. Shelter me. Take my side. I’d heard it put so many different ways, but it all came down to the same reaction on my part: relief at not having to deal with it anymore, whatever the *it* of the moment was.

“It’s almost midnight and I’m tired,” I said, walking to Jitterbug’s cage. He was upset, too, peeping and fluttering his wings as if the world were about to end. I slid open the door. He hopped onto my finger, made his way up to my shoulder, and nestled there, pressing his warm little body against my damp neck.

“Of course you are.” Dad’s voice had softened. He limped across the room, set his hand on my shoulder. “We’ve both been through a lot. Go to bed, get some sleep. Things won’t seem as complicated tomorrow, when we’ve had a chance to sort them out.”

The room fell silent except for the soft thud of my sneakers on the linoleum floor. I said goodnight and hurried through the living room and into the adjoining parlor. By the time I reached the base of the stairs that led to the safety of my bedroom, the conversation in the kitchen had resumed.

“Maggie’s done all the talking about this she needs to. If she can’t verify she saw the Tyler kid’s gun, she can’t. It’s not as if I’ll be hauled off to jail, for Christ’s sake. This was a stick-up, Kathy. An *armed* robbery.”

“Without a videotape, you can’t prove either suspect was armed.”

I waited, frozen on the bottom step, straining to hear Dad’s reaction. *Maggie forgot to turn it on* would have been the appropriate response. Usually I took care of it first thing in the morning, but sometimes I didn’t get around to it until after lunch; when you’d worked twenty-

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two years at a place, twenty-five if you counted Saturdays and after school, and had never once been held up, you tended to relax. I wouldn't be able to do that anymore.

I stroked my finger down Jitterbug's silky wing and back-tracked a few steps until the voices carried clearly again.

"I don't need the damn tape. The people of this town know what kind of guy I am."

"God, Dad. I can't believe you're so naïve. Maggie said the Tyler boy was a star athlete. Why would a kid like that rob your store? Risk his future for a few hundred dollars?"

"I don't know. Why do kids kill each other for shoes or because one of them is wearing the wrong colored jacket? Why do rich kids with everything in the world going for them kill their parents? Things don't have to make sense, and most times they don't. Facts are facts. The Tyler boy approached the counter wearing a ski mask and leather gloves, carrying a *gun* in his pocket. A gun he pulled out of his pocket and pointed at my face, gloved finger curled around the trigger. Do you honestly believe the townspeople here will vote to convict me for defending myself and my daughter and my own damn property?"

"You know better than I that depends on the evidence, which as of this moment is a corpse in the morgue, shot with your gun. If you can't prove that boy was armed . . ."

A car drove past the house, its taillights flickering through the window. For an instant, I thought it was the police coming to take Dad away, but it cruised by without slowing.

The argument in the kitchen escalated; Dad's and Katherine's voices jumbled together like boiling stew. I moved Jitterbug from my shoulder to my chest, put my hand over him so he didn't take off, and proceeded up the stairway to the second floor landing.

"It won't be easy," Katherine's voice echoed in my ears.

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I went into my room, locked the door, and settled into bed with the latest copy of *National Geographic*. I wanted to dream of exotic animals, far away lands, people I would never meet. A good, strong dose of reality that wasn't my own.

CHAPTER 3

I woke to the aroma of vanilla coffee and a wisp of filtered sunshine—pleasantries that quickly vanished as I noted the numbers 7:35 glowing from the clock-radio on my bedside table. I closed my eyes and tried to will myself back to sleep, but the day had begun. Across the room, Jitterbug was enjoying his breakfast; I heard the shells snap open and land softly on the bottom of his cage. I threw the covers back, got up, and went into the bathroom to brush my teeth.

Sometimes, when faced with events I preferred not to deal with, I tried to convince myself they'd been part of a bad dream, like the day Mother told us she was leaving, or the night the McLains stopped by to tell me that their daughter Kinsey, my best friend since the second grade, had been stuck and killed by a drunken driver. But the longer the pretense lasted, the harder I fell when reality hit. And it always did. Mother was gone and never coming back.

Kinsey was dead and never coming back.

Bobby Tyler was gone, dead, never coming back. Never.

Our store was closed until further notice, its doors sealed with bands of plastic yellow ribbon, as if it were the backdrop of a TV crime show. My own life was no longer comfortably scripted, and I couldn't imagine when it might be again until the police found Bobby's gun.

I stepped over to my closet. Normally, if I wasn't planning to go into work, I'd pull on a sweatshirt and jeans to begin the morning, but since Katherine was home, I dressed in tailored

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black pants, one of my nicer sweaters, and navy heels. After I brushed my hair, I applied my makeup more carefully than I normally would and surveyed myself in the mirror. Not bad. Not Katherine, but definitely not bad. “Come on,” I said, opening Jitterbug’s cage. “We’re missing all the fun.”

Fun was hardly the word for what awaited, but the forced sense of cheery anticipation helped me down the stairs and into the kitchen, where I found Katherine and Dad sitting at opposite ends of the table. Dad was pretending to check the stocks, which was impossible since he wasn’t wearing his glasses, and Katherine was paging through the comics. She never read comics. I deduced that the Founding Fathers gun discussion had taken place.

I put on a friendly smile and carried Jitterbug to his daytime cage. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” they answered in muffled unison.

Glancing at Katherine, I was pleased I’d opted for a dressy outfit. She looked comfortable and professional in a flattering green dress and matching pumps. I wondered if she even owned a pair of jeans. Maybe for gardening. If she ever had time to garden.

“The coffee smells delicious,” I said, still smiling. There was a definite lift to my step as I strode to the counter. Some people were blessed with Hollywood looks, others a scientist’s IQ. I had the ability to project the perkiness of a preschooler at will—a talent that came in surprisingly handy at times. I poured a cup of the sweet-smelling coffee and took a sip. Naturally, it was delicious. My sister did everything right, which was why she lived her perfect life in San Francisco, as far away from Rosemont and me as the vast shores of the Pacific Ocean allowed.

“So,” I said, wanting to chase off the uncomfortable silence, “what’s new?”

“Someone slashed the tires on Dad’s car last night,” Katherine said.

Maggie Inside-Out

“What?” I squeaked. Perhaps I had wandered off toward the rabbit hole again and missed a few lines of conversation along the way. Surely Katherine hadn’t said *slashed*. This was Rosemont. No one went around slashing tires.

“Yep,” Dad said. “All four of them, flat as a pizza from Jimmy’s.”

So much for perky. I walked to the window and peered out. The shrubs lining the driveway obscured my view, but I could make out the rear fender of the station wagon, which seemed lower than normal. “I guess it’s a good thing you left your car on the street,” I said, turning back to Katherine. “Whoever did it probably came in through one of the neighbors’ backyards. Maybe we should talk to them, see if anyone saw or heard anything.”

“I already did,” she said.

“Nobody heard a peep,” Dad chimed in.

“Everyone in Rosemont probably knows about the shooting by now,” Katherine said. “Bobby must have had a lot of friends. Any one of them could have done it.”

“But why?” I asked.

Dad shrugged. “To take out their frustrations, I suppose. And truth be told, if wrecking a set of tires does the trick, I can live with it. Just so it stops with the tires.”

“There’s certainly no guarantee of that,” Katherine said.

Dad shot her a shut-up glare. She did.

I ventured over to the table, where a box of fresh donuts awaited. I chose an apple fritter and sat down. The pastry could last ten large bites or fifteen small ones, depending on how much I decided to take part in the conversation. “Did you report it to the police?” I asked.

Katherine nodded. “They said they’d send someone over later this morning.”

Maggie Inside-Out

I glanced at the clock: 8:15. If today were a normal day, I'd be at the store, stocking shelves, brewing coffee, waiting on customers . . . but something told me nothing was going to be normal around here anymore. Not for a very long while.

#

Chief Kruger arrived a short while later. He tipped his hat and said hello to me, much in the same manner he had when I was twelve, then dismissed me and turned his attention to Katherine. Which was fine. He looked older these days and carried a pretty good paunch.

"Well, Katy." He took off his hat and tossed it on the table. His bald spot had grown to the size of a fist. "How's the big city treating you these days?"

"Fine, Chief Kruger."

My sister hated being called Katy even more than Kathy, a fact of which the chief was surely aware. It was just one of the little things he did to express his distaste for the choices she'd made. He resented anyone who hadn't lived in Rosemont for at least ten years, and those who had opted to leave his pleasant community upon high school graduation were shunned for life.

Dad motioned for the chief to have a seat at the table.

"Would you like some coffee, Chief?" I asked, making my way across the kitchen. Jitterbug peeped as I walked by, then climbed into his swing and began pecking his mirror.

"You betcha, I would. Your coffee's some of the best in town, Maggie."

"Katherine made this, but thanks for the compliment." And an odd one it was, considering he never bought coffee at the store. It was always Pepsi or tea.

I poured a cup and handed it to him.

"Wow." He took a whiff and shot a crooked grin in Katherine's direction. "I'm trusting all the added ingredients in this are legal."

Sure, if you don't count the cyanide.

Maggie Inside-Out

The words rang in my ears so loudly I thought I must have spoken them aloud, but thankfully no one stared my way with a shocked expression. I'd abandoned my wisecracking years ago on the advice of my doctors. I was supposed to be myself, but only if that self conformed to certain parameters. Sarcasm wasn't on the list.

"It's just coffee with a twist of vanilla," Katherine said, glancing at the chief. She looked away just as he made eye contact, and I didn't blame her; it was obvious he was thinking about things other than coffee. I thought the blush on her cheeks darkened a bit, though it could have been my imagination.

There was nothing imaginary about the chief's crush on my sister, however. I'd noticed it about the same time Mr. Peel had promoted her to senior editor of the *Gazette*. As if a better job meant she was finally good enough for him, the high and mighty chief of Rosemont. He stopped by the store two or three times a day that summer asking about her, but his friendly smiles eroded into smirks when she announced plans to attend college in neighboring Wisconsin. So what if the UW Madison had one of the best journalism programs in the country? Katherine was already doing what she wanted to do, right here in Rosemont.

Judging from the way he still gawked at Katherine, the torch had yet to burn itself out. If only she would return to Rosemont and fall for his charms, all was sure to be forgiven. I glanced over her trim figure and wondered if the chief had taken a good look in the mirror lately. It was hard not to imagine him as the clueless cop in a regional mystery novel.

"I'll tell you, it's a weight off my shoulders, seeing you here, Katy." His narrow brown eyes moved from Katherine's face to her chest. "Now I'll be able to assign my deputies to more pressing matters."

"What's that supposed to mean, Kruger?" Dad never called him Chief. *That bozo doesn't deserve to be chief of the litter patrol, let alone Rosemont.*

Maggie Inside-Out

“I’m just saying that with such a high-profile, experienced reporter on the scene . . .” He snatched a maple bar from the box, buttered his finger with the frosting, and licked it off.

“Everyone in town can rest easy, knowing the truth will come out.”

Katherine’s face took on the same forced look of self-control she used with Dad when the gun talk started. “I’m an editor, Chief Kruger, not a reporter. I’m here because my father’s been shot and my sister needs help until he’s back on his feet.”

“I’m not off my feet,” Dad retorted. “At least not for long.” He narrowed his eyes, finally seeming to notice the way the chief was staring at Katherine. “But I appreciate Kathy coming nonetheless. And now that our family roles have been established, do you think we could talk about who slashed the hell out of my tires and what you’re going to do about it?”

The chief shifted in the chair and fingered the badge pinned on his wrinkled tan shirt. He’d taken on a permanently disheveled look since his last divorce. “Well now, there’s no question someone did it deliberately, I’ll give you that. But I’m not sure it connects to the Tyler killing.”

“Killing?” Dad said.

“Well, you did shoot him, and he is dead.”

Dad glared.

“Let’s face it, Tom. You have a history.”

“A history?”

“You were on the force. You must have made your share of enemies in Chicago.”

“Chicago?” Dad snorted. “That was thirty years ago, Kruger. Nobody there remembers who the hell I am, let alone gives a shit.”

“You’d be surprised. And watch your language. There’s ladies in the room.”

Maggie Inside-Out

Dad looked ready to pop him one or burst out laughing, I couldn't tell which. "Are you going to look into this or not?" he finally asked.

The chief stuffed the rest of the maple bar in his mouth, chewed a couple of times, and swallowed. "I am. I'm just saying it might not be a smart idea to make waves over it." He stood up and brushed the crumbs off his pants. "Fact is, I had an interesting conversation with the county sheriff earlier today. He's feeling pressure from that new hotrod DA to look into the shooting."

"So? Let him look all he wants. I'm damn sorry Bobby Tyler's dead, but he shouldn't have been trying to rob me. I have the right to defend myself. One of your deputies already concluded as much."

The chief grabbed his hat from the table and put it on; his fingers left greasy donut marks on the rim. "Yeah, well. Red hasn't been on the job long. He likes to wrap things up early so he can get home to his pretty wife."

My sister and I exchanged glances. Katherine rolled her eyes.

"Anyway, all I'm saying is, it'd probably be best if you give your insurance company a call and let them handle this tire thing. You've got enough to worry about—unless we find that gun you claim Bobby was waving around."

"I saw it," I mumbled, but the words came out so soft I barely heard them myself. *I saw the gun in Bobby's hand.* Maybe if I rehearsed it enough, people would hear me and believe.

My thoughts evaporated into the numbing silence that had filled the kitchen. Glancing at Dad, I saw he'd engaged in a glaring match with the chief. *Don't aggravate him any further, we may need his help.* I cleared my throat. "Dad? Didn't you want to ask him about the store?"

Maggie Inside-Out

A grimace spread across his face. If Katherine had dared to interrupt the silent duel of male egos, Dad would have zapped a bolt of lightning in her direction, but since it was me, he settled for a heavy sigh.

The chief responded with a victory smirk. “My boys’ll be finished in there by this afternoon, so you folks can feel free to start putting things back together.” He walked to the door, his boots marking our off-white floor tiles with smudgy black heel marks. “Katy, I’m sure we’ll meet again real soon,” he said, tipping his hat in her direction.

And there he stood, hand resting on his scuffed leather holster, waiting for Katherine to react. Instead, it was Dad who got up and hobbled toward the door.

“I’ll be down to the station to file a report about my tires this afternoon, after I stop by the store to get the all clear from your crew.”

The chief shrugged. “Suit yourself. I was just trying to offer a little friendly advice. You want to make more trouble for yourself, I guess that’s your choice.”

“And if you want to go around impersonating a police officer, I guess that’s yours,” Dad said, and slammed the door.

“That might have been a little harsh,” Katherine said.

She was smiling, though. Dad picked up on the mood, and I joined in. Past tensions and those sure to come couldn’t be ignored, but beneath it all we were still a family. I wondered, if Mother could see us, whether she’d be happy or sad about that.