

Chapter 1

Northern Minnesota

July 6, 1990

The old farmhouse creaked in the night air, and the wind howled through the badly caulked windows. Nausea, shortness of breath, and stomach pain were assaulting Anna Teresa Miller's body as she lay in her bed in the darkened bedroom. She figured she was dying, but she didn't care. Her life had never been very good, so how could death be worse? The doctor had warned her that diabetes could kill her, that it would attack her kidneys and her other vital organs, but what did it matter?

As her mind fought to stay alert, thoughts rambled in and out, scrambled together, leaving her unsure of what was happening and what was just a memory. In one moment, she was three years old standing beside her mother in the ramshackle barn where cows were herded in each night and milked. Anna's stomach rumbled and hunger pains gripped her thin body, but she knew she wouldn't get supper until all the chores were done. Even at her young age, she had chores.

Suddenly, she was fourteen and her mother had dropped her off at Walter's family's farm to work for them. Her father had died, and her mother could no longer care for her.

As the memories floated in and out, she fought to remember where she

was now and what year it was. For a brief moment, she knew it was 1990 and she was still in the farmhouse she had moved to as a teenager.

Then she was sixteen, pregnant, and being forced to marry Walter, a reluctant groom at best.

Her mind relived the pain of losing that baby and three more after that. She was certain then that she wasn't supposed to be a mother and had convinced herself that she didn't want to be.

By that time, the farm could no longer support them, so Walter would pick up odd jobs, leaving most of the farm chores to her. Life with Walter had been hard—oppressive poverty, backbreaking work, and abuse. Then Helene, Alice, and Suzanne had been born, adding to her workload and escalating Walter's laziness, drinking, and anger—at her, at life, at the kids, and at the fact that he'd never had a son.

When she'd first become pregnant, Walter's mother, who sometimes tried to be good to Anna, told her that having children meant she wouldn't be lonely when she grew old. Now, as she lay dying alone in the creaking house that had been her prison and her home for over forty-five years, a cynical chuckle passed through her lips and a tear slid down her cheek.

Her mind once again slipped into the past to a day when her daughters, with their dirty faces, tangled hair, and soiled clothing, sat on the rough wooden floor, cutting out pictures from old magazines and catalogs as slight drafts of wind shivered through the poorly insulated walls and ruffled the pages. Chatter occasionally erupted in an otherwise silent and serious atmosphere.

"I'm going to marry a rich man and live in a big, beautiful house," ten-year-old Helene had exclaimed as she carefully arranged the figures of a handsome man and a beautiful woman among pictures of luxurious homes.

"I'm going to have lots of kids and be a really good mom," Alice proclaimed with the determination of an eight-year-old.

Seven-year-old Suzanne's voice was serious as she declared, "I'm going to work in a big office and be the boss of people."

That day, Anna had felt anger, fatigue, and defeat at her girls' wild imaginations and their ideas that life could be better. Anna knew it wouldn't be.

Overwhelmed by the constant work that the farm, the old house, her three girls, and Walter required of her, Anna's life had no room for dreams or play.

That particular day, and many before and after, Anna had felt as though the world rested on her shoulders. She had often been bitter that nobody seemed to know how hard she worked or what a burden the old house and those three girls were on her. It certainly wasn't the life she had wanted, but her mother had reminded her often enough by saying, "You made your bed, you lie in it." So Anna had done just that.

Anna's eyelids fluttered, and a shiver ran through her body as the same memory took hold again. A noise had erupted in the kitchen when the back door slammed open against the wall. Fear crossed the faces of her young daughters as a drunken voice bellowed, "Where are you, Anna? I'm hungry. Get in here and fix me something to eat!" The sound of a fist pounding against the kitchen table resonated into the living room as Anna scurried toward the raging man who now stood in the kitchen doorway, swaying unsteadily on his feet.

The memories stopped running through her mind like old motion pictures, and everything was starting to go dark. It had done that several times during the night. Her conscious mind knew she should call an ambulance, but she wasn't ready yet. Maybe she would just die in bed because it didn't really matter to her where she died. She was tired of living.

Anna's kids didn't know about her health problems because Helene had stopped talking to her years ago, and Suzanne had just slipped out of her life. Alice tried, but Anna didn't know how to talk to her middle daughter. In fact, she never did know how to talk to any of them. She had tried to raise them better than her mother had raised her, but her kids hadn't responded the way she had expected them to.

Walter had been a mean, abusive man his entire life, and Anna knew she had never loved him. For much of his life, she hadn't even liked him. Yet, when he died, she missed his presence. He was all she had ever known.

As darkness covered her eyes, momentary panic overwhelmed her because the shadows were so thick. *Is this what it will be like forever?*

"No, Anna, there is light waiting for you, but you're not done yet," a voice whispered in the darkness.

Quickly opening her eyes, she scanned the room. At the end of her bed, she saw a shadow. "Who's there?" Her weak voice tried to reach the specter.

A cold breeze echoed throughout the dusty, dingy room. The figure became

clearer as Anna grappled with her fading consciousness. *It's a man, an old man, gray and unshaven.* It took a moment, but her weary mind grasped a vision of her husband looking like that just before his death. Scared at the thought of seeing him again, her voice quivered into the empty room, "Walter? Is that you, Walter?"

The apparition inched closer. Anna's hands shook as she grappled to pull the sheet up over her face. "No, please, Walter. Go away," she pleaded. "Don't hurt me. Please don't hurt me anymore."

The specter seemed to stop moving, hovering there, and the voice became a whisper. "I can't hurt you anymore, Anna." Anna slowly pulled the sheet down and watched with wide, fearful eyes as darkness surrounded the vision; it began to fade. Pain-filled words echoed, "Don't come yet. I don't want you to suffer this pain. Set your life right, Anna."

"I don't understand," she whimpered.

The voice grew louder. "I didn't do right by you, Anna. We didn't do right by them. You have to do right by them. You can't come yet, Anna. You can't come yet." The words were so tortured that Anna quickly pulled the covers up over herself again, cowering lower in the bed, shivering with fear.

The sounds were farther away now, echoes in the quiet room. "Set your life straight, Anna. Do right by them . . . do right by them." The voice faded, and Anna could feel in the air that the ghost had disappeared.

The room was eerily quiet except for her own labored breathing. "I don't know what you mean. I don't understand . . ." she cried.

Memories of her life and her daughters once again floated through the darkness like a movie—visions of her children as babies, then toddlers, teenagers, and then young women. Tears slid down her cheeks as she called their names into the empty room.

With her last bit of consciousness, she reached for the pad and pen on the bedside table that had three telephone numbers neatly printed on it, and scribbled a message. Picking up the bedside phone and summoning the last of her strength, she dialed 911. After mumbling her address into the receiver, Anna closed her eyes and the world went black.

Chapter 2

Atlanta, Georgia

A beautiful April morning peeked in through the windows as Helene sat on the king-sized four-poster bed. Picking at the decorative pillow she held in her lap, she watched Bill's reflection in the mirror in the adjoining bathroom. She could smell the lemon scent of his shaving cream as he maneuvered the razor over his face. She gazed in fascination as he guided the sharp edge over his chin and down his cheek. She pulled at the embroidery of a brightly colored flower as he made stroke after careful stroke with confidence. Mesmerized, Helene watched in silent fury, yet part of her was still drawn in, even after twenty years of marriage, by the man's self-assurance.

Caught up with the reflection of his handsome face, almost-black hair, and blue eyes, she refused to deal with the reality of her life because it was much easier to keep pretending that things were different. Helene's voice stuck in her throat. There were so many questions she wanted to ask. *Why do you cheat and lie? Who is she this time? Why do I put up with it?* Even with those questions blasting in her mind, she took a deep breath and spoke in even tones that belied the tension building at her temples. "Will you be home for dinner?"

Bill didn't glance in her direction as the lies flowed smoothly through his lips. "No, I've got to work late on a case that's going to court next week. I'll probably work most of the night."

Helene furiously grabbed the tassel on the corner of the pillow. *How did*

you get so good at lying? As she listened to his words, she remembered the smell of the familiar perfume that had assaulted her nose, and the ever-so-light smudge of red lipstick on the collar of his shirt that she had taken to the cleaners yesterday. Her heart pinched in agony as the man at the cleaners smiled and winked at her, teasing her that she might want to change the color of her lipstick—red, he had said, was hard to remove.

Bill moved away from the mirror and continued talking about his heavy workload. Helene's demeanor didn't change as she quietly maimed the pillow with her pulls and tugs. *Shut up, Bill, shut up*, she wanted to scream. *Don't you know I've known about all of them throughout the years? I've given them names. Can you beat that? I name your mistresses!* The turmoil inside of her was at a full boil today, but she held it in tightly, not letting it erupt or even seep through her calm exterior. A divorce would be much more traumatic and expensive than replacing decorative pillows.

She gazed at Bill through the mirror and said, "I'll leave you something to eat in the fridge." He walked out of the bathroom, straightening his shirt. Her hands clenched firmly around the small pillow in front of her as she pasted a smile on her face. She raised her lips to accept his quick kiss.

Helene sat motionless for several moments after he left the room while the scent of his cologne gently lingered. In the quiet bedroom, her hands finally stopped their assault on the defenseless pillow as she willfully silenced her tormented mind.

After showering and preparing for her day, Helene stood in front of the mahogany dresser, leaning close to the mirror, and examined her appearance. Her large, blue eyes stared back at her, and she frowned at the wrinkles decorating her face. Her blonde, shoulder-length hair accented her fair skin. Her white blouse and shorts shone bright in the morning light. Anyone else peering at Helene through that mirror would see an attractive woman of forty-two, but Helene saw none of those things. Disgusted, she pinched less than an inch of flab around her middle.

The wedding picture on the edge of the bureau caught her eye, and Helene was drawn to the happiness in the faces of the young couple staring back at her. Gingerly, she picked up the photograph in its crystal frame, held it close

against her heart, walked back to the bed, and sat down as her memory took her back over two decades.

Helene had hated her childhood—the poverty, the abuse, the cruelty of the kids in school making fun of the way she dressed, the way her family lived, and her father’s constant drunkenness. The minute Helene graduated from high school she’d left the farm and eventually Minnesota, and she never looked back. She had known that college was out of the question, but that limitation hadn’t stopped her dreams and her determination to live a life without poverty and fear. With the help of one of her teachers, she had applied for a job behind the ticket counter with a major airline at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport, and to her amazement, she had been hired.

The day after graduation, Helene had loaded the few possessions she owned into the backseat of a classmate’s 1966 white Ford Mustang. With her sights set on the future, Helene refused to turn around to look at her sisters standing on the gravel driveway waving and crying. Helene knew her mother and father weren’t watching her drive away—they couldn’t care less—and she had shared the same sentiment.

Learning had come easily for Helene in her job with the airline, and so had interacting with people. She liked watching them, imagining what their lives were like, and where they were going. As she booked tickets for destinations all over the world, she dreamed of moving someplace warm, someplace far away from the state that held few good memories for her. After a year with the airline, Helene had learned about a position at the airport in Atlanta, Georgia. Immediately, she had known she wanted to move there.

When news of her transfer came through, she felt as though she was living a dream, and the move to Georgia happened quickly and easily.

Helene had immediately fallen in love with Georgia and felt that she was a Georgian by choice instead of birth. Life was simple but good as Helene planned her future. She’d often think back to the catalog pages of her youth and the world her imagination had designed—a world filled with love and beautiful surroundings. Even in the midst of a childhood filled with pain and lack, she knew a better life was possible, and her determination to have that life kept her on the path to that destination. In the beginning, her apartment

was bare, but she window-shopped and planned exactly what she wanted it to look like, and week by week, she was making that dream come true.

Helene hadn't dated much in high school. She kept to herself and people seemed to know not to cross the invisible but solid wall she had erected around her. When she moved to Georgia, her heart expanded and she was more open to the world and experiences, and men started asking her out. But she refused the majority of offers. Even though she was far away from home and lived on her own, it hadn't changed her mind about relationships or marriage. She would never let herself end up like her mother, so marriage was the furthest thing from her mind. Until she met Bill Foster.

It had been an ordinary day at the ticket counter, with lines of travelers going all over the world. She'd just finished checking in an elderly woman, who was flying to California to see her grandchildren, and placed the suitcases on the conveyer belt behind her. When she stepped back to help the next person in line, she was met with the bluest eyes she had ever seen. Helene had never believed in love at first sight until that moment. It had been hard to breathe and concentrate as she helped Bill with his ticket to Boston, told him his departure gate, and put his suitcase onto the conveyor belt.

Helene assumed she would never see him again, but when she went on her break fifteen minutes later, Bill was waiting for her. She walked with him to his departure gate, and they talked non-stop, as though they had so much to say and not much time to say it. She learned that he was twenty-six and in his last year of law school. When he graduated, he would join his father's firm in downtown Atlanta. His family roots were firmly planted in Georgia. He'd told her that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He took her phone number, called her every evening while he was in Boston, and they went on their first date when he returned. Helene had fallen deeply in love.

She had been so nervous the first time she met Bill's parents because they lived a totally different lifestyle than the one she had grown up in. They were both professionals, lived in a nice house, drove nice cars, and belonged to a country club. While they were not demonstrative people, they had made her feel welcome and a part of their family.

One year later, she and Bill had married in a big church, and it had been the wedding of her dreams. Bill's family paid for everything she could possibly

imagine, both in her wedding and in her life. She didn't send her family an invitation or even let them know she was getting married. When Bill and his mother asked questions about them, she simply said she wasn't close to her family, and they hadn't pressed her on the subject.

After their honeymoon in Cancun, Mexico, Helene left her job at the airport and spent her days and years creating a beautiful home and what she thought was a happy relationship. When she became pregnant in their first year of marriage, Helene wasn't sure how she felt about it. Children had never really been a part of the world she had wanted to create, but the moment she had held Thomas in her arms, Helene once more fell deeply in love.

In the beginning, Bill had doted on Thomas and been a loving, attentive husband. But when Thomas was a toddler, Bill stayed away from home more and more often, blaming it on a heavy workload. Then she'd found the lipstick on his shirt. The first time she told herself there was a reason. But when she could no longer ignore the signs of infidelity, she had dropped to her knees and sobbed. From that point on, Thomas had become her world, and she accepted the fact that her relationship wasn't perfect, but Bill and Thomas were all she had.

Her mind coming back to the present, she put the picture back on the dresser and quickly glanced at herself in the mirror again. Then she left the bedroom and walked down the back stairs that led to the large kitchen, with its marble countertops and hanging racks of copper pots and pans. She smiled as she heard the oldies station playing, "Shake, Rattle, and Roll."

Soft laughter spilled from her lips as she stopped at the bottom of the stairs to watch Lily, her housekeeper and cook, shake her hips, dance to the music, and sing along to the song. Lily was a contradiction in motion in her freshly ironed flower-printed dress, her golden-brown skin glowing, and neat braids of hair wrapped around the back of her head.

When Lily spotted Helene, she danced over to her, grabbed her hand, and twirled her around. Helene tried to pull her hand away and resist the playfulness, but soon Lily had her dancing. When the song ended, Lily patted her hair and said with a smile, "You're just in time for a cup a tea and a fresh muffin."

Laughing, Helene sat down at the cheery, little breakfast nook in the large

kitchen. Lily was the closest Helene had ever come to having a loving, caring mother. She often gladly relaxed into the security of Lily's love.

Over the steaming cup of tea, Lily eyed Helene carefully as she stated, "I'm making Mr. Bill's favorite chicken for dinner tonight. Thought maybe just the two of you could have a nice, quiet dinner, and Mr. Thomas and I could rent a movie. Haven't sat down and talked with that young one in a while—seems to always be off doing something or going somewhere." Lily paused for a moment. "Thought a rest would do him good. And you and Mr. Bill need more quiet time."

"Nice thought, but Bill's working late again. Thomas should be home for dinner, though."

Just as Helene was ready to bite into her muffin, the phone rang and Lily answered it. She listened for a few seconds, then handed the phone to Helene. "It's Mr. Thomas's school. They want to talk about Thomas's excessive absences."

A lump darted into Helene's throat. *What excessive absences? He goes to school every day.*

"This is Mrs. Foster."

"Hello, Mrs. Foster, this is Vivian Middleton from Thomas's school. We're very concerned about Thomas missing so much school. He has brought in all of his absence slips signed by you, but we wanted to make sure it was you who signed them."

Helene's thoughts were spinning. *What is she talking about? What absences? What permission slips?*

"Mrs. Foster?"

"Oh, yes . . . I signed them. He seems to be catching every bug this season." *I just lied. Why am I lying for my son?* Yet, she knew why. Something had to be wrong and she wasn't about to make it worse.

"Well, as long as you know about the absences."

"Yes, I do. Everything is fine," Helene assured her. "He's in school today, isn't he?" She closed her eyes, waiting for the answer.

"Yes, he is, Mrs. Foster, but we're very concerned about his grades. Thomas's numerous absences have put him behind. Something needs to be done."

Helene's thoughts were trying to catch up with what she was hearing. How much school had Thomas missed and why didn't she know he was missing

school? Thomas had always loved school and had been a good student. *What's happening with my son? And why didn't I know about it?*

"Let me talk with Thomas when he gets home today. We'll come up with a plan and I'll get back to you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Foster."

After Helene hung up the phone, she slumped against the wall, worry and concern flooding her mind. She thought of calling Bill, but he'd probably just get angry at Thomas, and she didn't want to deal with that. She could talk with Thomas, but would he tell her the truth? And when had he started lying to her? Something was wrong, and she had to find out what it was.

She spent most of the day curled up on her bed or sitting quietly in the sunroom, barely responding to Lily's attempts at conversation. Memories of Thomas as a little boy kept dancing through her mind. They had been so close. He had excelled in school, and their times together had been playful and fun. When had it all changed? What had gone wrong? When in the world had he started skipping school? And why? As much as she tried to deny the fact that her son's behavior was far from normal and acceptable, she knew better.

As afternoon turned to evening, Helene walked into the kitchen where Lily was making a cake. Thomas wasn't home yet. At five-thirty, she called Thomas's best friend Chuck to see if Thomas had stopped by after school but Chuck hadn't seen Thomas since their last class together, which was just after lunch.

"What if something has happened?" she asked Lily. "What if he's been in a car accident, and he's lying somewhere breathing his last breath and calling for his mother? What if—"

"Now whoa there," Lily interrupted. "Don't you think you're going a little fast in your worrying? Yes'm, all those things do happen in this world of ours, and we gotta be aware of them, but not everything that happens is bad."

At seven o'clock, without saying a word, Lily set two places at the counter that separated the large kitchen from the adjoining family area with its leather sofas and big stone fireplace. She filled the plates and motioned for Helene to sit down on one of the comfortable bar stools that edged up to the counter where they often had tea or shared a snack in the middle of the day. Helene reluctantly sat down, picked up the fork, and began to nibble at her food.

Lily pulled out the stool next to her, sat down, and placed her hand over

Helene's with a look that told Helene how much Lily cared about her, Bill, and Thomas. "It will be fine."

"I've got to make it fine, Lily. I just have to!"

It wasn't until after sunset that a car pulled into the driveway. Lights flashed across the kitchen windows and disappeared into the garage. They both seemed to be holding their breath as footsteps approached the back door and the knob turned.

Thomas entered with a crooked grin on his face. His eyes were bloodshot. "Hi, guys" was all he said as he moved through the kitchen toward the stairs at the back of the house.

"Thomas, are you okay? Where were you? Why are you so late?" The questions flew from Helene's lips as her heart beat wildly in her chest.

"I'm fine, Mom." His walk was unsteady, and his few words were slurred.

"Thomas, wait a minute. I want to talk to you. Your school called today about your being absent a lot and me apparently signing the slips." Helene stood firmly with her right hand on her hip.

"Can we talk about this later, Mom? I've got studying to do." His hand reached out for the wall to steady himself.

A part of Helene's mind noticed his lack of balance, but she ignored it. "Where were you tonight?" her voice sharpened as she slowly walked toward the stairs.

Thomas was halfway up the staircase. He stopped with his back still toward her, clutching the banister to steady himself, but he didn't say a word.

"Thomas, please answer me." Helene's voice was louder now. She stood at the bottom of the staircase, her brow furrowed with worry.

Thomas took a few steps forward, widening the space between them. "I just needed some space," he said without turning to look at her. "Everything's just crowding in on me. You understand, don't you?" His shoulders slumped and his voice softened. "Mom, I thought you'd understand."

Helene's mind refused to acknowledge his slurred speech and the implications of his unsteady gait. Running her fingertips over her forehead, her words were firm as she spoke. "You absolutely can't miss any more school. And you've got to catch up with your homework. This has got to stop. Do you understand me?"

He still hadn't turned to look at her.

"Yes, ma'am." He took another step up the stairway and then paused. "Can I be excused now?"

"No, Thomas, we've got to talk about this." As Helene moved up the stairs, her nose picked up the smell of alcohol, and reality finally marched in. *What in the world?* Fear gripped Helene as long-ago memories of alcohol assaulted her mind, yet she quickly dismissed them because they were a part of another life, another time. Pulling down the blinders of love, Helene once more let denial envelop her in its firm grasp. Feelings of overwhelm cemented her to where she stood. "Just don't miss any more school, okay? Promise me?" she pleaded.