

## CHAPTER 1

NOAH

April, 2017

Austin, Texas

“Hello?”

A garbled string of code words over the police scanner carries down the darkened hallway, answering me.

My heart sinks.

She’s still awake.

Kicking my dusty sneakers off, I drag myself all the way to the back of the house. “Hey, Mom,” I offer as casually as possible, passing her hunched body at the kitchen table, a cigarette smoldering on the edge of a supper plate, a half-finished bottle of cheap whiskey sitting within her easy reach, her gun belt lying haphazardly next to it.

I don’t know why I was hoping for something different tonight. I’ve been coming home to the same scene for weeks now.

“Where were y’all at tonight?” That Texan twang of hers is always heavier when she’s been drinking.

I yank open the fridge door. “It’s Wednesday.”

She tilts rather than lifts her head and spies the basketball tucked under my arm. “Right. I can’t keep up with you.”

I *could* point out that there’s not much to keep up with. I’m a creature of habit. If I’m not at work, then I’m with my friends, at the gym or doing laps at the pool, or tossing a ball around.

I've been going to the same pickup courts every Wednesday night since I moved back to Texas to go to UT seven years ago.

I twist the cap off the carton of orange juice and lift it to my mouth instead. Wishing she'd berate me for not using a glass. That's what she used to do, back when she didn't beeline for her liquor cabinet the second she walked in the door from work. She'd also remind me not to dribble my ball in the house and to throw my sweat-soaked clothes through the hot cycle of the wash right away, so my room doesn't smell like a locker room.

Now she doesn't even bother to change out of her uniform half the time.

As if to prove a point to myself, I let the ball hit the tile once . . . twice . . . seizing it against my hip after the third bounce, the hollow thud of leather against porcelain hanging in the air.

Waiting.

Hoping.

Nothing. Not a single complaint from her, as she sits there, her eyes half-shuttered, her cropped blonde hair unkempt, her mind preoccupied with something far beyond the oak table's wood grain that she stares at. She doesn't give a shit about basic manners anymore. These past few weeks, all she does is sit at the kitchen table and listen to the radio crackle with robbery reports and domestic assault calls and a dozen other nightly occurrences for the Austin Police Department.

*Her* police department, seeing as she's the chief. A female chief of police in one of the biggest cities in the United States. A monumental feat. She's held that position for two years.

And, up until recently, seemed to have held it well.

Coughing against the lingering stench of Marlboros, I slide open the window above the sink. Crisp spring air sails in. I never thought I'd say this, but I miss the smell of lemon Pledge and bleach.

"Don't forget to close it before you go to bed. Don't wanna get robbed," she mutters.

"We're not gonna get robbed." We live in Clarksville, a historic neighborhood and one of the nicest in a city that's generally considered to be safe and clean. I can't blame her for being cautious, though; she's been a cop for thirty years. She's seen society's underbelly. She probably knows things about our neighbors that would make me avert my eyes when passing them on the street. Still, even the worst parts of Austin are a playground next to typical city slums.

I frown as I peer down at the filthy sink. The stainless steel is spattered with black specks. "Did you *burn* something in here?"

"Just . . . trash."

I fish out a scrap of paper with perforations along one side. It looks like a page torn from a notepad. *April 16, 2003* is scrawled across it in writing that isn't my mother's.

"Biggest mistake of my life." She puffs on her cigarette, her words low and slurred. "I should have known Betsy wasn't the only one . . ."

"Who's Betsy?"

"Nobody anymore," she mutters, along with something indiscernible.

I fill a tall glass of water and set it down in front of her, using it as a distraction so I can drag the bottle of whiskey out of her reach.

She makes a play for it anyway, her movements slow and clumsy. "Give it on back to me, Noah. Right now, ya hear me?"

I shift to the other side of the table, screwing the cap on extra tight, though she could probably still open it. For a woman of her stature—five foot four and 130 pounds—she’s all muscle. At least she *was* all muscle. Her lithe body has begun to deteriorate thanks to the daily liquid supper. “You’ve had enough for tonight.”

“What do you know about *enough*? There ain’t enough whiskey in the world for what I’ve done.” She fumbles with the four silver stars pinned to her uniform’s collar, looking ready to rip them off.

So it’s going to be one of *those* nights. But who am I kidding? *Those* nights, when she starts in on this incoherent rambling, about not deserving to be chief, are more and more common lately. I miss the days when all she’d complain about was stupid laws and lack of department funding.

I sigh. “Come on, I’ll help you upstairs.”

“No,” she growls, a stubborn frown setting across her forehead.

It’s half past eleven. She’s normally passed out by nine, so this is an unusually late night for her. Still, if she downs a few glasses of water and goes to bed, *maybe* she’ll be ready for work by the morning, only a little worse for wear.

I fold my six-foot-two frame into the chair across from her. “Mom?”

“I’m fine . . .” she mumbles, her brow pinched with irritation as she fumbles with her pack of cigarettes.

I wish I could be angry with her. Instead, I’m sad and frustrated. I’m pretty sure I need help, but I have no idea who to turn to. I was eleven the last time she hit the bottle like this. She and Dad were still married, so he dealt with it. But Dad has wiped his hands of her. He’s got a

new wife and family and a meat-and-potatoes life in Seattle. He was never meant to be the husband of a cop, and especially not one as ambitious as my mother.

She'd skin me alive if I went to any of the guys I know from the APD about her drinking. There are too many people looking for a reason to get rid of a female chief. *This* would be a *good* reason.

I could go to Uncle Silas. He's the district attorney; he wouldn't want voters finding out that his sister the chief of police is a drunk. I should have gone to him already, but I hoped it was a phase, something she'd work out on her own.

Maybe with a little push from us, Mom can get sober again. She did it once before, years ago. Quit cold turkey. She's tough like that. She can beat this again.

*If* she wants to.

I turn down the volume on the police scanner. "Mom?"

Her eyes snap open. It takes her a moment to focus on me, but she finally does. "How was basketball?"

"They beat our asses."

"Who were you playing with?"

"Jenson, Craig. The usual crew."

"Jenson and Craig . . ." she mutters, her gaze trailing over my arms, long and cut from hours of lifting weights and swimming laps. And she smiles. It's sloppy, but I see the wistfulness behind the boozy mask. "You've become so strong and independent, Noah. And smart. *So* smart. You know I love you to bits, right?"

I nudge the glass of water forward. "Take a sip, Mom. Please."

She humors me by downing half the glass, only to then reach for her glass of whiskey and knock back the shot.

“What time do you have to be in to work tomorrow?” If I can catch her over her morning coffee, when she’s sober and still feeling the pain of tonight, maybe I can start a serious conversation.

Maybe I can get through to her.

“You’ve grown into a good, honest man,” she mutters, not answering me. “You’re going to be fine.”

“Here. Let me get you another glass of water.” I fill up three more, lining them on the table in front of her. “Drink. Please.”

With reluctance, she reaches for the first.

“I’m gonna grab a shower.” Without the promise of more booze, she’ll stagger upstairs and be passed out facedown in her uniform by the time I’m out, I’m betting. I dip down to grab the bottle from beneath the chair.

“He was a good, honest man, too,” she mutters.

“You’ll find someone else. You’re still young.” She does this when she’s drunk, too—talks about Dad, about how it’s her fault they divorced. Right after this, she’s going to say that she’s a terrible mother, because she abandoned me, let him take me to Seattle all those years ago. A boy needs his father, she believed.

“No, not your father . . . Abe.”

I freeze.

I haven’t heard her say that name in years.

I ask cautiously, “*Abraham*, Abe?”

“Hmmm.” She nods. Again, that wistful smile touches her lips. “You remember him, don’t you?”

“Of course.” He was the tall man with ebony skin and a wide smile who taught me how to dribble a ball. He was my mother’s police partner for years, and one of her best friends for even longer.

Until he was killed by a cocaine dealer, only to be labeled a corrupt cop after his death. I was eleven when he died. I didn’t understand what that meant, only that whatever Abraham Wilkes did was *bad*. It made statewide news and broadened an already perceptible racial divide within the community. It made Mom start drinking, and I’m pretty sure it broke apart our family.

“He was a *good* man.” Her voice drifts off with her gaze, as her eyes begin to water. “He was a good, honest man.”

I wander back toward the table. “I thought he was stealing and dealing drugs.”

She chuckles as she takes another drag of her cigarette. It’s a sad, empty sound. “That’s what everyone thinks, because that’s what they *made* them think. But *you* . . .” She pokes the air with her finger, her normally neat and trim fingernails chewed to the quick. “You need to know the truth. *I* need you to know that he was a good man and we are bad, bad people.”

“Who’s bad?” I’m desperate to pull the chair out and sit down across from her again, to listen to whatever it is she’s trying to tell me. But I also don’t think she realizes what she’s divulging. And I don’t want to give her pause to clue in and clam up.

She dumps her cigarette pack out on the table, scattering a half dozen cigarettes before finding one to light. “You know he broke Dina. Ran her and that beautiful little girl out of town. She was so young when Abe died. Gracie. He always smiled when he said her name.” Mom

smiles now too, reminiscing. “She has her mama’s green eyes and Abraham’s full lips and kinky curls. And her skin, it’s this gorgeous color, like caramel, and—”

“Mom!” I snap, hoping to get her focus back. I vaguely remember Abe’s kid—a cute girl with big eyes and wild hair—but I don’t want to hear about her right now. “What are you talking about? Who did what?”

“It didn’t start out that way. Or . . . I guess it did. But he made it sound *right*.”

“Who? Abe?”

Her head shakes back and forth lazily. “I don’t deserve to be chief, but it was one heck of a carrot. Better than the stick. Abe . . . *he* got the stick. He couldn’t be bought. He was just in the wrong place, at the wrong time. Because of me.”

“You’re not making sense.”

Her jaw sets, and her eyes fix on a point behind my head. “What I let happen . . . I may as well have pulled the trigger.” She barely has the cigarette lit when she mashes it into the pile of ashes. “I sold my soul is what I did, and there ain’t no coming back from that.”

“What—”

“Course I should have known he’d be waiting like a wily fox in the thicket to use it against me.”

“Who—”

“Just remember I meant to do good. And he *promised* me he didn’t know her age. He *promised* he’d never do it again.” She snorts. “I need you to know, Abe was a good man.” A tear slips down her cheek, and her gaze locks on mine. “I tried to make it right. But I couldn’t face her. After all this time, I couldn’t face what I’d done to her. I’m a coward. Not a chief. A coward.”

A shiver runs down my back. “Who are you talking about, Mom?”

She shakes her head lazily. “She must hate her daddy. She don’t know any better. But I *need* her to know. Tell Gracie he was a good man. You’ll do that, right?”

I’m speechless, trying to decipher the meaning behind her jumbled words. “Mom . . . what are you trying to tell me?” It sounds a hell of a lot like a confession. But for what?

She opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out as she stares at me, her blue eyes—the same cornflower shade as mine—cast with a haunted shadow. I wait for her to explain herself.

Finally she flicks her lighter, letting the tiny flame dance for a moment before pulling her thumb away to extinguish it. “Go on to bed, and let sleeping dogs lie. They’re less likely to bite.” She chuckles. “He always liked that saying, every time I pushed him, every time I told him they were up to no good.”

As if I could sleep after this. “Mom . . .”

“You remember Hal Fulcher?”

“Your lawyer?”

“Make sure you pay him a visit. Don’t wait too long. They don’t have much time.”

*What? Why?*

“Go and grab that shower.” She finishes the first glass of water, then chugs the second. I’m not going to get any coherent answers from her tonight. This conversation will have to continue in the morning, though I can’t imagine how to start it.

I lean down to place a kiss on her forehead, and she reaches up, her palm cupping my stubbled jaw in an affectionate gesture. “I love you so much. Always remember that.”

“Love you, too. And if you’re not in bed by the time I’m done, I’ll throw you over my shoulder.” She knows it’s not an idle threat. I’ve done it before.

She responds with hollow laughter, then turns up the dial on the police radio, her eyes beginning to shutter. Another five minutes and she’ll be passed out, right there on the table.

The dispatcher’s voice doesn’t quite muffle her heavy sigh. “You’re gonna be fine.”

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I peel off my clothes and throw them in a corner. I’ll deal with them later. Just like I’ll deal with the scruff covering my jaw. Or not. We’re going to Rainey Street tomorrow night for drinks and Jenson’s girlfriend is bringing her friend Dana, the one I hooked up with last week. I forgot to shave then, too, and she seemed to like it.

I simply stand under the hot stream of water for a moment, letting it rivulet over my skin, hoping it’ll melt away the unease that’s settled onto my shoulders. Mom was acting different tonight. Almost . . . crazy. The fact that she brought up Abe has thrown me for a loop. She took his death hard. That’s when she started *really* drinking the first time.

And what the hell was all that talk of carrots and sticks and selling her soul?

I inhale the spicy scent of my shampoo as I scrub away at my scalp. Fucking dramatic drunken rambling. I can’t imagine what my mother thinks she’s guilty of. She’s a highly decorated police chief. She’s well respected in the community. She’s smart and funny. When she’s not drunk.

She’s my *mom*.

The blast of a gunshot tears through the house.