

Chapter 1

They buried Joe three days after his murder. Maya wore black, as befitted a grieving widow. The sun pounded down with an unflagging fury that reminded her of her months in the desert. The family pastor spouted the clichés, but Maya wasn't listening. Her eyes drifted to the schoolyard across the street.

Yes, the cemetery overlooked an elementary school.

Maya had driven past here countless times, the graveyard on the left, the elementary school on her right, and yet the strangeness, if not obscenity, of the placement had never really registered with her before. Which came first, she wondered, the schoolyard or the cemetery? Who'd been the one to decide to build a school next to a cemetery—or vice versa? Did it even matter, this life-

ending and life-beginning juxtaposition, or was it, in fact, somewhat poignant? Death is so close, always, a breath away, so perhaps it was wise to introduce children to that concept at an early age.

Maya filled her head with inanities like this as she watched Joe's casket disappear into the earth. Distract yourself. That was the key. Get through it.

The black dress itched. Over the past decade, Maya had been to a hundred-plus funerals, but this was the first time she'd been obligated to wear black. She hated it.

To her right, Joe's immediate family—his mother, Judith; his brother Neil; his sister, Caroline—wilted from the combination of high temperatures and deep sorrow. To her left, getting antsy and starting to use Maya's arm as a rope swing, was her (and Joe's) two-year-old daughter, Lily. The parenting cliché states that children do not come with instruction manuals. That never seemed more true than today. What, Maya had wondered, was the proper etiquette for a situation like this? Do you leave your two-year-old daughter at home—or do you take her to her father's funeral? That was an issue that they didn't cover on those know-it-all, one-size-fits-all mommy websites. In a fit of pity-anger, Maya had almost posted that question online: "Hi, Everyone! My husband was recently murdered. Should I bring my two-year-old daughter to the graveyard or leave her home? Oh, and clothing suggestions? Thanks!"

There were hundreds of people at the funeral, and in some dimly lit corner of her brain, she realized that this would have pleased Joe. Joe liked people. People liked Joe. But of course, popularity alone wouldn't explain the crowd. Mourners had been drawn in by the horrible lure of being near the tragic: a young

man gunned down in cold blood, the charming scion of the wealthy Burkett family—and the husband of a woman mired in an international scandal.

Lily wrapped both arms around her mother's leg. Maya bent down and whispered, "Not much longer, sweetheart, okay?"

Lily nodded but held on even tighter.

Maya stood back at attention, smoothing the itchy black dress she'd borrowed from Eileen with both hands. Joe would not have wanted her in black. He'd always preferred her in the military formals she'd worn back in the days when she'd been Army Captain Maya Stern. When they'd first met at a Burkett family charity gala, Joe had walked straight up to her in his tails, given her the rakish smile (Maya hadn't understood the term "rakish" until she saw that smile), and said, "Wow, I thought the turn-on was supposed to be *men* in uniform."

It was a lame pickup line, just lame enough to make her laugh, which was all the opening a guy like Joe needed. Man, he was so damn handsome. The memory, even now, even standing in this stifling humidity with his dead body feet away, made her smile. A year later, Maya and Joe were married. Lily came not long after that. And now, as though someone had fast-forwarded a life-together tape, here she was, burying her husband and the father of her only child.

"All love stories," Maya's father had told her many years ago, "end in tragedy."

Maya had shaken her head and said, "God, Dad, that's grim."

"Yes, but think about it: You either fall out of love, or, if you're really one of the lucky ones, you live long enough to watch your soul mate die."

Maya could still see her father sitting across from her at the kitchen table of yellowing Formica laminate in their Brooklyn town house. Dad wore his customary cardigan sweater (all professions, not just those in the military, wear uniforms of some kind or another), surrounded by the college essays he'd have to grade. He and Mom had died years ago, within months of each other, but in truth, it was still hard for Maya to know which category of tragedy their love story fell into.

As the pastor prattled on, Judith Burkett, Joe's mother, took hold of Maya's hand in the death grip of the grieving.

"This," the old woman mumbled, "is even worse."

Maya didn't ask for clarification. She didn't have to. This was the second time Judith Burkett had been forced to bury a child, two of her three sons now gone, one supposedly by tragic accident, one by murder. Maya glanced down at her own child, at the top of Lily's head, and wondered how a mother could live with such pain.

As if she knew what Maya was thinking, the old woman whispered, "It'll never be okay," her simple words cutting through the air like a reaper's scythe. "Never."

"It's my fault," Maya said.

She hadn't meant to say it. Judith looked up at her.

"I should have . . ."

"There was nothing you could have done," Judith said. But there was still something off in the tone. Maya understood, because others were probably thinking the same thing. Maya Stern had saved so many in the past. Why couldn't she have saved her own husband?

"Ashes to ashes . . ."

Wow, did the pastor really trot out that hackneyed chestnut or had Maya imagined it? She hadn't been paying attention. She never did at funerals. She had been around death too many times not to understand the secret to getting through them: Go numb. Don't focus on anything. Let all sounds and sights blur to the point of being unrecognizable.

Joe's casket reached bottom with a thud that echoed too long in the still air. Judith swayed against Maya and let out a low groan. Maya maintained her military bearing—head high, spine straight, shoulders back. She recently had read one of those self-help articles people always emailed around about “power poses” and how they were supposed to improve performance. The military understood that tidbit of pop psychology way before its time. As a soldier, you don't stand at attention because it looks nice. You stand at attention because, on some level, it either gives you strength or, just as important, makes you appear stronger to both your comrades and enemies.

For a moment, Maya flashed back to the park—the glint of metal, the sound of gunshots, Joe falling, Maya's shirt covered in blood, stumbling through the dark, distant streetlights giving off hazy halos of illumination . . .

“Help . . . please . . . someone . . . my husband's . . .”

She closed her eyes and pushed it away.

Hang on, she told herself now. Just get through it.

And she did.

Then there was the receiving line.

The only two places you stand on receiving lines are funerals

and weddings. There was probably something poignant in that fact, but Maya couldn't imagine what it could be.

She had no idea how many people walked past her, but it took hours. Mourners shuffled forward like a scene in some zombie movie where you slay one but more just keep coming at you.

Just keep it moving.

Most offered a low "Sorry for your loss," which was pretty much the perfect thing to say. Others talked too much. They started in about how tragic it all was, what a waste, how the city was going to hell, how they were almost robbed at gunpoint once (rule one: never make it about yourself on a receiving line), how they hoped the police fried the animals who did it, how fortunate Maya was, how God must have been looking out for her (the implication being, she guessed, that God hadn't cared as much about Joe), how there is always a plan, how there is a reason for everything (a wonder she didn't punch those people straight in the face).

Joe's family grew exhausted and had to sit midway through. Not Maya. She stood throughout, maintained direct eye contact, and greeted each mourner with a firm handshake. She used subtle and not-so-subtle body language to rebuff those who wanted to be more expressive in their grief via hugs or kisses. Inane as their words might have been, Maya listened attentively, nodded, said, "Thank you for coming" in the same sincere-ish tone, and then greeted the next person in line.

Other hard-and-fast rules of the receiving line at a funeral: Don't talk too much. Short platitudes work well because innocuous is far better than offensive. If you feel the need to say more, make it a nice, quick memory of the dead. Never do, for example,

what Joe's aunt Edith did. Never cry hysterically and become the most theatrical "look at me, I'm suffering" of mourners—and never say something chillingly stupid to the grieving widow like: "You poor girl, first your sister, now your husband."

The world stopped for a moment when Aunt Edith voiced what so many others were thinking, especially when Maya's young nephew, Daniel, and younger niece, Alexa, were within earshot. The blood in Maya's veins thrummed, and it took everything she had not to reach out, grab Aunt Edith's throat, and rip her vocal cords out.

Instead, Maya said in a sincere-ish tone: "Thank you for coming."

Six of Maya's former platoon mates, including Shane, hung back, keeping a watchful eye on her. That was what they did, like it or not. Guard duty seemed to never end when they were together. They didn't get in line. They knew better. They were her silent sentinels, always, their presence offering the only true comfort on this horrible day.

Every once in a while, Maya thought that she could hear her daughter's distant giggle—her oldest friend, Eileen Finn, had taken Lily to the playground at the elementary school across the street—but maybe that was just her imagination. The sound of laughing children felt both obscene and life affirming in such a setting: She longed for it and couldn't bear it.

Daniel and Alexa, Claire's kids, were the last two in line. Maya swept them into her arms, wanting, as always, to protect them from anything else bad happening to them. Eddie, her brother-in-law . . . Is that what he was? What do you call the man who was married to your sister before she was murdered? "Ex-brother-in-law" seemed like something more for a divorce.

Do you say “*former* brother-in-law”? Do you just stick with “brother-in-law”?

More inanity designed to distract.

Eddie approached more tentatively. There were tufts of hair on his face where he’d missed with the razor. Eddie kissed Maya’s cheek. The smell of mouthwash and mints was strong enough to drown out whatever else might be there, but then again, wasn’t that the point?

“I’m going to miss Joe,” Eddie mumbled.

“I know you will. He liked you a lot, Eddie.”

“If there’s anything we can do . . .”

You can take better care of your kids, Maya thought, but her normal anger with him was gone now, leaked away like a raft with a pinhole.

“We’re fine, thanks.”

Eddie went silent, as if he too could read her mind, which in this case he probably could.

“Sorry I missed your last game,” Maya said to Alexa, “but I’ll be there tomorrow.”

All three of them suddenly looked uneasy.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” Eddie said.

“It’s okay. It’ll be a nice distraction.”

Eddie nodded, gathered up Daniel and Alexa, and headed to the car. Alexa looked back at her as she walked away. Maya gave her the reassuring smile. *Nothing has changed*, the smile said. *I will still always be there for you, just as I promised your mother.*

Maya watched Claire’s family get into the car. Daniel, the outgoing fourteen-year-old, took the front seat. Alexa, who was only twelve, sat alone in the back. Since her mother’s death, she seemed

to always be wincing as though preparing for the next blow. Eddie waved, gave Maya a tired smile, and slipped into the driver's seat.

Maya waited, watching the car drive slowly away. When it did, she noticed NYPD homicide detective Roger Kierce standing in the distance, leaning against a tree. Even today. Even now. She was tempted to walk over and confront him, demand some answers, but Judith took her hand again.

"I'd like you and Lily to come back to Farnwood with us."

The Burketts always referred to their house by its name. That probably should have been clue one of what would become of her if she married into such a family.

"Thank you," Maya said, "but I think Lily needs to be home."

"She needs to be with family. You both do."

"I appreciate that."

"I mean it. Lily will always be our granddaughter. And you'll always be our daughter."

Judith gave her hand an extra squeeze to emphasize the sentiment. It was sweet of Judith to say, like something she was reading off a teleprompter at one of her charity galas, but it was also untrue—at least the part about Maya. No one who married a Burkett was anything but a tolerated outsider.

"Another time," Maya said. "I'm sure you understand."

Judith nodded and gave her a perfunctory hug. So did Joe's brother and sister. She watched their devastated faces as they stumbled toward the stretch limos that would take them to the Burkett estate.

Her former platoon mates were still there. She met Shane's eyes and gave him a small nod. They got it. They didn't so much "fall out" as quietly fade away, being sure not to disturb anything in

their wake. Most of them were still enlisted. After what happened near the Syrian-Iraqi border, Maya had been “encouraged” to take an honorable discharge. Seeing no other real option, she did. So now, instead of commanding or at least teaching the new recruits, retired Captain Maya Stern, for a short time the face of the new Army, gave flying lessons at Teterboro Airport in northern New Jersey. Some days it was okay. Most days she missed the service more than she’d have ever imagined.

Maya finally stood alone by the mound of dirt that would soon cover her husband.

“Ah, Joe,” she said out loud.

She tried to feel a presence. She had tried this before, in countless mourning situations, seeing if she could sense any sort of life force after death, but there was always nothing. Some believed that there had to be at least a small life force—that energy and motion never die completely, that the soul is eternal, that you can’t destroy matter permanently, all that. Perhaps that was true, but the more of the dead Maya hung around, the more it felt as though nothing, absolutely nothing, was left behind.

She stayed by the gravesite until Eileen came back from the playground with Lily.

“Ready?” Eileen asked.

Maya took another look at the hole in the ground. She wanted to say something profound to Joe, something that might give them both—ugh—closure, but no words came to her.

Eileen drove them home. Lily fell asleep in a car seat that looked like something designed by NASA. Maya sat in the front passenger seat and stared out the window. When they got to the house—Joe had actually wanted to name it too, but Maya had put

her foot down—Maya somehow managed to release the complicated strapping mechanism and eased Lily out of the backseat. She cradled Lily’s head so as not to wake her.

“Thanks for the ride,” Maya whispered.

Eileen turned off the car. “Do you mind if I come in for a second?”

“We’ll be fine.”

“No doubt.” Eileen unbuckled her seat belt. “But I’ve been meaning to give you something. It’ll just take two minutes.”

Maya held it in her hand. “A digital picture frame?”

Eileen was a strawberry blonde with freckles and a wide smile. She had the kind of face that lit up a room when she entered, which made it a great mask for the torment beneath.

“No, it’s a nanny cam disguised as a digital picture frame.”

“Say again?”

“Now that you’re working full-time, you’ve got to keep a better eye on things, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Where does Isabella play with Lily most of the time?”

Maya gestured to her right. “In the den.”

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

“Eileen . . .”

She took the frame from Maya’s hand. “Just follow me.”

The den was right off the kitchen. It had a cathedral ceiling and plenty of blond wood. A big-screen television hung on the wall. There were two baskets filled to the brim with educational toys for Lily. A Pack ’n Play stood in front of the couch where there

used to be a beautiful mahogany coffee table. The coffee table, alas, hadn't been child friendly, so it had to go.

Eileen moved toward the bookshelf. She found a spot for the frame and plugged the cord into a nearby outlet. "I already pre-loaded some pictures of your family. The digital frame will just shuffle through and display them. Do Isabella and Lily normally play by that couch?"

"Yes."

"Good." Eileen shifted the frame in that direction. "The camera built inside this thing is wide-angle, so you can see the whole room."

"Eileen—"

"I saw her at the funeral."

"Who?"

"Your nanny."

"Isabella's family goes way back with Joe's. Her mother was Joe's nanny. Her brother is the family gardener."

"For real?"

Maya shrugged. "The rich."

"They're different."

"They are."

"So do you trust her?"

"Who, Isabella?"

"Yes."

Maya shrugged. "You know me."

"I do." Eileen had originally been Claire's friend—the two had been assigned as freshman roommates at Vassar—but all three women quickly grew close. "You trust no one, Maya."

"I wouldn't put it that way."

“Fine. When it comes to your child?”

“When it comes to my child,” Maya said, “yeah, okay, no one.”

Eileen smiled. “That’s why I’m giving you this. Look, I don’t think you’ll find anything. Isabella seems great.”

“But better safe than sorry?”

“Exactly. I can’t tell you how much comfort it gave me when I left Kyle and Missy with the nanny.”

Maya wondered about that—whether Eileen had just used it with the nanny or whether she had built a case against someone else—but she kept the thought to herself for now.

“Do you have an SD card port on your computer?” Eileen asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Doesn’t matter. I got you an SD reader that connects into any USB port. Just plug it into your laptop or computer. Really, it doesn’t get easier than this. You take the SD card out of the frame at the end of the day—it’s back here, see?”

Maya nodded.

“Then you stick the card into the reader. The video pops up on your screen. The SD is thirty-two gigs, so it should last days easily. There’s also a motion detector, so it’s not recording when the room is empty or anything like that.”

Maya couldn’t help but smile. “Look at you.”

“What? The role reversal bothering you?”

“A little. I should have thought of doing this myself.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t.”

Maya looked down and met her friend’s eye. Eileen was maybe five two, Maya nearly six feet tall, but with the ramrod posture, she looked even taller. “Did you ever see anything on your nanny cam?”

“You mean, something I shouldn’t have?”

“Yeah.”

“No,” Eileen said. “And I know what you’re thinking. He hasn’t been back. And I haven’t seen him.”

“I’m not judging.”

“Not even a little?”

“What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t judge a little?”

Eileen came over and wrapped her arms around Maya. Maya hugged her back. Eileen wasn’t a quasi-stranger paying her respects. Maya ended up going to Vassar a year after Claire. The three women had lived together in those halcyon days before Maya had started Army Aviation School at Fort Rucker in Alabama. Eileen was still, along with Shane, her closest friend.

“I love you, you know.”

Maya nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

“You sure you don’t want me to stay?”

“You have your own family to take care of.”

“It’s okay,” Eileen said, pointing at the digital frame with her thumb. “I’m still watching.”

“Funny.”

“Not really. But I know you need downtime. Call if you need anything. Oh, and don’t worry about dinner. I already ordered you Chinese from Look See. It’ll be here in twenty minutes.”

“I love you, you know.”

“Yeah,” Eileen said, heading to the door. “I know.” She stopped. “Whoa.”

“What is it?”

“You have company.”

Chapter 2

The company was in the short, hirsute form of NYPD homicide detective Roger Kierce. Kierce entered the house with his best attempt at swagger, glancing all around the way cops do and saying, “Nice place.”

Maya frowned, not bothering to hide her annoyance.

Kierce had something of a caveman thing going on. He was stocky and broad, and his arms seemed too short for his body. He had the kind of face that looked unshaven even immediately after a shave. His bushy eyebrows resembled a late stage of caterpillar metamorphosis, and the hair on the back of his hands could have been the work of a curling iron.

“Hope it’s okay I stopped by.”

“Why wouldn’t it be okay?” Maya said. “Oh, right, that whole just-buried-my-husband thing.”

Kierce feigned contrite. “I realize my timing could be better.”

“You think?”

“But tomorrow you go back to work and, really, when is a good time?”

“Great point. What can I do for you, Detective?”

“Do you mind if I sit?”

Maya gestured toward the couch in the den. A spooky thought came to her: This encounter—in fact, every encounter in this room—would now be recorded by the hidden nanny cam. What an odd thing to think about. She could, of course, manually turn it on and off, but who would remember or want to go through that hassle every day? She wondered whether the camera recorded sound too. She would have to ask Eileen, or she could wait and see when she checked its content.

“Nice place,” Kierce said.

“Yeah, you said that on the way in.”

“What year was it built?”

“Sometime in the nineteen twenties.”

“Your late husband’s family. They own the house, right?”

“Yes.”

Kierce sat. She stayed standing.

“So what can I do for you, Detective?”

“Just some follow-up, that kind of thing.”

“Follow-up?”

“Bear with me, okay?” Kierce gave her what he must imagine was a disarming smile. Maya wasn’t buying it. “Where is it . . . ?” He dug into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out a

frayed notepad. “Do you mind if we go through it one more time?”

Maya wasn’t sure what to make of him, which was probably what Kierce wanted. “What would you like to know?”

“Let’s start at the beginning, okay?”

She sat and spread her hands as if to say, *Go ahead.*

“Why did you and Joe meet up in Central Park?”

“He asked me to.”

“On the phone, right?”

“Yes.”

“Was this normal?”

“We had met up there before, yes.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. A bunch of times. I told you. It’s a nice area of the park. We used to spread out a blanket and then we’d have lunch at the Boathouse . . .” She caught herself, stopped, swallowed. “It was just a nice place, that’s all.”

“During the day, yes. But it’s a little secluded at night, don’t you think?”

“We always felt safe there.”

He smiled at her. “I bet you feel safe most places.”

“Meaning?”

“When you’ve been where you’ve been, I mean, in terms of dangerous places, I guess a park must rank pretty low.” Kierce coughed into his fist. “Anyway, so your husband called you and said, ‘Let’s meet there,’ and so you did.”

“That’s right.”

“Except”—Kierce checked his notepad, licked his fingers, started paging through it—“he didn’t call you.”

He looked up at her.

“Excuse me?”

“You said Joe called you and said to meet you there.”

“No, you said that. I said he suggested we meet there on the phone.”

“But then I followed up with ‘He called you’ and you said, ‘That’s right.’”

“You’re playing semantics with me, Detective. You have the phone records for that night, am I correct?”

“I do, yes.”

“And it shows a phone call between my husband and me?”

“It does.”

“I don’t remember if I called him or he called me. But he suggested that we meet at our favorite spot in the park. I could have suggested it—I don’t see the relevance—and in fact, I might have, had he not suggested it first.”

“Can anyone verify that you and Joe used to meet up there?”

“I don’t think so, but I don’t see the relevance.”

Kierce gave her an insincere smile. “Neither do I, so let’s move on, shall we?”

She crossed her legs and waited.

“You describe two men approaching you from the west. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“They wore ski masks?”

She had been through this dozens of times already. “Yes.”

“Black ski masks, am I right?”

“You are.”

“And you said that one was about six feet tall—how tall are you, Mrs. Burkett?”

She almost snapped that he should call her captain—she hated being called missus—but that rank wasn’t apropos anymore. “Please call me Maya. And I’m right about six feet tall.”

“So one man was your height.”

She tried not to roll her eyes. “Uh, yes.”

“You were pretty precise in your description of the assailants.” Kierce started reading from his notepad. “One man was six feet tall. The other you estimated to be about five eight. One wore a black hoodie, jeans, and red Converse sneakers. The other wore a light blue T-shirt with no logo, beige backpack, and black running shoes, though you couldn’t tell the brand.”

“That’s correct.”

“The man with the red Cons—he was the one who shot your husband.”

“Yes.”

“And then you ran.”

Maya said nothing.

“According to your statement, they wanted to rob you. You said that Joe was slow to give up his wallet. Your husband also wore a very expensive watch. A Hublot, I believe.”

Her throat was dry. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“Why didn’t he just hand it over?”

“I think . . . I think he would have.”

“But?”

She shook her head.

“Maya?”

“Have you ever had a gun jammed into your face, Detective?”

“No.”

“Then maybe you don’t understand.”

“Understand what?”

“The muzzle. The opening. When someone is pointing it at you, when someone is threatening to pull the trigger, that black hole grows impossibly large, like it’s going to swallow you whole. Some people, when they see that, they freeze.”

Kierce’s voice was soft now. “And Joe . . . he was one of those people?”

“For a second.”

“And that was too long?”

“In this case, yes.”

They sat in silence for a few long moments.

“Could the gun have gone off by accident?” Kierce asked.

“I doubt it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Two reasons. One, it was a revolver. Do you know anything about them?”

“Not a ton.”

“Because of the action, you either have to cock it back or squeeze very hard. You don’t accidentally fire.”

“I see. And the second reason?”

“More obvious,” she said. “The gunman fired two more times. You don’t ‘accidentally’ fire three bullets.”

Kierce nodded and checked the notes again. “The first bullet hit your husband’s left shoulder. The second hit landed in the right tangent of his clavicle.”

Maya closed her eyes.

“How far away was the gunman when he fired?”

“Ten feet.”

“Our ME said neither one of these shots was fatal.”

“Yes, you told me,” she said.

“So what happened then?”

“I tried to hold him up . . .”

“Joe?”

“Yes, Joe,” she snapped. “Who else?”

“Sorry. Then what happened?”

“I . . . Joe dropped to his knees.”

“And that was when the gunman fired the third shot?”

Maya said nothing.

“The third shot,” Kierce repeated. “The one that killed him.”

“I already told you.”

“Told me what?”

Maya raised her eyes and met his. “I didn’t see the third shot.”

Kierce nodded. “That’s right,” he said too slowly. “Because you were running away by then.”

“Help . . . please . . . someone . . . my husband’s . . .”

Her chest started to hitch. The sounds—gunfire, the whirl of helicopter rotors, the screams of agony—rushed her all at once. She shut her eyes, took a few deep breaths, kept her face composed.

“Maya?”

“Yes, I ran. Okay? Two men had guns. I ran. I ran and left my husband behind, and then somewhere, I don’t know, maybe five, ten seconds later, I heard the blast coming from behind me and yes, now, based on what you told me, I know that after I left, the

same gunman put the gun against my husband's head while he was still on his knees, pulled the trigger . . .”

She stopped.

“No one is blaming you, Maya.”

“I didn't ask if anyone was, Detective,” she said through gritted teeth. “What do you want?”

Kierce started paging through the notes. “Besides very detailed descriptions of the perpetrators, you were able to tell us that the one with the red Cons carried a Smith and Wesson 686 while his partner was armed with a Beretta M9.” Kierce looked up. “That's pretty impressive. Identifying the weaponry like that.”

“Part of the training.”

“That would be your military training, am I correct?”

“Let's just say I'm observant.”

“Oh, I think you're being modest, Maya. We all know that about your heroics overseas.”

And my downfall, she almost added.

“The lighting in that part of the park isn't great. Just a few distant streetlights.”

“It's enough.”

“Enough to know specific gun makes?”

“I know firearms.”

“Right, of course. You are, in fact, an expert marksman, is that correct?”

“Markswoman.”

The correction came automatically. So did his patronizing smile.

“My bad. Still it was dark—”

“The Smith and Wesson was stainless steel, as opposed to

black. Easy to see in the dark. I could also hear him pull back the hammer. You do that on a revolver, not a semiautomatic.”

“And the Beretta?”

“I can’t be sure of the exact make, but it had a floating barrel in the style of Beretta.”

“As you know, we recovered three bullets from your husband’s body. Thirty-eight calibers, consistent with the Smith and Wesson.” He rubbed his face as if in deep thought. “You own guns, don’t you, Maya?”

“I do.”

“Would one of them happen to be a Smith and Wesson 686?”

“You know the answer,” she said.

“How would I know that?”

“New Jersey law requires that I register all weapons purchased in state. So you know all this. Unless you’re a complete incompetent, Detective Kierce, which you are definitely not, you checked my gun records immediately. So can we stop playing games and get to it?”

“How far would you say it is from where your husband fell to Bethesda Fountain?”

The subject change threw her. “I’m sure you did the measurements.”

“We did, yes. It’s approximately three hundred yards with all the twists and turns. I ran it. I’m not in as good a shape as you, but it took me about a minute.”

“Okay.”

“Well, here’s the thing. Several witnesses said they heard the gunshot but then you emerged at least a minute or two later. How do you explain that?”

“Why would I need to explain it?”

“It’s a fair question.”

She didn’t so much as blink. “Do you think I shot my husband, Detective?”

“Did you?”

“No. And you know how I can prove it?”

“How?”

“Come to the range with me.”

“Meaning?”

“Like you said, I’m an expert markswoman.”

“So we’ve been told.”

“Then you know.”

“Know what?”

Maya leaned forward and met his eye. “It wouldn’t have taken me three shots to kill a man from that distance if I was blind-folded.”

Kierce actually smiled at that. “Touché. And I’m sorry for the line of inquiry because no, I don’t think you shot your husband. In fact, I can pretty much prove you didn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

Kierce stood. “Do you keep your guns here?”

“Yes.”

“Do you mind showing me?”

First, she took him to the gun safe in the basement.

“I guess you’re a big fan of the Second Amendment,” Kierce said.

“I don’t get into politics.”

“But you like guns.” He looked at the safe. “I don’t see a combination wheel. Does it open with a key?”

“Nope. You can only access it with your thumbprint.”

“Ah, I see. So it’s set that only you can open it.”

Maya swallowed. “It is now.”

“Oh,” Kierce said, realizing his mistake. “Your husband?”

She nodded.

“Anyone else besides you two have access?”

“No one.” She placed her thumb on the opening. The door opened with an audible pop. She stepped aside.

Kierce looked inside and whistled low. “What do you need all these for?”

“I don’t need any of them. I enjoy shooting. It’s my hobby. Most people don’t like it or get it. That’s fine with me.”

“So where is your Smith and Wesson 686?”

She pointed into the safe. “Here.”

His eyes narrowed. “May I take it with me?”

“The Smith and Wesson?”

“Yes, if it isn’t an issue.”

“I thought you didn’t think I did it.”

“I don’t. But we might as well eliminate not only you but your gun, don’t you think?”

Maya took out the Smith and Wesson. She was, like most good shooters, OCD when it came to cleaning and loading/unloading her weaponry, which just meant you always check again to make sure it is unloaded. It was.

“I’ll give you a receipt for it,” he said.

“I, of course, could ask for a court order.”

“And I’d probably be able to get it,” he said.

True enough. She gave him the weapon.

“Detective?”

“What?”

“You’re not telling me something.”

Kierce smiled. “I’ll be in touch.”

Chapter 3

Isabella, Lily's nanny, arrived at seven the next morning.

At the funeral, Isabella's family had been among the most animated of the mourners. Her mother, Rosa, Joe's childhood nanny, had been especially distraught, clutching a handkerchief and continually collapsing on her own children, Isabella and Hector. Even now, Maya could still see the tinge of red in Isabella's eyes from yesterday's tears.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Burkett."

Maya had asked her several times to call her by her first name, not Mrs. Burkett, but Isabella would just nod and continue to call her Mrs. Burkett, so Maya let it go. If Isabella was more comfortable with formality in her work environment, who was Maya to force it?

“Thank you, Isabella.”

Lily hopped out of her kitchen chair, the cereal still in her mouth, and ran toward them. “Isabella!”

Isabella’s face lit up as she swooped the little girl into her arms and gave her a big hug. Maya felt the quick pang of the working mother: grateful that her daughter liked her nanny so much while ungrateful that her daughter liked her nanny so much.

Did she trust Isabella?

The answer was, as she had said yesterday, yes—as much as she would trust any “stranger” in this situation. Joe had hired Isabella, of course. Maya hadn’t been sure about it. There was this new day care center on Porter Street called Growin’ Up, which Maya read as a small homage to the old Bruce Springsteen song. A pretty, young smiley thing named Kitty Shum (“Call me Miss Kitty!”) had given Maya a tour of the clean, sleek, multihued rooms of overstimulation, with all kinds of cameras and security procedures and other young smiley things and, of course, other children for Lily to play with, but Joe had been insistent on a nanny. He reminded Maya that Isabella’s mother had “practically raised me,” and Maya had jokingly countered, “Are you sure that’s a résumé enhancer?” But since Maya had been heading overseas for a six-month deployment at the time, she really had little say in the choice—and no reason not to embrace it.

Maya kissed Lily on the top of her head and headed off to work. She could have taken a few more days and stayed at home with her daughter. She certainly didn’t need the money—even with the prenup, she would be a very wealthy widow—but classically doting motherhood was simply not for her. Maya had tried to dive into the whole “mommy world,” the coffee klatches with

her fellow moms where they discussed toilet training, top pre-schools, stroller safety ratings, and slow-bragged with genuine interest about their own children's mundane development. Maya would sit there and smile, but behind her eyes, she would be flashing back to Iraq, to a specific blood-filled memory—usually Jake Evans, a nineteen-year-old from Fayetteville, Arkansas, getting the entire lower part of his body blown off yet somehow surviving—and trying to somehow come to terms with the unfathomable fact that this gossipy coffee klatch existed on the same planet as that blood-soaked battleground.

Sometimes, when she was with the other moms, the sounds of the rotors more than the gruesome visuals would come roaring back. Ironic, she thought, that this in-your-face, never-back-off parenting was nicknamed “helicoptering.”

They all just didn't have clue.

Maya assessed her surroundings as she headed to the car in her own driveway, looking for places where the enemy could hide or spring an attack. The reason for doing this was simple: Old habits die hard. Once a soldier, always a soldier.

No sign of the enemy, imaginary or not.

Maya knew that she suffered some textbook mental malady from being over there, but the truth is, no one comes back without scars. To her, that malady felt more like enlightenment. She got the world now. Others didn't.

In the Army, Maya had flown combat helicopters, often providing cover and clearing for advancing ground troops. She'd started by flying UH-60 Black Hawks at Fort Campbell before logging enough miles to apply for the prestigious 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) in the Middle East. Sol-

diers routinely called helicopters “birds,” which was fine, but there were few things more grating than when a civilian did the same. It had been her plan to stay in the service, probably for life, but after that video had been released on the CoreyTheWhistle site, that particular plan was blown up as though it too, like Jake Evans, had stepped on an IED.

The flight lessons today would take place aboard a Cessna 172, a single-engine four-seater that just so happened to be the most successful aircraft in history. Teaching ends up being about hours in the air for the student. Maya’s job was often more “watch and see” than active instructions.

Flying, or just being in a cockpit when the plane was up in the air, was the equivalent of meditation for Maya. She could feel the bunched muscles in her shoulders loosen. No, it didn’t offer the rev or, let’s be honest, thrill of flying a UH-60 Black Hawk over Baghdad or being one of the first women to pilot a Boeing MH-6 Little Bird helicopter gunship. No one wanted to admit that awful high of combat, the adrenaline boost that some compared to narcotics. It was unseemly to “enjoy” combat, to feel that tingle, to realize that nothing else in your life would ever really approach it. That was the terrible secret you could never voice. Yes, war was horrible and no human being should ever have to experience it. Maya would have laid down her own life to make sure that it never came close to Lily. But the unspoken truth was a part of you jonesed for the danger. You didn’t want that. You didn’t like what it said about you. Liking it means you are prenatally violent or lack empathy or some such nonsense. But there was an addictive element to fear. At home, you live relatively calm, placid, mundane lives. You go over there and live in mortal fear, and then

you're supposed to come back home and be calm, placid, and mundane again. Human beings don't work that way.

When she was in the air with a student, Maya always left her phone in her locker because she wanted no distractions. If there was an emergency, someone could radio up. But when she checked her messages during her lunch break, she saw a strange text from her nephew, Daniel.

Alexa doesn't want you to go to her soccer game.

Maya dialed the number. Daniel answered on the first ring.

"Hello?" he said.

"What's wrong?"

When Maya tapped Alexa's soccer coach on the shoulder, the big man turned so quickly the whistle around his neck nearly slapped her across the face.

"What?" he shouted.

The coach—his name was Phil, and his daughter was an obnoxious bully named Patty—had been shouting and pacing and throwing tantrums pretty much nonstop the entire game. Maya had known drill sergeants who'd have considered his behavior over the top for hardened recruits, let alone twelve-year-old girls.

"I'm Maya Stern."

"Oh, I know who you are, but"—Coach Phil gestured theatrically toward the field—"I'm in the middle of a game here. You should respect that, soldier."

Soldier? "I have a quick question."

“I got no time for questions now. See me after the game. All spectators need to be on the other side of the field.”

“League rules?”

“Exactly.”

Coach Phil dismissed Maya by turning so that his expansive back was now facing her. Maya didn't move.

“It's the second half,” Maya said.

“What?”

“League rules specify that you're supposed to play each girl half the game,” Maya said. “It's the second half. Three girls haven't gotten in yet. Even if you put them in now for the rest of the game, it wouldn't total half a game.”

Coach Phil's shorts probably fit him okay twenty, thirty pounds ago. His red polo shirt with the word “Coach” stitched in script across the left breast was also snug enough to double as sausage casing. He had the look of an ex-jock gone to seed, which, Maya surmised, he probably was. He was big and intimidating, and his size probably scared people.

Keeping his back to her, Coach Phil said out of the corner of his mouth, “For your information, this is the semifinals of the league championship.”

“I know.”

“We're only up by one goal.”

“I checked the league rules,” Maya said. “I don't see an exception to the half-game rule. You also didn't play all your players in the quarterfinals.”

He turned toward her and again faced her full-on. He adjusted the brim of his cap and moved into Maya's personal space. She didn't step back. During the first half, sitting with the parents and