

## PROLOGUE

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Susan Jackson lay on her bed, swamped by pain and meds, crawling through confusion toward shreds of consciousness. She wasn't alone, sure even in her murky mind someone sat beside her.

A hand cupped her chin, encircling her jaw. She tried to speak, but only garbled *nn-NN* sounds emerged from her fuzzy mind, her furry tongue. She tried to flail, but moved minimally, as if her body had disconnected from her mind. The hand holding her jaw—palm under it, fingers on either side—squeezed. She blinked, tried to focus her eyes. Squeezing at the sides of her jaw intensified, coupled with downward pressure, forcing her head back into the pillow, her mouth open.

“No more,” she tried to say, words thick from the force of the hand against her throat, the odd arch of her neck, the gagging feeling.

Drops in her mouth, tiny drops but she knew what they could do. The hand moved away and her head slumped to the right, mouth gaping. The hand grabbed her again, forced her head upright, held her jaw closed, then stilled.

The person changed position slightly. The hand touched her throat again, gentle now, massaging it, coaxing a swallow.

Susan's eyes finally focused enough to recognize the one beside her. She latched on to the eyes, and even through her fog, saw the determination, the cold devoid of caring.

No. Not you. Not you. Not you.

Susan Jackson swallowed reflexively. She began to sink, slipping into a darkness, a depth she knew would be deeper than ever before.

Not meds. Murder.

# CHAPTER ONE

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## OCTOBER—SIX MONTHS BEFORE SUSAN JACKSON'S DEATH

Peering into our great room, I watched my husband's still form on the hospital bed, searching for signs he was only sleeping. When his chest rose and fell, I breathed, too.

I tiptoed down the hall, closed the bathroom door tightly and turned the fan on high, shielding Tom from the sound. After tossing my clothes aside, I blasted the shower. My torrent of tears merged with the gush of water, sobs shaking me like an unstoppable earthquake. I loved Tom. I'd told him every day of the years we'd had together. I'd tell him every day he had left.

But that wasn't all I wanted to say. Part of me wanted to grab him, shake him, plead with him, *Don't you dare leave me. Don't you make me love you the way I've loved you all these years and then go away. Don't you build a life with me that doesn't exist without you and then leave me. Goddamn it, don't you*— It wasn't Tom's fault, I knew that. But there had to be someone, something to blame. God, the universe, some evil beyond understanding...

I squeezed my eyes shut, jammed my hands over my ears, my sobs morphing to wails.

As I stepped out of the shower, I pulled myself together, forcing slow breaths as I dressed.

Tom woke as I stepped into the great room. I walked over, saw his eyes cast toward the cathedral ceiling. "We... did this, Abby," he said. As his cancer progressed, Tom husbanded his words.

"Yes," I said softly, "yes, we did." Looking into his

eyes, I knew the images cascading through his mind matched mine. The weeks and months we'd spent building this hillside house, together, with our own hands, twenty years ago. We had so little money, we'd used a bureau drawer lined with a thick quilt as Delia's cradle. Short on cash, but Tom and I had love and dreams and our baby girl and—bliss, that's what we'd had back then. This room—expansive, oversized windows looking over the woods to Falls Harbor, Maine—had always been our favorite. What would it be like? To be here after...

As I sat next to him, Tom stretched his hand toward me. "Don't let them embalm me, Abby."

A shocky cold shot through me. *This can't be happening.* Leaning forward, I took his hand in mine, looked into his haunted eyes.

"You know what they do?" he asked.

I swallowed and braced myself. "Tell me."

"They drain your blood, replace it with embalming fluid." He stopped to catch his breath. "They jam a sharp steel rod inside you"—his eyes widened in fear—"and pierce organs like the heart. Then they pump in more embalming fluid."

Nausea gushed up my throat. I imagined them taking Tom... doing that... "Oh, dear God."

He sank onto his pillows. "Don't let them," Tom whispered, eyelids fluttering. "I want a home funeral." He pushed the pamphlet he'd been reading toward me. Sleep crept over him. How much weight had he lost? So vulnerable now, so small. Relying on me to do what had to be done.

But a funeral? Here? Weren't there laws? On the back of the pamphlet was a number for a home funeral guide. Not a Maine area code, so probably too far away to meet. Still,

maybe she could help. I walked into the kitchen and picked up the phone. She walked me through the entire process.

I hung up, a fast flutter in my chest. I could keep Tom at home after he died, wash and dress his body, have people come here to say their good-byes. Tom didn't have to be embalmed. Home funerals were legal. But I could expect problems, pushback. Some from those who didn't understand what they were. Some from those who did.

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Kissing Tom awake from a nap the next afternoon, I said, "The singers will be here soon." The Seaside Singers, a small choir composed of volunteers, sang at the bedside of people near the end of life. I hoped it would bring Tom comfort.

I opened the door to a woman with a soft smile and five others. In the great room, I introduced them to Tom and Delia, home from college.

The voices of the Seaside Singers melded together in celestial harmony, the music a living, breathing presence. A beautiful bass shone through, its depth, its strength guiding the whole. Tom's eyes closed as the choir moved from one song to another, the music rising up, drifting down, an invisible veil, as soft as a caress.

As a song ended, a tall man slipped out. The choir sang one more piece. As the music gently faded, I walked the choir out. The man sat on a bench. I asked the leader, "You think he's okay?"

"That's Brad Rainey. A while ago, he lost his family in a car accident. He thought he could start singing again, but it may have been a little soon."

I walked toward the bench. As I neared, he shifted over to make room for me.

"Sorry about that," he said as I sat down.

He had the deepest voice I'd ever heard; here was the beautiful bass. I said, "It can't be easy, doing what you're doing."

"Nothing about losing someone is easy. The wake, the funeral..." He shook his head.

"I'm having a home funeral for my husband."

"A home funeral?" He looked at me, forehead furrowed. "That something new?"

"Really it's just going back to the way we always cared for the dead until a hundred years ago." I told him a little about home funerals.

"Oh." He sat quietly for a long moment.

I wondered what he was thinking. When he turned back to me, he saw the question in my eyes.

"I'm a detective here in Falls Harbor," he said.

"Oh. If I were a detective, I guess I might have questions about home funerals."

"Right. I couldn't help thinking how easy it would be for someone to twist a situation like that—someone sick at home, then a home funeral—use it as a way to... hurt someone."

"You mean murder. A home funeral is just the opposite," I said quietly. "It's loving care."

"I'm sorry. My mind just goes that way. I simply meant there's a vulnerable victim. Lots of ways to kill right in the room."

"Awful someone could pervert it that way."

He nodded, and gave me a long look. "Your husband's fortunate to have you. I'm sure a home funeral will be loving care in your hands."

We rose as the leader of the Seaside Singers approached. "You let us know when, Abby," she said, "and we'll come back to see you again."

But they didn't come back.

A few days later, in the middle of the night, I climbed onto Tom's bed and lay next to him. Claspng his hand in mine, I held it as he dozed. I slept too. When I woke, Tom was gazing at me.

"Abby," he whispered, "listen to me."

The intensity of his voice grabbed me.

He clutched my hands with surprising strength. "You and Delia," he said. "Live."

"We will," I whispered. "I promise."

As he drifted off, I kissed his hands, his cheek, his lips. That gentle kiss to his lips would be the last he'd know. Early the next morning, as I lay by his side, Tom drew his last breath. His heart stilled.

Mine shattered.