

CHAPTER 1

I consider myself to be a fairly decent person with relatively high values, but I want my husband to die. I haven't actually tried to murder him; I've only created situations where the odds of his early demise are a bit higher. Now that I've said it, you've likely decided that I'm a ruthless, cold-blooded person and no doubt think badly of me. But, it's only fair that you know the entire story before passing judgment.

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Father deserted Mama when I was six years old and my brother, Robert, was nine. He left money for two months' rent, which is all we ever got from him, and was rumored to live in Alaska, a place he'd long talked about, although to my way of thinking, not any improvement over northern Minnesota. We moved from our village to Birch Lakes, a small city where Mama got a job at a garment factory, slaving long hours for low wages, while Robert and I went to school and kept the apartment tidy.

Both of us were expected to clean. Robert prepared simple meals until, at the age of twelve, my enterprising, housework-hating brother obtained a series of jobs, from walking dogs to washing cars, determinedly saving his money for college. Thus, at nine, my salad days a fading memory, I was solely responsible for cleaning our home and cooking the meals. I strongly resented Robert for dumping it all on me.

By the time I'd turned twelve, I'd learned to bake pies, sew curtains from old ones bought from rummage sales, and had developed a flair for housekeeping—all on limited funds. I still disliked it but did the chores with grim determination, even proficiently. Mama did appreciate it.

Gaynelle Webb, my best friend, had a similar life, with babysitting for her half-brother tacked onto the onerous list of tasks that she was allotted by her also-divorced mother. We became firm friends, escaping to a marvelous grassy park whenever we had a free hour. The fact that we both despised our names drew us even closer.

On a hot July afternoon, at the age of thirteen, I left our clean but shabby garage apartment and carefully locked the door before I walked across the dismal yard. The soil produced only a few bunches of yellowish weeds. The landlord had two old cars

parked there. One of the junkers had no wheels and was blocked up on railroad ties; the other had two rims and two flat tires. Its front end was smashed in, the windshield broken into a maze of tiny cracks. The vehicle was unlocked, but I never entered it after spotting the sinister, brownish-red stains that coated the front seat and the brandy bottle that lay on the floor. I did, nonetheless, spend countless hours speculating about the gruesome accident, which caused such frightening dreams that I sometimes was tempted to flee to Mama's bed. Only the thought of her dangerous mattress, with its unpredictably stabbing springs, kept me in my own bed. I often wished the cars would be towed away to give us a little more yard space, but they never were.

I skipped to Gaynelle's. She saw me coming and plunked her three-year-old brother into a rusty old wagon, along with a ragged blanket and a ketchup bottle filled with drinking water. She grabbed the wagon handle, and we walked side by side on the cracked and heaving sidewalk of our neighborhood, speeding through the sunny parts and creeping along where the shade from the maple trees blocked us from the broiling-hot sun.

"Merry Kessler, you lied to me!" she said, her mouth turned down and her eyes dull with misery.

"I did not! What about?"

"I'll never get used to wearing this miserable thing!" she said, thrusting her hand into her blouse to adjust the straps of her first bra. "I feel it binding me every time I take a breath. I'd like to rip it off and throw it into a tree."

Speaking as a veteran bra-wearer of two months, I said, "Leave it on when you go to bed for a couple of nights; you'll feel naked without it after that."

"Are you nuts? I'd have nightmares about being kidnapped and duct-taped to a chair. No thanks."

I giggled and kicked a dead branch into the street, my cheap rubber flip-flop flying alongside the branch. After dashing onto the gritty pavement to retrieve it, I slipped it back onto my dusty foot. "I wish my shoes still fit. I'm gonna be stuck wearing these ugly things until fall. I hate being poor!"

"Me too. We'll never have clothes to attract boys who have money, so if we get married, it'll be to some *poor* guy." Gaynelle's honey-blond bangs fell over her eyes, and she brushed them aside angrily.

"I know."

"It's like there's no escape from it. We have to do so much work at home that there's never enough time to study, so we won't be able to get a scholarship, and that means college is

out." She walked along looking dejected, then shrugged the mood off with a smile. "I'll just have to find a prince. One who's rich and covered with jewels."

"The only man we've seen wearing jewels is that old fart who comes around selling renter's insurance. And all he ever wears are those agate rings and that bola tie with the agate shaped like Minnesota. Some prince."

"You have to have faith. I'll find him, just you wait."

I kept silent, letting her keep her dreams, but I had no expectations of either finding a prince or of any miracles coming along for me. I took my turn at pulling the wobbly, squeaking wagon, my hand becoming brown from the powdered rust that flaked from the handle.

As we walked, the sidewalks gradually improved, and the houses became larger and well-maintained. Most had flowers planted in small beds, along with patchy yards that were both green and mowed. After several more blocks, we arrived in an area of large and luxurious homes, their huge lawns upholstered with lush green grass. The shiny cars parked in their driveways had tread-covered tires mounted on *all* the wheels. The very air smelled sweetly fragrant from the abundance of flowers in bloom.

A couple emerged from an enormous brick house and strolled to their car. The lady wore a spotless white dress and sandals,

her hair bouncing while she walked. Her toenails were painted deep rose to match her fingernails. The man was freshly barbered and wore a pale-yellow shirt tucked into tan pants. I glanced down at my grubby feet and rumped, faded clothing and felt ashamed because I was poor.

"There has to be some way out of poverty. We just have to figure it out." I handed the wagon handle back to Gaynelle and wiped my sweaty hands on the back of my shorts to get rid of the rust. We plodded toward the park, the wagon wheels screeching in protest, it seemed, against the unfairness of life.

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At fifteen, I considered myself to be an adult, which, in the varied arts of housekeeping, I certainly was. But, I was woefully inadequate in the social graces so easily mastered by the lucky girls whose mothers didn't have to work. My tender teen psyche suffered agonies of embarrassment at the many blunders I made while in the company of kids my own age. Sometimes I wished I were like those cool kids, but more of my time was spent longing to be like Mrs. Brick, the name I'd given to the lady whose house I so often passed. She always wore subdued colors, and her hair was cut in a pageboy style that fell perfectly in place. If she happened to be outdoors when I walked by, she always waved and smiled at me with friendly self-

assurance.

One day when I went past her home, her tiny white poodle ran from the porch and darted into the street. I snatched up the beautifully scented dog and carried him to Mrs. Brick, who scurried toward me, her tiny feet shod in heeled sandals that tapped on the inlaid-brick walk.

"Oh, thank you!" she said, her perfect teeth displayed in a big smile when she took her dog.

"He smells really good."

Mrs. Brick chuckled. "I spray him with a little of my perfume every morning." She scratched his head, and his gold name-tag became visible. Phydeaux.

"What's the perfume called?" I asked, surprised at my boldness. "It's the nicest I've ever smelled."

"Why, thank you. Charlie always buys it for me. It's called Must DE Cartier."

I left, aware for the first time that wealthy people even smelled better than poor ones, and I was determined to buy some Must De Cartier myself.

Gaynell and I first searched for it at K-Mart, then went to two drugstores, still not finding it.

"I'm tired of walking in all this heat," Nell said. "Why don't you just buy some musk?"

"When you smell it, you'll know. Besides, we only have five more blocks before we get to Hershback's." It was the finest store in town, and in the cosmetics department, behind the counter, we found the perfume.

With my entire fortune of twenty-seven wrinkled dollars in my pocket, I asked the clerk the price.

When she told me my mouth fell open to my boobs.

She said kindly, "Well, honey, it's made by Cartier." She placed a sample bottle on the counter, inviting us to try it.

We left the store, sniffing our wrists until we became euphoric from the heady scent. I felt filthy rich and smelled every bit as good as Mrs. Brick's poodle, though not nearly as well groomed.

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The summer we turned sixteen, I asked Nell to cut my tobacco-brown hair in a style to match Mrs. Brick's. Nell readily agreed. While she hacked and sawed with the dull sewing shears, I felt envious of how tall and willowy she'd grown, wishing I could add a spurt of growth to my short, sturdy frame. I soon grew tired of sitting, but the long job turned out rather well. And, as long as I kept my head tilted to the left, the difference in length wasn't really noticeable.

Mom did notice. "You can't walk tipped over like that till

it grows out. The edge looks like a ragged, old paint-brush. I can't fix it, so you'll have to go to a beauty shop."

I reluctantly parted with some of my wrinkled hoard on my first-ever haircut by a professional, and the difference was truly remarkable. It curled under and bounced—just like Mrs. Brick's.

The vivacious young operator clearly enjoyed her job and gave me many tips on hair care and styling, even telling me about her schooling. I found it fascinating, something I'd like to do.

But outside of robbing a string of convenience stores, I could see no way to earn enough for tuition.

CHAPTER 2

By sucking up to a pimply boy who was interested in my body, I got a job in his father's bakery, working in the back, where I washed dishes and mopped. Over time I was given more responsibilities. I learned to operate the bread slicer and was promoted to running the monstrous bread mixer. After working for four hours, my feet throbbed from standing on the tile-covered cement floor. The constant smell of baking, the equatorial heat and batting off the continual advances of the horny boy all nauseated me. I was sorely tempted to quit, but I needed the money to go to beauty college, so I gritted it out.

Nell worked as a bagger in a grocery store, working weekends and after school most nights. Her mother remarried and quit her job, since her third husband, besides providing an adequate income, brought along three small daughters, some-

how packing them into the small house. During the school year the only chance Nell and I got to talk was during lunch hour, when we discussed our lives and our plans.

"Are your parents going to add on to the house soon?" I asked, speaking quietly so the other kids at our table wouldn't hear.

Nell dug a piece of squashed chocolate cake from her lunch bag and picked frosting from the clinging plastic wrap. It smelled delicious, but I put on weight too easily to beg even a small bite. "Probably not till I move out," she said. "And it's so noisy with all those little kids that I have a hard time studying."

"I have trouble getting *time* for it. The apartment is clean on the surface, and supper's ready, but that's all I can manage. I'm still getting B's and C's, though."

"Me too. Can't you get Robert to do *anything*?"

"Him?" I rolled my eyes back in exasperation. "He does his laundry and he studies. At least he doesn't bitch about my cooking." I wrapped my apple core in a napkin and dropped it into my lunch sack. "Which beauty shop are you visiting this weekend?"

"The one by the east-end bowling alley. They have three

operators." She tugged her chin-length hair. "We're gonna have to quit spying on them pretty soon. I don't have much hair left to cut."

I grinned, then said, "So have it dyed black."

She gave me a dirty look. "I wonder if it's such a good plan—our going to beauty school. I've missed every football game this year, and I've turned down a half-dozen dates because I had to work."

"You can date all you want, once we get our shop running. Otherwise, you'll end up marrying some dead-end guy who'll leave you after you have two kids. Then what?"

Nell looked miserable. "It's just that for the first time I have money to buy lots of cute clothes. Saving it for beauty college—I don't know. What if we aren't accepted there? I'll have wasted all my time for nothing."

"Do you want a life like your mother's?"

She thought for about ten seconds. "No."

A pair of senior boys sat at our table, and I raised my eyebrows at Nell, guessing from their nervous eagerness that they were about to ask us out. And, they did.

We double-dated, going to an action-adventure movie. To top off the evening, they took us parking. The young men,

reeking of their fathers' aftershaves, were filled with hopeful expectation while they plied us with cans of warmish beer on the romantic, moonlit road of the landfill. They plainly hoped to get lucky, but I easily resisted, as did Nell. We had bigger plans.

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After graduating, I worked full time at the bakery for two months, and then quit, taking the month of August off. For the first week, I slept thirteen and fourteen hours a night, nearly hibernating to recuperate from the unremitting labor I'd done since I was six.

Robert had moved out by this time, finding a job in Duluth in the electronics field. He came home every three or four weeks, the look of cautious tenseness gone from him, to be replaced by confidence, which made him look handsome and mature. He tried to give Mama money, but she refused, so he bought a new mattress to replace the bear trap on which she slept. She accepted *that* with unadulterated delight.

I gave the apartment a thorough cleaning and painted all the dingy walls in various shades of pale blue and green, which were Mama's favorite colors.

"It looks really good," she said. Her forehead wrinkled

with worry, and she added, "But, I wish you'd have saved it for yourself. You never know what you might need in the Cities."

I worried about that too, but I was not to be outdone by Robert. "I have enough for what I need *and* emergencies." I forced myself to smile, because despite her protests, Mama walked around the apartment admiring the fresh-looking rooms with a pleased look on her face.

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I searched second-hand stores and rummage sales for household goods for the tiny apartment that Nell and I had rented in Minneapolis, reasonably close to the beauty college. Since she had spent a good deal of her income on clothes, Nell was still working, adamant about contributing equally to our expenses.

The day finally came when we loaded our possessions into a truck owned by Nell's uncle, who was driving us to the Twin Cities. The only cars we could afford to buy were similar to the junks parked in my yard, so we decided to wait, although wheels were greatly desired. Mama looked at me with tears in her eyes but made no fuss when we hugged. She looked tired and old, and felt as unsubstantial as a cotton sheet worn

thin. I hated leaving her all alone in that apartment. My anticipation was dampened by worry about her, and I vowed to help her as soon as I began to earn money.

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"It's as hot here now as July is up north," Nell said, standing in front of the fan we had propped in the only window of our tiny apartment. Actually, there was a second window, but it was located in the long, skinny closet that ran the full width of our paper-bag brown, single-room home.

I wiped the sweat from my face with a paper towel and wrenched open the warped cupboard door to cram a few more dishes into it, then gave up, too hot to continue.

Sirens wailed as emergency vehicles raced through the street below, alarming me.

Nell peered out the window. "Two ambulances, a squad car and a fire truck. I hope they don't go by when we're trying to sleep."

Angry shouts between a man and a woman on the floor above us ended with ominous-sounding thuds.

Chewing her nails, Nell turned to me.

Trepidation filled me. The desire to flee back home to the familiar safety of life in Birch Lakes was overwhelming.

Nell looked as frightened as I felt.

I said, "Let's get out of here. There must be an air-conditioned store somewhere close. We need milk."

"Yeah, let's, before that couple decides to shoot it out and the bullet travels through our ceiling," Nell said, gazing nervously upward.

There was a breeze outside, but the baked-in heat of the sidewalks negated any good it gave. We walked for several blocks before spying a small grocery store. We spent half an hour selecting four grocery items, allowing the cool air to revive us.

School started three days later. Going to beauty college was as different from high school as Mrs. Brick's house was from our apartment, but within a couple of weeks we'd worked out a routine of studying, shopping and chores. We found time to visit art galleries and museums. Also, we attended concerts and poetry readings in an effort to become polished enough to run the high-end beauty salon we planned to have.

When we finally began to work on actual hair, we discovered that Nell had a knack for giving permanents, while I shone at cutting. And, I had more of a head for business than she did, which was no surprise. We were equally good at

esthology, and our complexions glowed from proper skin care. I despised working on nails, and Nell thought them merely useful to bite on during moments of stress, but we drove our-selves through that compulsory class, deciding to hire a manicurist when we had a shop of our own.

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We rode the bus home for Christmas. For gifts, I cut and styled my brother's hair and gave Mama a permanent and a facial. After tweezing her brows and convincing her to wear a little blush every day, she easily looked as if she'd dropped ten years. Leaving, I was flooded with homesickness, and I positively ached to finish college so I could start earning money and move back.

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After completing the course, Nell and I proudly framed our accreditation certificates. We were placed by the college at a huge beauty salon in the Cities, living poor and saving money for our business. The summer was sultry, and we came home too exhausted for much of a social life.

One evening, a year after we'd moved in, we sat at the table eating generic tuna sandwiches and drinking iced tea. Spread out on the table before us was our budget.

I said, "It looks like we have to live like this for ten more months before we'll have enough."

It had rained earlier in the day, raising the humidity in the ugly brown room to a greenhouse level. Dishes piled in the sink gave off the nauseating smell of cheap food.

"I don't know if I'll be able to stand it that long," Nell said, pouring us more tea. "This neighborhood is so bad that we're lucky we haven't been robbed or worse. I'm tempted to move to a nicer section, even if we'll be stuck in the Cities for longer. It's always hot, and we're too tired to have any fun."

I forced myself to finish my sandwich, even though the heat had destroyed my appetite. "If there wasn't so much crime everywhere here, I'd agree with you."

Nell said, "What about moving back north now? We could work at some shop up there. Rent would be cheaper, so it wouldn't take as long to save." She drank the rest of her tea, wiping up the ring of condensation from the table with her forearm.

"That's true, but damn it, I want to start work up there as a class act—not struggle up to it. I don't want to be the poor girl who clawed her way up; I want to make an *impression*

right off the bat."

"So do I, but I hate living here. And I suppose I'm a baby, but I miss seeing my mother."

"I miss mine too, but it's only ten more months."

Surely, we'd be able to tough it out for that long.