

Prologue

She didn't hate Her Child.

But she was beginning to suspect Her Child hated her.

She shoved her fists deep into the pockets of the bathrobe She hadn't taken off in three days. There was no one coming to save Her from her baby's tiny screaming tyrannies, and She weighed the more profound consequences if She were to follow the untamed impulses that were flashing through Her mind; impulses no rational person would, nor could, act upon.

As She withdrew Her hand from Her pocket, something fell to the floor. It was the baby's pacifier; the pink one that had been indispensable on Monday and hated on Tuesday. She rinsed it in cold water and then an idea occurred to Her. She popped the pacifier into Her own mouth and began to suck. Sometimes – most times – it pacified the Baby. Why not her? She began to gnaw on it, demanding the same relief it offered the Baby, but no matter how hard She chewed, serenity would not come. The baby still wailed.

She stood over the keening Child, resisting the urge to stuff the pink pacifier down its throat. Instead, She tickled the baby's lips with it. After a moment, the baby took the gnarled pacifier from her.

And was quiet.

A few minutes later, The Baby let the pacifier fall from her mouth and drifted off to sleep. The Mother took it to the sink, washed and sanitized it, and as She wiped it dry

with a paper towel, She saw the chew marks she'd left. Necessary damage that could never be repaired had been done, but this moment of relief made any consequences well worth it.

Act I

Chapter One

Carolyn hid herself at the top of the stairs, hoping to overhear some snide comment, but the girls only said a few more brief, polite words to Rafa, and then followed her through the house to the sunporch, trailing a vapor of perfume that smelled like a mix of spring flowers and nicotine.

Rafa materialized behind Carolyn. Carolyn hated when she did that.

“They’re ready, Missus.”

“Thank you, Rafa.”

Rafa was gone.

Carolyn rushed back to her vanity to take one last look in the mirror. Tired, but natural: exactly the look she was going for. Black had always been Carolyn’s signature color, but now it was more than just an austere style choice.

‘Jews only mourn a child for a year, Carolyn. Maybe they’re onto something.’ Her mother scolded.

‘This isn’t mourning, Mother.’

‘Well, if it’s not mourning, it’s a very good imitation. Mourning makes a woman look guilty.’

‘I don’t have anything to be guilty about.’

‘Then stop acting like you do!’

‘You only wear black.’

‘I’m a widow. You’re not.’

Carolyn’s mother was always very good about claiming privileges she denied to everyone else. It had been a long, brutal year – and four days – for all of the Wheelers, but none more so than Carolyn. Or so she believed.

Carolyn’s mother had demanded that she gather the girls together on Christmas morning just as she had done for years until a year ago. Since their days as cheerleaders, they’d gathered for a juice cleanse, yoga, and moral support at Carolyn DuBois’s house on New Year’s Eve. Then, once Carolyn DuBois became Carolyn Wheeler and famous for her Christmas parties, they started getting together on Christmas mornings after all the family gifts had been opened. This gave their husbands a chance to settle in for some football games and the caterers a chance to set up their respective family Christmas dinners.

That all changed one year ago.

‘These girls are going to talk, Carolyn. It’s time to tell them what to say.’

Carolyn tore open her dresser to see if she even owned anything anymore that wasn’t black. She did not expect to find the brand new dusty-pink leotard with matching tights and ballet slippers. They hadn’t been there an hour ago when she got dressed. She was sure of it.

Rafa.

Carolyn held the costume up to herself and looked in the mirror. The girl of twenty who had worn this uniform forty years earlier stared back at the woman of sixty. She had a glimmer of defiance about her that Carolyn hadn't seen in quite some time. Neither mourning nor guilt were going to be part of her message today. Carolyn stripped off the black hoodie and yoga pants and wiggled into the new gear. Then she dotted her lips with some color and checked herself in the mirror again. There she was! A little worse for the wear, but Carolyn Wheeler was back! She tied her hair back with the pink ribbon that was on the hanger and with her head held high she floated down the front stairs to face the girls.

'Everything a lady does, Carolyn, is with intent. No matter how small, nothing is left to chance.'

Carolyn stumbled. Like a cold slap of water in the face, she saw it: the empty car seat tucked in the corner of the foyer, right where it had been for the last three hundred and sixty-nine days. It was practically served up on a silver platter for the girls to see. She could have come down wearing a flaming black garbage bag and no one would have noticed because there, in the corner, lay the only thing the girls would talk about for the next three months. 'Did you see her car seat?'

Carolyn adjusted her bra strap and soldiered on.

At the entrance to her own kitchen, she found her old squad ordering Rafa around, needing mineral water with lemon wedges – not slices – and more ice.

Damn. They all looked good. You could bounce a quarter off Bethany's refreshed face.

"There she is!" Bethany and Willow raced each other to embrace Carolyn. "You look amazing! Doesn't she look amazing, girls?" Bethany delivered her rehearsed pronouncement with the fervor of a talk-show host whose Spanx were too small.

Willow, always in second place, chirped, “Amazing!”

Grace tilted her head and furrowed her face into an exaggerated frown, a distant third.

“Oh my god!! I can’t tell you how great it is to see all of you! How long has it been?”

Carolyn cooed.

‘Keep it light, Carolyn,’ her mother had coached. ‘Keep it light.’

“Well... I guess it would be just short of a year! You know, since Caroline...” Like a vampire cuckoo popping out of an overpriced clock at the top of every hour, Bethany never disappointed; always scraping away the scab, lusting for easy blood.

Carolyn Wheeler gave her nothing.

“Of course. It just seems so much longer.” And Willow, still never an original thought in her overbleached head, piled on.

Bethany nudged Willow out of the way to give Carolyn a proper hug and reflexively Carolyn tensed but returned it.

‘Give them nothing but marching orders, Carolyn. Trust your mother on this.’

“Of course! We were just saying it feels like a whole lifetime. Doesn’t it, Willow? We all understand, don’t we girls?” The girls nodded, appropriately sad.

Carolyn disobeyed her mother’s bromides and gave them a weary smile that was only half fabricated. That little social crumb sparked in each of the girls’ eyes.

‘Every tiny detail will be dissected for nefarious meaning, Carolyn! And it will be all over Evanston by New Year’s Eve.’

Carolyn tried to give them nothing. She couldn’t help it. She was a giver.

‘Smile. Say nothing interesting until you’re ready to deliver the message.’

‘Which is?’

‘Carolyn Wheeler is back.’

Carolyn tried. She really did.

Like an amateur, Willow steered the conversation away from the only topic anyone really wanted to discuss. “How’s Bobby?”

Willow’s smirk and Bethany’s wince confirmed everything Carolyn had always wondered. This was why Willow never received an invitation to the Christmas parties. No tact. Carolyn smiled. This Christmas required discipline. She managed to not take the bait.

Willow plodded on. “It has been years, hasn’t it? It’s all my fault. I’ve been meaning to have a housewarming party...” and then she recited all the exhausting renovations she felt required to make the new house guest worthy. “We’re not on the lakefront, of course, but it will still be very, very nice.”

Bethany would not allow control of the conversation to go to Willow. “I have been nagging her, haven’t I girls? Nag, nag, nag! Positively, nagging her to let us see what she’s done to the new house —”

“I can’t host a housewarming without getting Carolyn Wheeler’s seal of approval!” Willow squealed.

Bethany interrupted, trying to steer the conversation to her intended agenda, but Willow just gnawed on about the horrors of setting up a new suburban home in an “up-and-coming” neighborhood.

Grace nodded as if keeping time to a Bach concerto.

When Bethany had had enough, “Oh, how long has it been since we’ve had a good old, girls gab sesh?” Carolyn saw the sharp look Bethany shot at Willow.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Willow wilted. Message received.

Three hundred and sixty-nine days. That's how long it had been since Carolyn had spoken to anyone other than Rafa. And Carolyn knew they knew it.

"...and I don't think I've been here since you've added this amazing sunporch! The view of the lake must be amazing when the weather's cooperating. Just amazing. Isn't it amazing?"

Bethany took control and led the group into the sunporch.

"Amazing!"

"When did you add this?" Willow pointed to the fading hopscotch, painted on the floor.

Now!

Carolyn took control. "Shall we begin? I don't want to eat up your entire holiday."

The girls looked confused for a moment, until they realized Carolyn wasn't talking about beginning her confession, but the workout.

'If you do it right, Carolyn, playing with their expectations will be fun. Make 'em wait.'

Mother was right.

The girls began to stretch as Carolyn counted out a meticulously slow beat.

Carolyn luxuriated in the returning feeling of control. "Focus on your breath."

Breathe in. Breathe out, Carolyn. It'll all be over soon.

When they finished, Rafa was there, ready to hand out towels.

Willow wheezed, "Oh, I have missed you, Carolyn."

Bethany asserted herself. Finally, they were at the line of skirmish. "I hear Hannah is expecting again." Bethany dropped it like an ice cube into a neat glass of vodka. And like a traumatized ice cube, the accusation cracked with a loud pop.

Carolyn Wheeler had them right where she wanted them. "Yes."

"When's she due?" Bethany risked wrinkles with her smile.

“Today, actually.”

“You’re not going to the hospital to be with her?” Instead of an ice cube in tepid vodka, this one was a full-blown iceberg scraping along the side of the Good Ship Carolyn Wheeler, and Bethany just broke off a chunk and casually tossed it in Carolyn’s general direction.

“No. I’m just waiting by the phone right here.” Carolyn tossed it right back.

“I don’t know how you live without a cellphone, Carolyn,” Willow said. “I wish I could _”

“Boy or girl?” Bethany would not be deterred.

“Excuse me?”

“I imagine everyone is hoping for a girl.”

“As it happens, it’s one of each. Hannah and Rosco are having twins.” Suck it, Bethany Kaufmann.

Bethany snapped at the bait. “Oh! The Wheelers are certainly due for a blessing.” She clutched Carolyn’s arm. The feel of Bethany’s glacial hand enraged Carolyn. ‘Smile, Carolyn. This is the deciding moment.’

“I’m sure you mean something by that...” Carolyn prepared to drop Antarctica on the whole squad of them, and she knew they sensed it.

“It’s just that... I want you to know that Jim and I – everyone in Evanston, really – are here for you. Of course. I’m just saying that the whole town supports you and Hannah, and... and... Rosco! We will all do whatever we can to make things go smoothly... this time...”

‘This time’ almost sounded like a slip of the tongue, but Carolyn knew Bethany better than that.

Now!