Chapter 1

She was quiet. For the first time since we brought her home, Abagail had gone more than an hour into the night without battering the walls with incessant cries. I leaned against the doorway and closed my eyes. Almost cried with relief. It had been the best night's sleep and it wasn't even morning yet. She wasn't even screaming yet. Opened them.

The moon reached through the window to baptize my little night owl with light. I'd heard artsy folks like to stay up all sorts of odd hours. Maybe we were raising the next great musician. Painter. Poet. I was just thankful for these little victories. Quiet assurances that I could make it through this. Perhaps one day I'd miss these moments, but right now I looked forward to escaping these trying times. Things had to get better, right?

Pink shadows followed me across the room. I tiptoed so carefully. Couldn't wake her, but I needed this moment to remember why this was worth it. Took a moment to appreciate my angel. So peaceful like this. Her baby blues were closed. I kissed the top of her head, touched the fine, blonde hairs that were starting to cover it. Breathed in that baby scent.

Paused.

Something was wrong. I listened for that noise. So faint, I could simply be missing it. Except, when I put my hand over her little chest it didn't move.

And she was so quiet.

"Brian!" I screamed. Tears blurred her perfection. Too perfect. "Oh my god, Brian!" My words disintegrated in sobs. Maybe this was all a dream. A nightmare. I didn't feel fully awake. Footsteps. Sounded too clear. Too real.

"What's wrong?" He asked, as I collapsed in his arms.

"It's Abigail," I sobbed.

He held me close with one arm as he looked into the crib. Let me fall to the floor with a hard thud as he reached for our daughter and started doing the special baby CPR we learned in that parenting class.

“Call 911!” Brian demanded. I couldn’t move. “Dammit, Maddy! Abigail isn’t breathing! You need to call 911!”

His sharp words stitched me together just enough to get me off the floor. There wasn’t time to panic. Our baby needed us. I couldn’t breathe as I tripped over my feet in a desperate race to the phone.

“It’s too late. Too late.”

The words clung to my skin as I stumbled into our bedroom. Hands shook. I tried to stay with it long enough to dial those three numbers. Hands shook so badly that it took me four tries to dial three numbers in the proper order.

“911. What’s your emergency?” The voice on the phone was so distant from my reality, that I almost hung up. They couldn’t help. There was only Brian and me here now. We were the only ones wrapped up in this nightmare. The only people who could do anything in this space.

“My baby’s not breathing!” The world blurred.

“Where are you located?” An alternative reality. In a place where children died and there was nothing you could do to save them. A nightmare. A horror movie. “Ma’am? I need your address so we can get help to your baby.”

Darkness drowned me. Guilt, a noose around my throat. This was my fault. Abigail was dead. If only I was a better mother. I tried and tried and couldn’t get another breath. The phone fell as I collapsed onto the bed.

“Madeline!” Brian bellowed, bringing the world back into focus. Fear fueled clarity. “Call 911! What the fuck are you doing?”

“I called them.” The words were too small for him to hear, so I forced myself up. I just wanted to sleep. Until all this was over. Restart that whole night. Wake up to a better reality. I walked to the nursery like it was haunted. Now, it would be haunted. “I called them.”

“And?” His eyes raged red as he looked up from our daughter, laid on the bedroom floor. Her eyes still unopened. Chest still not moving.

“And…” I dropped the phone. Stupid. I didn’t hear their reply. Any instructions. “And they said they’d be here as quickly as they can. In the meantime, just continue with the CPR.”

“It’s not working!”

His attention fell went back to Abigail. Pumped her tiny chest with two fingers. Breathed into her mouth.

Again.

And again.

And what if they weren’t coming? It was too late to save Abigail. Brian would be furious regardless. I never confirmed they were coming. What if they didn’t know where we lived? Maybe he’d finally kill me. Then I wouldn’t have to face all of this. Wouldn’t have to accept that my angel...

Sirens screeched onto our street. Echoed the ones that were going off in my brain.

“Go wave them down!” Brian commanded. “So they don’t get the wrong house.”

I’d heard horror stories about that happening before. I ran down the stairs, finally in control of something. This was a disaster I could prevent. If I could prevent this, and I could, maybe I could save Abigail.

Hope pushed me through the front door. Neighbors were already peering out of their homes that kept them safe from our nightmare. Didn't they know that they might confuse the ambulance? Selfish.

To stand out among them, I stood at the very edge of the street. Waved my arms like a mad woman. Desperate to get their attention. Maybe they could save her. Maybe it wasn't too late. My redemption not quite out of reach.

The sirens grew closer. Louder. I drew them toward me. Lights splashed through the darkness and reassured me that I wasn't alone. This was out of my hands now. Someone more capable would take care of this. I wasn't a good enough mother to save Abigail, but maybe someone else could. They would. Had to.

"She's upstairs!" I screamed, to any heroes who would listen to me. "My baby! She stopped breathing! She's upstairs!"

They leapt out of the ambulance and ran past me like I wasn't there. I wished I wasn't there. Now that they were here, my last ounce of strength seeped into the grass. My bruised knees cried out as they hit the ground. I sobbed as if I could cry all the pain out and bring my baby back. A trade off I was desperate to make.

A tall man in uniform walked up to me like he had full control over the situation. Like this was just another day on the job. A ginger. Probably no soul. I glared through my tears as he approached.

"Are you okay, Ma'am?" A young lady asked, as she stepped past the male officer. Blanket in hand. She too wore a uniform, blonde hair pulled back. Ready for business. Except her eyes held kindness.

"How could I be?" I asked.

She knelt on the ground next to me. Wrapped the blanket around me. Helped me up.

A gurney surrounded by nameless faces burst out of my house. I sensed Abigail in the middle of all this mess. So young. Too little.

“My baby,” I sobbed. “She stopped breathing.”

“These medics will do everything they can to help her,” the officer assured me. “It can be difficult riding in the ambulance with them, so would you like me to…”

“I’m going with her!”

The officer steadied me as I joined Brian in the back of the ambulance. So much noise. So much white. So much work to be done so we were pushed to the side. To make way for the professionals holding Abigail’s life in their hands. Ambulance barreled down the street. Never quick enough.

Everything needed to slow down. This was a terrible space of parenting we were being shoved into and we weren’t prepared for it. We couldn’t even comfort our baby, though we cared more about her than these people ever could. She wouldn’t be aware of our presence anyway.

And if she was? If she saw how much we had failed her?

“My baby,” I sobbed. Brian held me as if by keeping me together, he could keep our family from being torn apart. “Abigail. She’s gone, she’s gone, she’s”

“Don’t say that.”

I was so used to listening to him that I stopped.

The pain didn’t stop. The guilt. If only I was a better mother. If only. If only. If maybe they could save her.

Everything moved so quickly as the world came to an end. The ambulance stopped after two seconds. After an eternity. Brian and I ran after the medics, but we were stopped outside of

those swinging doors. A portal to a world where Abigail survived. Those cruel keepers wouldn't let us in.

"We're her parents!" Brian protested. Was he actually going to punch the nurse? He usually kept this side locked behind closed doors. "We need to be with our daughter!"

"The doctor needs to do anything he can to save her," the nurse explained. Calmly. Like she had done this all before. Impossible. It wasn't possible that anyone else could've experienced exactly what we were going through right now. "He needs space. He needs room to focus, and he'll be better able to do that without any outside distractions. Don't you want what's best for your daughter?"

"What if she dies?" Brian whispered. As if saying the words too loud would make them come true. "She must be so frightened already, without us there. What if she dies and we aren't there with her?"

If she died, then it was already too late. She was already dead. That's what the nurse couldn't say. And if Abigail was to have her best chance, the doctor couldn't be tripping over panicking parents. I wanted to be with her, but I understood. I hoped he would understand. Hoped his anger wouldn't put our daughter's life in danger.

"I promise you that we'll do everything we can for her," she assured us. "We need to give her her best shot, and the doctor's attention needs to be fully on her in order to do that. If you just wait over here"

"I don't want to wait!" The mask slipped so the whole room could see a glimpse of the anger I lived with. The danger. "I don't want to just sit and wait for my daughter to die!"

Anger dissolved in a hurricane of tears as we were escorted to the waiting room. White washed in devastation. All of our grief and worry confined to bruise colored plastic chairs. Under

the heat of everyone's stares. All of them were grateful they weren't us. I desperately wanted to be them. Needed to escape this tragedy. Take back everything. Rewind to the beginning of the night. Find a new future. I knew I could do better if I just had a second chance.

All I could really do was cry.

And wait.

Cry.

And wait.

Each second, prolonged agony. The unknown. The known. Tore through me. Until finally?

A doctor came out. The doctor who saved our daughter? I couldn't face him, didn't want to know if he was a hero. Because that might mean finding out that he wasn't.

Brian had always been braver than I was. He stopped pacing and turned to the doctor. Suspicious of him. Afraid. As if he killed our daughter.

"Is she okay?" He asked. Desperate eyes begged her to be okay. I begged her to be okay. She had to be. There was no way this could be happening. I joined him slowly. We had been fighting so much lately, but in that moment we presented a united front. "Our daughter? Abigail? Do you know about her? Is she… Is she okay?"

The doctor's face was replaced by sorrow. Regret. Helplessness. I wanted to walk away before he could speak. Spend a little more time unknowing. Still warmed by a bit of hope.

I knew his words would change our life forever.

"I'm sorry," he said. And he should be because he was supposed to save her and... "We did everything we could, but she was gone before she reached the hospital. Abigail died tonight."

My heart shattered and I bled to death on the hospital floor.