

PROLOGUE

Tuesday August 11

"Sign here and here." The lawyer pushed the papers across the desk, and Doug Bolling hesitated just an instant before picking them up. He reached in his shirt pocket for his reading glasses, buying himself a little more time, a little more distance.

A muddle of legalese. Pages of claims. Every little nit-picking thing Vic Wiley could come up with. "It's how things are done, Doug."

"Yeah, I know. This is not about my son, you understand that. It's . . . about the kids."

"I think that's clear. You're not making any criminal charges, exactly."

"What do you mean, 'exactly'? What am I charging, then?"

"That your son's and his wife's religious fanaticism creates an environment that is detrimental to the children's emotional, social and intellectual development."

"What about the hospital stuff? You included that didn't you?"

"Systematically denied access to adequate healthcare, yes."

"And we're asking for custody?"

"Yes."

"And he has to come home for this?"

"If he doesn't, they'll swear out a warrant and he'll be arrested as soon as he sets foot on U.S. soil."

Doug sighed and slowly flipped through page after page. It wouldn't go that far. Mark would come home. He'd probably never speak to him again, but Mark would come home.

Thankful that Judy didn't live to see this, he took the pen the lawyer offered. He didn't have a choice. Doug stood and leaned over the desk, signing his name as instructed. He had to do this. For Matt. For Ben. For Jane.

Chapter 1

SIXTEEN YEARS EARLIER

Thursday, July 29

Doug Bolling clutched the small bag of cookies in his left hand. His right hand rested on the door handle to his wife's hospital room. No matter how many times he had done this, it never got any easier.

He took a deep breath, pushed the door open slowly, and stepped inside. The room was dimly lit, by the images flickering across the screen of the muted television. Judy's eyes fluttered open as he got closer, and she gave him her best smile. "Hey, Babe," he whispered, and leaned down to kiss her, wishing her cheeks still had that almost babyish roundness they used to have.

"You just missed the doctor." She pulled at the bedrails and managed to prop herself up.

"There was a line at Schnuck's." He held the bag up for her to see.

"What'd you bring?" She reached for it, her narrow wrists showing as she stretched her arm forward. Doug wondered if she had enough strength to hold the bag.

"Those, uh, cookies. The white chocolate and macadamia nut ones."

"Bless your heart."

He watched her labor to open the bag, fighting the urge to do it for her. She inhaled deeply, and he feared she had already exhausted herself.

"They smell wonderful," she said. "I can't wait to have one."

"You can have one now," he said.

"I'm not hungry yet. I'd rather be hungry."

"You want me to set them on the table then?"

"No, I want them close." She held out her hand, and he cradled it in his. "Almost as close as I want you."

"So what did the doctor say?"

Her smile faded and she hesitated. Not good. "He's sending me home, Doug."

Home. Not "home" home. Home to die. *Don't show it. She needs you. She's depending on you.* "There's not anything . . . ?"

She shook her head. "He suggested some, uh, some hospice care providers."

"How . . . how much . . . how much time?"

She smiled again. "He's too slippery to give me anything definite. Christmas is probably . . . I mean, Christmas was his best-case estimate. He said I should think in terms of weeks . . . not months. I'm sorry."

He squeezed her hand gently. "Don't be sorry." The grief in her eyes tore at him most of all.

"I hate for you to have to go through this."

"Me? Don't worry about me. I'm a tough guy."

"The toughest." He felt the slightest squeeze back. "I . . . I want to tell Mark."

"Sure. You'll do it better than I would."

He hooked his foot around the leg of the bedside chair, and dragged it closer without ever letting go of her hand. Several silent, motionless moments passed. "Are you afraid?" he asked, hoping she'd say yes, because he was terrified.

"No. I don't have any pain, really."

"I mean to die." *You idiot! You said it out loud!* "I'm sorry . . . I shouldn't have said that."

"It won't be as frightening if we talk about it."

Which meant she knew he was terrified, so she would pretend she was, too. "But you're not scared."

"You remember when you asked me to marry you?"

"Like it was yesterday." They'd just graduated high school. She was young enough that she preferred pulling her dark hair back in a ponytail most of the time. A lifetime ago. "I think it was just yesterday."

"Seems like it. My parents were so worried. All they could see was this punk who barely graduated high school."

"They still see that."

She smiled and squeezed his hand again. "They focused on the situation. They couldn't see how much you loved me, and how sure I was of that love." She twisted and pulled herself up a little straighter. "I know this makes no sense to you, but I'm completely sure of how much God loves me, so I'm not afraid at all. The situation doesn't matter anymore."

He dropped his head and hoped she couldn't see his jaw clench in the low light. A God who loved her wouldn't make her go through this. A good God wouldn't kill a wife and mother in the prime of her life. Her God was a fairytale, a happy story to help her sleep better at night. A fairytale with no basis in reality.

"I see that line of discussion is a dead end," she said.

He smiled. At least she wasn't too weak for a little attitude. "I'm glad your, uh, your faith helps you."

"I wish it helped *you*."

"It does. When I see you optimistic and brave and . . ." He looked away again. If he didn't shut up now, he'd lose it in front of her. "So where's that doctor? I need to get you out of here."

Mark Bolling knew when he saw his father's truck in the driveway that his parents were home—both of them, but the house was silent. He walked as carefully and quietly as his clunky, steel-toed boots would allow, checking the living room and the kitchen. Maybe they were outside. He peeked out the back door and saw his dad fussing with the charcoal grill.

The guy was a million-dollar-a-year homebuilder, but he was too cheap for a gas grill. Or a new house for that matter. Nope. They still lived in the same three bedroom place he built the first year Bolling Developers was in business. And his mother, for all her refined tastes, was okay with that.

Mark slipped his boots off and left them by the backdoor, and then he took the stairs two at a time. He thought he heard the television, and hoped that meant his mother was awake. He knocked gently as he pushed it open. "Mom?"

"Mark? Is it that late already?" She reached for the remote and clicked the television set off. "Come and sit with me and tell me about your day."

"I'd rather hear about yours." He eased himself down onto the edge of the bed.

"Oh, it was about what I expected." She pulled the sleeve of her warm-up jacket down toward her wrist. For a year now, the sicker she got, the more athletic her preferred attire became. She thought the bulky clothes hid things better. She was mistaken.

"So no more treatments?" he asked, knowing exactly what that meant

She shook her head. "The doctor said . . . well . . . his primary concern from here on out . . . is that I'm comfortable." She must have seen the tears forming, because she put a hand on his knee. "Hey, I can have all the morphine I want."

He had to smile at her. "How did . . ." Mark swallowed hard and wiped his eyes. "How's Dad?"

Her smile faded. "That's what hurts me. Watching him." She smoothed the comforter. "He's so lost."

In more ways than one, Mark thought.

"He needs you more than he will ever admit, more than he understands even."

"Excuse my cynicism."

"Listen to me, Mark, and I want you to remember this. When I . . . Your dad, he carries everything inside, and he's going to need someone he can vent to. Someone who can take it."

"You mean someone to yell at?"

"Yell at, yell to . . . It's all the same to him."

"Then I've been there for him for years."

"I'm not explaining this right," she said. "There's much more to your dad than the blustering guy in the hardhat. Give him a chance. Be patient and he'll come around."

"Have you given him this speech?"

"Not yet. He's on my schedule." She smiled. "If I could have a few more years with him . . ." She blinked away her own tears. "He just needs someone who will love him."

Doug sat at the kitchen table sorting through the latest stack of bills. Doctor, doctor, hospital, ambulance, radiology. What a mess. He wrote check after check, stuffed them in the envelopes, and dropped the 'keep this portion' of the bills in the box at his feet. He didn't have time for this. He should be in there with Judy. Christmas. Christmas was only five months away. He couldn't be ready in four months.

If she didn't eat any more than she did today, he didn't see how she could last that long. He tried his best to cook, to cook things she liked, or used to like anyway. She used to have this metabolism that most people would give anything to have. She could eat whatever she wanted, and still keep that cheerleader figure. He used to tease her about out-eating him.

She was never what anyone would call beautiful. Judy was cute. Petite, and youthful, she never seemed to age. In those early years they joked about how ancient forty was. She'd never let herself get old, she said. Terminal cancer made that decision for her.

"She's asleep." Mark strode in the kitchen and pulled a glass from the cabinet. "You want a Coke or something?"

"No."

The teenager got a 2-liter bottle from the refrigerator and it hissed loudly when he twisted the cap off.

"Do you mind?" Doug said. "It's all I can do to concentrate right now."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." He quickly filled his glass, but even the fizzing grated on Doug's nerves. "Mom seems good."

"Good?"

"Good spirits. Considering everything." He gulped from the glass then leaned against the sink.

"Did she tell you why the doctor sent her home?"

"Yeah."

Doug laid his pen down, and pushed his chair back from the table. "Listen, I think you need to sit out this semester coming up."

"What?" Mark set the glass on the counter, clinking it against the sink. "Why?"

"Really? I have to explain this to you? Your mother is dying, Mark! It'll be a miracle if she lives past Christmas. Don't you think you belong here with her instead of in some frat house somewhere?"

"I'm not even gonna respond to that."

Doug had seen that same condescending sneer on Judy's face more times than he cared to remember. "You're an arrogant brat, Mark."

"Mom specifically said not to drop out of school. She told me to go on with my life."

"I bet she did," Doug muttered.

"Fine! You want me to stay home? I'll stay."

"Oh no. I'm not taking the blame for bullying you into dropping out of college."

"You bully me into everything else."

"And Mommy always rescues you, doesn't she?"

"Again, I'm not going to respond."

"Why not?"

"Because it's just like that stupid frat house comment. I don't even belong to a fraternity. It makes no sense. You're just ranting at me, and I've learned not to try to reason with you when you're like this."

"I'm unreasonable?"

"Right now, yes."

Doug jerked himself out of the chair and stood inches away from his son. The boy, the man now, straightened himself until he stood half a head taller than Doug, with a look of annoyed indifference that he inherited directly from Judy's father.

"Reason left a long time ago," Doug growled. "You have no idea . . ." Then he stopped himself. He waved his hand and stepped back. Mark couldn't understand and he didn't have the strength or the words to explain it.

"Go ahead and say it, Dad."

This time it wasn't a challenge. Mark was inviting him, the way Judy did. Not now. "Just . . . You better pray to that God of yours that you never have to stand by and watch your wife . . . watch her go through something like this."

"He's your God, too."

"I have no God."

"That's your problem."

Tuesday, August 3

"What do you think you're doing?" Doug leaned against the kitchen doorframe, his arms crossed across his chest as he watched his wife rummage through the kitchen cabinets.

"Making your dinner," Judy said, pulling out a skillet.

"You have no business . . ." He gently took the skillet from her hand and set it on the counter.

She huffed like an angry teenager. "Will you please, please, let me do as much as I can for as long as I can?"

"But you shouldn't be wasting your energy—"

"It's not wasting it if I'm doing what I enjoy."

"You enjoy making my dinner? Since when?"

She pulled the skillet toward the stovetop. "All right, all right. There have been times that making dinner was not my favorite thing."

"Like the first nineteen years of our marriage," Doug teased.

"Get the spaghetti out, smart aleck."

"That's more like it." He handed her the box of pasta, and watched her brown the ground beef. He wasn't joking though. She seemed to begrudge everything she did for him until she got sick. Everything about her changed during the second round of treatments.

"You know, this reminds me of the time we were at Disneyworld and Mickey or Goofy or somebody sat down beside Mark and begged for his spaghetti." She smiled as she stirred. "He wouldn't walk close to the characters any more after that. Do you remember that?"

"No."

"Oh, sure you do. Mark was maybe . . . five . . ."

"Judy, I wasn't there. You and your parents took Mark. I couldn't get away."

"Or wouldn't."

"That's not fair."

She sighed with a heavy sadness. "Why did we treat each other that way for so long?"

"We were young. We didn't know what we were doing."

"I was selfish, Doug." She struggled to pull a heavy pot from the cabinet, so he steadied it for her. "I, uh, married you because it infuriated my father." She slid the pot into the sink and turned the water on. "You deserved a woman who loved you for you."

"I have one."

"But I'm not gonna be around to finish the job." She turned the faucet off and held a hand out. He slipped in beside her and put an arm around her waist. She was so thin now. "Can you forgive me?"

"For what?"

"For being such a horrible wife."

"That's crazy." He dropped his hand and stepped away. "You were, I mean, are, you are a perfect wife."

"Now who's crazy." She arched an eyebrow at him, and he smiled. "I know better."

“At least we had the last couple of years when things were good. Some people don’t have that.”

“It has been good, hasn’t it?”

He nodded and lifted the pot from the sink, then set it on the stove for her. “I think we both learned what was really important.”

“I learned what love was. I couldn’t give you what I didn’t have.”

Doug braced himself. He recognized the setup for another Christianity commercial from her.

She wrinkled her brow at him. “All right. I won’t say anything else.”

“No, say it. I don’t want to leave anything unsaid between us.”

She faced him and spoke with urgency. “You’re a good man, Doug. You’ve made your own way. You work hard, and you have great integrity. I love all those things about you.”

He smiled, trying to diffuse the heaviness in the moment. “Tell me more.”

“Those things aren’t going to be good enough. The only thing, the only thing that scares me is an eternity without you. Mark finally came around, and I pray everyday that you will too . . . and I pray that I’ll get to see it.”

She had tears in her eyes, and guilt washed over him. Why couldn’t he just say he believed whatever she wanted him to, make her happy, let her have peace these last few months? Because he couldn’t lie to her. “Babe . . . Here’s how it looks to me. God . . . He’s only taken from me. I don’t believe He’s good and I don’t trust Him.”

“But He’s not like that!”

“Not to you.”

“Let me find somebody who can explain things better than I can—”

“I don’t want to talk about it with somebody else. I only talk about it with you because . . .”

“Because I’m dying. You’re patronizing me.”

“I’m not patronizing you. I’m trying to be supportive, but save your religion talk for Mark.”

“You hate that, too.”

“I don’t . . .” He turned his back to her, paced away, and took a deep breath. If she saw his eyes, she’d know he was lying.

“You resent every minute I spend with him.”

It was a soft declaration, not an accusation, but she still knew how to cut into his very soul. Years ago, he would have walked out, got in his truck and driven away to some job site somewhere and beat something with a hammer until he could face her again.

He couldn’t leave though, not even for a couple of hours. He could lose her long before she passed away. After all, she was only coherent the final two days of her last trip to the hospital.

He faced her again. “Can we compromise on this?”

“Can we?” She looked tired, and her hair seemed to gray before his eyes. She’d spent all her energy on him.

“Talk about your religion. Tell me all about it, but I don’t want to hear how much I need it. No hard sells, no sob stories, nothing.”

“And you won’t give Mark a hard time?”

“Mark and I will be fine.”

Wednesday, September 22

Mark met his father at the top of the stairs just outside his mother’s room, and to his utter surprise, he held out a hand. Mark shook it, as grieving fear took hold of him. “Is she . . . ?”

“They said it was just a matter of days now.” His father glanced back toward the door. “She’s on a lot of medication. She’s kind of in and out.”

Mark nodded. “You tell her I was coming?”

He shook his head. “She didn’t want me to call you. Afraid your schoolwork might suffer.”

“As if I have anything more important to do.”

“I’m gonna grab her a glass of water, and throw a load of her things in the laundry. Did you get the mail on your way in?”

“Yeah, it’s on the table.”

“Thanks.” His dad stepped around him and headed down the stairs.

“Dad?”

“What?”

“We’ll get through this.”
 His father just shook his head and shuffled into the kitchen.
 Mark pushed the bedroom door open, and his breath caught when he saw his mother, ashen-faced and motionless, propped up against a pillow. “Mom?”
 “Mark? It’s not Friday, is it?”
 “No, it’s Wednesday.”
 “Your dad doesn’t listen.” She managed a smile.
 “I’m glad he called me.”
 She reached for his hand. “Your dad. He reads to me. I wish you could hear him.”
 “The Bible?”
 She nodded. “It’s the most beautiful thing. Mark . . . would you let him read at your wedding?”
 “My wedding?”
 “You’re still dating that preacher’s daughter, aren’t you?”
 “Well, yeah, but . . .”
 “You love her?”
 “I do.”
 “See, you’re already practiced up on the ‘I do.’” She smiled again. “Don’t wait, Mark. Don’t wait until you’re older . . . or you’re more settled . . . or you have more money. There are no guarantees.”
 “Mom . . .”
 She managed another smile. “Your dad doesn’t know about her, does he?”
 “It’s not like I’m trying to keep it a secret . . . It just . . . I don’t know, never seemed like the right time to bring it up.”
 “I wish I could have met her. I’m sure she’s wonderful.”
 Mark smiled and nodded. “Does he know you want him to read?”
 “He promised me today.”
 “You pick out the passage?”
 “First John, chapter four. Where it talks about love, God’s love for us. He read it today . . .” She sighed and closed her eyes.
 “You’re getting tired. I should let you rest.”
 “No, stay. Talk to me. I love hearing you.” She patted his hand. “I’m listening . . .”
 Mark talked about his classes, his homework, the drive home, the church service he and Julie went to last Sunday, whatever he could think of, but always with a keen awareness of every breath she took. If she passed without his father there at her side . . . God help them all.

Friday, September 24

Doug rubbed his eyes and shifted in his chair. In the dim early morning light he squinted, trying to make sure Judy was still breathing. Finally, he reached his hand to her chest. It rose and fell in a slow, shallow rhythm. That reassurance was costly. Now he was afraid to pull his hand away for fear that he’d miss the last one.
 Ellen and Russell Carson had passed the night with him here, hovering over their only daughter. Of course they belonged here, had a right and a need to be here, but Doug hated it. When Ellen slipped out to get a quick shower, at least Russ left to make coffee, giving Doug these precious few moments alone with Judy.
 “You’ve never answered anything I’ve ever asked,” he whispered. “But . . . I’ll do . . . anything. Or take me instead . . . Just . . . Don’t . . . You can fix this. I read those stories to her . . . I need her. Take anything else of mine . . . Just not—”
 Judy drew in two quick breaths, and opened her eyes. “Doug?”
 “I’m right here.” He slipped his hand around hers. “Right here.”
 “I love you.” She labored to draw the corners of her mouth into a smile. “Mark . . . ?”
 “He’s just down the hall. He’ll be right here.”
 “Were Mom and Dad . . . ?”
 He nodded. “Your mom’s down in our bathroom getting a shower and your dad’s making a pot of coffee. They’ve been here the whole time.”
 She closed her eyes. “You need . . . that.”
 “Need what? Coffee?” he asked, daring to tease her in this moment.
 She blinked slowly in place of a smile. “I heard . . . you pray.”
 He felt himself flush with the shame of desperation. “I don’t think it did any good.”
 “I pray . . . for you . . . and Mark. You need . . .”

You, he wanted to say. I need you, Judy.

“You need someone . . . and someone who deserves to have you.” She squeezed his hand.
“You . . . I love you. We will meet again. I have that peace.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I can let go. You’ll . . .” Her hand relaxed, and everything inside Doug Bolling died.