

Chapter 1

Revelation

Thursday, July 28

Chuck,

I'm meeting Chad and Michelle for drinks at Baker Street Pub at 6.

Can you join us? My whole evening is free again. *wink*

Tracy

Bobbi Molinsky stared at the e-mail. Yes, it was addressed to her husband. Yes, it automatically forwarded from his account at the law firm since he was out of town again. But it didn't make any sense.

Her fingers hovered over the mouse as she grasped for the "logical explanation." Chuck never mentioned a Tracy. Who was this woman, and why was she inviting Chuck to a pub, when he didn't drink? Why would Tracy say 'again'? Unless ...

She swiveled the chair around, grabbed the cordless handset, and punched in the speed dial number for Chuck's cell phone. She'd hear it straight from him. He would clear up everything, and they would laugh about it. What's more, he would rib her for her jealous paranoia for the next twenty years.

His cell rang once, then rolled over to voice mail. *Strike one.* Now what? Chuck's office must have a number where he could be reached, but if she interrupted him in the middle of the biggest deal in the firm's history ...

"Benton, Davis, & Molinsky, how may I direct your call?"

“This is Bobbi Molinsky, Chuck’s wife. I need to get in touch with him.”

The receptionist gave her Chuck’s hotel number and three different client numbers. She also promised to have Chuck call home if he called in.

Bobbi pulled her notepad closer. Eight, one, three ... then she froze. The receptionist. Was that Tracy? She hit redial with both thumbs.

“Is this Tracy?”

“No, it’s Christine. Tracy Ravenna is no longer with the firm, and I don’t have a number where she can be reached. If you’re a client of hers, I can put you through to Mr. Davis.”

Tracy ... an attorney ... but no longer with the firm. Did Christine know anything about Chuck and Tracy? Office gossip?

“Ma’am? Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Bobbi switched the phone to her left ear and hunched over the desk.

“Maybe there is. This is Bobbi Molinsky again. We received an e-mail from Tracy Ravenna, and I’m almost positive it should go to someone else. Is there anyone else there named Chuck?” *Please God, let there be another Chuck.*

“No, ma’am, I’m sorry. If you want to forward the e-mail to our IT guy, I’m sure he could help you.”

Strike two.

One e-mail doesn’t mean anything. Besides, why was a Monday e-mail just now showing up in their inbox three days later?

If this Tracy person e-mailed him, did she call him, too? Bobbi knew she could call in to Chuck’s voice mail, and find out in thirty seconds. She bought the phone for him and set up the voice mail. She pulled the cordless phone closer, but hesitated. Was she ready to admit her marriage had slid to the place

where she would cross that line of trust, that she could, or rather would, doubt her husband?

She dropped the phone back on its cradle and closed her eyes, envisioning last year's Christmas party. Why hadn't she paid more attention to the endless stream of clients, attorneys, and guests Chuck paraded before her that night?

Wait! She remembered Chad. He joined the firm last fall, and his wife was named Michelle. Chad and Michelle from the e-mail! Had they introduced Tracy to Chuck? But they knew he was married. None of this added up.

Chuck was a lot of things, but an adulterer? All those other girls, he knew them in college, before they even met, before he discovered his parents' faith, before he committed himself to follow Jesus Christ. A shared faith drew them to each other in the first place. Shouldn't that faith stop him from ...?

Just because they'd had another argument Monday morning, that didn't justify monitoring his phone calls. People have arguments all the time. She and Chuck still slept in the same bed. Most nights, anyway. They were going through a phase, that's all.

She glanced up at the e-mail again and dialed.

The factory-set PIN no longer worked. Why would he change his PIN? She tried 1234, but the system rejected it. She tried their house number, then his birthday. Still no access. What would he have chosen? *My birthday?* Bingo. He had four messages. The first two were work-related, but the third was from a woman.

"Now I know why you never gave me a home phone number!"

The message continued with a profanity-laced tirade about being used and lied to by a married man until the machine cut her off. On the fourth message, Tracy picked up where she had left off.

Bobbi watched the phone slide out of her hand, unable to will her fingers to close around it before it dropped onto the carpet under the desk. She had run out of straws to grasp. It *was* true. Chuck had been unfaithful. With Tracy. The e-mail was from Chuck's mistress.

Bobbi pushed the chair back, leaving a sweaty handprint on the desk. Perspiration beaded across her back and her jaws tingled with an odd hollowness. She grabbed the wastebasket the instant before she threw up.

She staggered around the desk and across the hall to the downstairs bathroom, dragging the wastebasket with her. Her brain, misfiring on all cylinders, managed to put two coherent words together—*how long?* How long had she been blind? How long had she been a failure? How long had Chuck ...?

“NO! No, no, no, no, no!”

She snatched the hairbrush lying by the sink and slammed it to the floor. It echoed in the tiny room as it hit the tile, then ricocheted up and knocked the wastebasket over. Seizing the basket before it could spill, she set it in the shower, then turned the hot water on full blast.

If Chuck was cheating, she would know it. He couldn't hide that from her. How could he have taken her out for their anniversary if he broke his marriage vows? How could he kiss her goodbye in the morning? *When he kissed me goodbye ...*

Would Chuck try to smooth things over with Tracy and continue their affair? Was Tracy the first or just the latest? Gagging on the acid rising in the back of her throat, she tried to vomit again, but her stomach was empty.

Dizzy and lightheaded, she flipped the toilet lid closed so she could sit down. She rested her forehead on the sink and concentrated on each breath. *Don't pass out ... Breathe ...* She rubbed the back of her neck, her icy fingers soothing the flush of heat that washed over her. Long moments passed before she felt steady enough to sit up. *Dear God, how could he? How could You let him? How ... how are we supposed to recover from this?*

How?

She would give him the chance to come clean, that's how. Back in the study, she kicked the cordless out from under the desk, then punched in Chuck's cell phone number. "Your call has been forwarded to a voice mailbox."

If she left a message, he would have time to prepare, time to get his story straight before he faced her. She considered waiting for him to get home, then broadsiding him the way he had done her. No, she needed to keep the high ground, but when the beep sounded, her throat closed off.

"Chuck, we have to talk ... about Tracy."

Chuck Molinsky snapped his briefcase shut. *Mission accomplished.* Mentally spending his portion of the ServMed fees, he checked his watch on his way out of the hotel conference room. *A Rolex. That's what I need. I've earned it.* A quarter past eleven meant he could grab a quick lunch before boarding his plane and getting out of Kansas City. He threw his briefcase onto the passenger

seat of his rental car, yanked his necktie off, and powered up his cell phone. A tweet indicated a missed call.

“Bobbi, there’s nothing wrong with your car, and no, I won’t let you apologize.” Hers wasn’t the only call he missed, though.

He halfway listened to the first two messages from Walter Davis and Gina Novak. The third one hit like a slap in the face. “Now I know why you never gave me a home phone number! How long were you going to lie to me about being married? Did you think you could just use me as a little side distraction?” Tracy sprayed accusations and epithets like a verbal machine gun, spitting words Chuck hadn’t heard since the high school locker room, and even a few new ones.

“I never lied ... not to you.” Everybody knew he was married. If she missed that, it wasn’t his fault. And he never used her. She had him all wrong. Didn’t they have an understanding? All they had was an intense, physical ... whatever, not even a relationship.

He shook his head, as if that would disrupt the memories. As if. He saw her, saw himself with her every time he closed his eyes. He leaned back in the driver’s seat and played Bobbi’s message.

In that one searing moment, the choking anguish in her voice ripped away his carefully constructed fantasy world. “Chuck, we have to talk ... about Tracy.”

Dear God, she knew. The only woman who ever really loved him, and she knew. At some point, he dropped his phone, probably when the crushing pressure hit his chest, followed by waves of panic. He was having a heart attack. His Grandpa Bradley died at forty-two of a heart attack. He was forty-

two, and now he was going to die in a hotel parking lot far away from home. He was going to die without ever seeing Bobbi again.

He slapped at the key until he got the car started and blasted the air conditioner in his face. Chuck rested his forehead on the steering wheel and took long, slow breaths. Sweat dripped from his forehead and his pulse throbbed in his neck. He closed his eyes and waited. Finally, the pain in his chest subsided. Not a heart attack. Not that kind, at least.

Bobbi knew. But how much did she know? How did she find out? Maybe she thought he was in love with Tracy. Maybe if he could reassure her that he never considered leaving, that it wasn't about her at all. Tracy was just ... whatever.

Time. He could convince Bobbi to forgive him if he had enough time. If forgiveness was asking for too much, he had to keep her from divorcing him. A divorce meant failure. A negotiator who couldn't work things out with his own wife—that looked bad. If they stayed together, that would be enough to keep Walter Davis from blowing a gasket. Keep his wife, his sons, and his job. Buy time and don't let Bobbi divorce him, no matter what.

Bobbi leaned her forehead against the window in the study and stared out into the empty street. She hadn't spoken to Chuck since Monday morning. She resolved then, after she dropped him off at the terminal that he could find his own way home. If he was still coming home. In six hours, she'd have her answer. She tugged the cord and drew the drapes.

Their most recent family photograph sat on the bookcase. She walked over and picked up the picture, cradling it like a fragile heirloom. Her necklace,

the eighteenth anniversary diamond necklace, shifted against her. It went with the fifteenth anniversary bracelet she wore in the photo. Those went along with the twelfth anniversary earrings and the tenth anniversary diamond ring.

Always diamonds. Cold, hard diamonds.

Bobbi studied Chuck's face, her finger tracing his square jaw line. She searched his eyes, trying to wring some sign of dissatisfaction or unhappiness from them. She couldn't see it.

Chuck had one just like it on his desk at work. What was missing from the picture, from Chuck's life, that would push him to another woman?

I've been a good wife. I've supported him, been understanding. I've always given him the benefit of the doubt. Was that my mistake? Have I set him up to take advantage of me?

If they had any hope of salvaging their marriage, that had to change. She couldn't be passive and reactive. She had to be ready for him when he came home.

Chuck piled his bags against a no-parking sign and stood on the airport curb, scanning the incoming traffic. He checked his watch again. Bobbi had his itinerary and the plane landed on time. Granted, he never called her to confirm he needed a ride, but she knew exactly when to be here, and she was never late. She wasn't coming.

Bobbi didn't do public confrontation. Fine. He'd do this her way. He reached in his jacket pocket for his necktie and tied it in a crisp knot. She bought this shirt and tie for him. She would remember that, and that would work to his advantage. He caught his reflection in the terminal's plate glass

window and smoothed his hair. The suit jacket was all wrong, so he folded it and slipped it in his garment bag. He stood up straight, picked up his bags, and hailed a taxi.

He ran through his approach one more time. Let her vent, agree with her, then bring up the deeper issues in their marriage. He had to be careful that he didn't come across like he blamed her at all. That would be a disaster. She would agree the best thing for the boys, for the family, was finding some way to work through this. He was willing to go to counseling for as long as it took to satisfy her. Counseling would keep everybody else out of it, the law firm, the church, and especially Rita.

When the taxi turned onto his street, Chuck could feel his adrenaline kick in. His pulse quickened. The back of his neck warmed, and every muscle tensed. It was go time.

He heard the front door open as he paid the cab driver and he could feel Bobbi's eyes on him. Should he speak first, or wait for her? He had to be proactive. He had to make the first move. He picked up his bags, and when he turned around, his eyes met hers. His wife of eighteen years, the mother of his sons, stood in silent dignity, never blinking, never flinching, and he ... looked away.

He watched his feet step up to the porch, all the while trying to remember some shred of the things he wanted to tell her.

"Did you get your phone messages?" she asked with an icy edge on each word. Before Chuck could answer, she slammed the door, then came the crash of shattering glass.

He eased the door open and slid his carry-on bag inside. Silence greeted him. The mangled frame for Brad's first grade picture lay in the entry hall floor among glass shards of all sizes. Chuck carefully picked up the largest pieces and placed them on the console table.

He set his briefcase down and straightened the other pictures in the entry hall, the boys' baby photos, Joel's first grade picture, sports teams, and Cub scouts. With lingering care, he leveled their wedding picture. Bobbi looked stunning in her grandmother's wedding dress. Her jet-black hair framed her face and her ready smile lit up the room. Her dark eyes even had an extra sparkle.

Bobbi's question finally registered with him. The phone messages. If Bobbi heard Tracy's messages ...

She sat at the breakfast table with her back to him. "Bobbi, where are the boys?" He didn't want his sons to hear any of this.

"Don't you even say my name." She spoke without turning around, her voice low with the same intense anger. "I hate you. I hate what you've done, and I hate you."

Chuck didn't dare join her at the table. Instead, he moved over, and leaned against the sink so he could face her. She folded her hands in front of her and looked past him. "Are the boys here?" he asked again.

"They're at Rita's. And no, she doesn't know."

"Look, I—"

"Just give me the whole speech, Chuck. I'm sure you practiced it all the way home."

She locked her eyes on his. That seething emotion wasn't anger at all. It was humiliation and betrayal. He wanted her to be angry. He could face anger. He could fight that. But he couldn't fight hurt. He never wanted to hurt her. For the first time in his life, his swaggering self-confidence evaporated, and he bolted.

"I can't do this right now," he muttered, stepping around the table. "I'm going to go. We'll talk about this later."

"This?" She slammed her hand on the table, and he froze. "Can't you even say it?" She pushed back from the table and jerked herself to her feet. "Here, let me do it for you. You slept with another woman, Chuck! You had an affair! You committed adultery! You cheated on me." She closed the gap between them until she stood mere inches away.

"For God's sake, Bobbi—"

"God? Don't drag Him into this! He didn't have anything to do with it." Bobbi pointed her finger right at Chuck's heart. "It was all you!"

"I know!" His instincts told him to unload on her, to match her yelling and slamming, but he couldn't. "I'm going."

"Can't you face me? You didn't have any trouble facing me while you were having an affair behind my back! Why should now be any different?"

"Because you're upset. I can't talk to you when you're upset." He couldn't think of anything better than that lame excuse. His points, his concessions, his action plan vanished.

"Upset? I just found out my husband is having an affair! How did you expect me to act when you got home?"

“Maybe coming home was a mistake!” he shouted as he walked back to the front hallway to get his bag and briefcase.

Chuck twisted the last screw in the last outlet in the last upstairs bedroom of the biggest house in the subdivision. His knees popped as he stood up. At least this was just a summer job.

“Got those outlets wired, college boy?” Gene Thomas, the head contractor, stepped in between the studs of the unfinished wall. Chuck enjoyed the good-natured ribbing.

“Just finished.”

“All right. I can get the drywallers in here.” He scribbled a note on his clipboard. “Get packed up, and you can get out of here.”

“But it’s not four yet.”

“Son, when your boss tells you to go home, you go.”

“I just wanted to make sure it wasn’t a test.” Chuck grinned and walked over to close the bedroom windows.

“You’re too smart for this job.” Gene shook his head.

As Chuck slid the front window closed, an old Buick Electra, a little old lady’s car, pulled up out front. He was ready to walk away when he caught sight of tanned legs. That was no little old lady. Then he got a full view of the woman the legs belonged to. She rounded the front of the car and pushed her sunglasses up on her head. She wore her hair pulled back and pinned up. Her shirt flattered her without being tight or revealing, and she had an easy grace when she walked. “Hey, Gene, who’s that?” Chuck motioned for his boss then pointed out the window.

“The plumber’s daughter ... Brenda, maybe ... no ... something with a ‘B’.”

“I gotta go.” Chuck pushed around Gene and clamored down the stairs, trying to catch the woman before she got in the house. He yanked the door open and found her standing on the porch.

“You startled me,” she said. Even at six-foot-two, he didn’t tower over her. She had a perfect Mediterranean complexion and the most beautiful deep brown eyes.

“I’m sorry. I just finished up, getting ready to go home.”

“Yeah, I’m here to get my dad. He’s a plumber.”

“He doesn’t drive?”

“His car’s in the shop. Now, if you’ll excuse me ...”

“Wait, can I take you for a burger or something?”

“No, I don’t even know your name.”

He held out his hand. “I’m Chuck Molinsky.”

She smiled. “Yours is almost as bad as mine. I’m Bobbi—Bobbi with an ‘i’—Petrocelli.” She shook his hand with a firm, confident grip. “What is that, Polish?”

“Russian, actually. Somewhere along the way the Slavs got mixed up some blue-eyed blondes, though. I’m not sure when that happened. Now, can I take you somewhere?”

“I don’t think so. Daddy doesn’t like for me to date construction types.”

“Oh, I’m not. I mean, I’m going to law school this fall.” He took his Missouri hat off. “See, I’ve already got a lawyer haircut. I just work for Gene in the summer.”

“You’ve ... already finished college.”

“Is that bad?”

“I haven’t graduated high school yet. I only have a couple of weeks left, but ...”

“You’re kidding me. I thought ... Never mind.”

“You thought I was older?”

“At least my age.” He looked into those eyes again. “The age thing, it doesn’t matter to me if it doesn’t bother you.”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes sparkled. “Usually when an older guy wants to go out it’s because all the girls his own age know he’s a loser.” At least she smiled when she said it.

“You’re harsh!” He put a hand over his heart. “I swear I’m not a loser.”

“And you expect me to take your word for it?” She smiled again, and he thought he’d melt right into the unfinished floor.

“I can get you some references. Please? I’d love to spend some time with you.”

“But if I say yes on such short notice, it looks like I’m pathetic and have nothing else to do.”

“Not at all. If you’re free, I’ll figure that it’s God arranging things.”

“So, you’re a Christian?”

“Yeah, about a year now. I’m still learning.”

“Tell you what.” She took the pen from his shirt pocket, then raised his hand, and wrote her address in his palm. “Come by about seven. We’ll go for ice cream or something.”