

Prologue

Monday, July 25, St. Louis

Two minutes. Wait two minutes before reading the results. She set the alarm on her wristwatch for five minutes, just to be sure, and left the bathroom.

In the kitchen, she paced between the refrigerator and the doorway, a dozen, then two dozen times. She was never late. She had to be pregnant this time. At thirty-two, her ever-ticking biological clock grew louder and more urgent with each passing month.

For months, she researched, planned, and when the time came, she executed it flawlessly. As soon as he introduced himself to her, she knew he was the one. Just like Mr. Dailey, he was intelligent, successful, driven, but he was also a man of character and integrity. Granted, she wore him down, and led him to compromise some of that integrity, but he would recover. Most importantly, he would never leave his wife for her.

Once or twice, she allowed herself to wonder what might have happened if she'd met him ten or fifteen years ago. Maybe things would have been different. Maybe she would be different.

The alarm on her watch beeped. She rushed to the bathroom, and snatched up the plastic stick. Positive! She was pregnant. She fumbled to find the package instructions and reread them slowly and carefully. Two lines just like in the picture. She *was* pregnant.

Lightheaded and unsteady, she sat down on the edge of the tub, and focused on her breathing. "Be calm," she coached, but then she indulged in a moment of pure satisfaction. She did it. She was going to be a mother. This was her one chance to redeem herself, to prove that she wasn't completely messed up.

After one more deep breath, she stood and checked the calendar. It was July now, that meant ... April, or maybe early May. A spring baby. A boy. A boy with his father's square jaw and broad shoulders. She smiled, and gently lay a hand low on her belly.

First things first, however. She had to get rid of Chuck. He could never know about the baby. That would protect him, and prevent anyone from getting to her through him. He was leaving town this morning for Kansas City, giving her a day or two to set things in motion. She would tip off Chuck's wife that he strayed, and then play the part of the scorned lover. Chuck would have to marshal all his energy and attention to appease his wife. He would be more than glad to let her fade out of his life.

Just for safety's sake, she would file a lawsuit accusing Chuck of harassing her. It was utterly groundless, but it would keep him from contacting her. He wouldn't want anything to do with her ever again. By the time she began to show, she would drop the suit, and simply disappear.

Chapter 1

Reappearance

SEVEN YEARS LATER

Thursday, August 2

“This is going to be a miserable day,” Bobbi Molinsky muttered to herself as she got out of her air conditioned car. Thick, heavy air blanketed her, and shimmering waves of heat rose from the asphalt parking lot. She headed up the sidewalk along the short side of the playground, thankful the teachers’ lot was close to the building.

Hearing giggling over the rhythmic squeaking of the swings, Bobbi glanced back at the playground. A small boy swung in a wide arc. “Emma! I’m gonna jump!” he teased in a singsong voice. “One! Two! Three!” The woman gasped in mock horror, satisfying the boy, who never left the swing. “Fooled ya!”

Bobbi shook her head and smiled as she passed. He sounded like Joel. In fact, except for his dark, reddish hair, he could have passed for Joel’s little brother. *Bobbi, your baby boy is a college freshman now. Let him go.* Besides, her nest was hardly empty. With Shannon entering kindergarten, she and Chuck were starting over.

Inside the school building, mothers and grandmothers with children in tow clutched papers, filled out forms and hustled in and out of the office. Of course. Open registration for transfer students. That explained the boy on the swings. Maybe he would end up in Shannon’s class. Or hers.

Bobbi slipped into the school office, picked up her mail and headed down to her classroom. A wall of cardboard boxes surrounded the desk, giving the room the look of a warehouse. After spending the morning unpacking boxes and arranging the room, she

dropped into her desk chair, and began reviewing her class roll while her computer booted. *Wade ... Carmella ... Kaylee ... Brayton ... Brodie ... I think I had Brodie's brother. Ashton is a boy, not a girl ...* The last name on the list, a handwritten addition, was Jackson Charles Ravenna.

Ravenna.

Seven years ago, Chuck had an affair with Tracy Ravenna. Surely, this couldn't be ...

"Dear God, please," Bobbi murmured. "Not again." She quickly flipped through her students' information sheets until she found Jackson's. Round, loopy letters confirmed her fears.

Jackson was Tracy's son.

Emotions Bobbi locked away for the last seven years churned to the surface. In spite of the counseling, the changes Chuck made, and the reconciliation, searing pain surged through her, almost as fresh and real as the day she looked in Chuck's eyes and knew he'd been unfaithful.

Would Tracy try to reestablish contact with Chuck? Is that what she was after? Had he done enough to protect his heart and mind from her in these intervening seven years? Seven years. Jackson was six years old. She ran her finger down the sheet looking for a date of birth. April eighteenth. She counted backward on her fingers. April meant July.

He was conceived in July. Chuck was with Tracy on the eleventh, the fourteenth and the twenty-first. Pain gave way to bitter shame. Jackson Charles Ravenna wasn't just Tracy's son.

He was Chuck's son.

She wiped the sweat beading across her forehead. The air conditioner was on, wasn't it? Lightheaded and nauseous, Bobbi leaned over, and breathed deeply, dragging the wastebasket closer as a precaution.

They quit counseling altogether because everything was good. They were solid. She loved him, and she trusted him. She asked Chuck point blank if Tracy was pregnant, and he said no. If he lied ... If he knew about this boy all these years ... If he kept this a secret ...

Clutching the class list, she bolted back outside to her car. She couldn't wait for Chuck to come home to discuss this. She had to know now. She jerked her car out of the parking space, her tires squealing as she sped out of the parking lot.

Chuck sighed and gave up squinting through the Thursday updates. He reluctantly pulled his glasses from his shirt pocket and slid them on. Bobbi didn't need glasses yet, much less bifocals, but then Bobbi wouldn't be fifty this fall either.

He reached across his desk and picked up the photo of his wife. He took the picture on their second honeymoon on Maui, moments after he stopped a complete stranger to ask him if he'd ever seen a more beautiful woman. He captured her shy smile, with the self-conscious tilt of her head.

A few weeks later, with that same expression, she whispered, "Chuck, I'm pregnant."

"What? How?"

“Well, sweetheart, when a husband and wife love each other, there are many special ways to show that—”

“Bobbi! I’m not talking about mechanics!”

She smiled that smile again. “I guess God wants to give us a reconciliation gift.” God gave him more than a reconciliation gift. Shannon Hope Molinsky proved God forgave him.

He smiled and set the picture back on his desk, and glancing out through the glass walls of his office, he nodded to Christine, his receptionist. He adjusted his glasses, and began reading again. Before he finished two pages, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

Bobbi charged across the lobby, her jaw set, fire in her eyes. Before he could react, she banged his office door closed behind her. “So help me, God, if you knew about this, Chuck, I will divorce you right now!” She threw a packet of papers across the desk.

“What are you talking about? If I knew about what?”

“I asked you!” Bobbi leaned across his desk, pointing a finger at him. “I asked you specifically if she was pregnant!”

“Who? Tracy? She wasn’t.”

“Read that last name on my class list! It’s her son!”

Chuck picked up the papers without taking his eyes off his wife. He swallowed hard and adjusted his glasses, then skimmed the top sheet until he found “Jackson Charles Ravenna.” A wave of squeezing pressure hit his chest. “How do you know—?”

“Next to last page,” she snapped.

He looked away from her icy glare and carefully turned pages. This had to be a misunderstanding, a mistake of some sort. His eyes ran down the sheet looking for “Jackson Charles Ravenna.” He immediately recognized Tracy’s handwriting. Before his mind blasted in a thousand directions, he looked back up at his wife, battling to maintain calm in his voice. “Now Bobbi—”

“Don’t patronize me!” She slammed her hand down on his desk. “You look me in the eyes and tell me the truth. Did you know about this boy?”

“No.” He locked eyes with her. “I’m as shocked as you are.”

“I doubt that,” Bobbi shot back. “She hasn’t tried to contact you?”

“No.”

“Have you tried to contact her?”

He could feel heat rising under his shirt collar, and his pulse began to pound.

“Chuck, answer me,” Bobbi seethed with quiet fury.

Chuck wished she were still yelling. “When I split the firm and sent Pete to open the Kansas City office ...” Her clenched jaw twitched ever so slightly. “I checked with the Missouri Bar to see if she was there.” Bobbi dropped her head and huffed. “That’s all, I swear. I’ve never, ever tried to find a phone number, an address, or anything.”

“Say it without blinking.”

“I haven’t had any contact with Tracy in seven years.”

“That’s about to change,” Bobbi smirked, and pointed at the class list. “He’s yours, isn’t he?”

“He couldn’t be. She told me she took care of everything.”

“And of course she wouldn’t lie.” Bobbi rolled her eyes at him, and jabbed a finger toward the packet. “Look at his birth date.”

“April eighteenth. So?”

“Do the math.”

Chuck’s blood ran cold as he counted backwards nine months. He looked up from the paper into his wife’s eyes, as her anger gave way to fear and uncertainty.

“Bobbi, I don’t know what to say ...” He wanted to cry, yell, throw something, punch something, and then rip the papers up in little tiny pieces.

“Almost to the day, isn’t it?” she said quietly.

He rested his hand on his desk, so she couldn’t see it shake, and slowly pushed his chair back from his desk.

“What are we going to do?” Bobbi slumped into one of the office chairs.

“I don’t know,” Chuck answered, his voice just above a whisper. “I can’t think right now.” Tracy was pregnant. “That lyin’ ...” He clenched his fist, crumpling the papers still in his hand. “How could she? Pregnant ...” He stood and reached for his suit jacket.

“What are you doing?” Bobbi stood between him and his office door.

“I’m gonna go straighten this out.”

“Now?”

“She owes me an explanation! I think she intended to get pregnant all along—”

“Chuck! You’re six years too late! We’re not dealing with a pregnancy anymore. She has a son. A little boy!”

“Then I need to find out if he’s mine.”

“His middle name is Charles. I think that’s a fairly good indicator.”

“What if she’s just playing games?”

“No, I saw this kid today. I’m sure it was him. He looks just like Joel, except his hair is the same color as his mother’s.”

“You saw him? Where was Tracy?”

“I don’t know. He was with an older woman. He called her Emma.”

“Emma? Who’s Emma?” He pulled his jacket on. “I’m gonna get to the bottom of this.”

She grasped him by the arm. “Are you insane? In the first place, I will not sit by and let you go see your mistress—”

“She’s NOT ...” Chuck turned away and took a deep breath. “Bobbi, how could you ... How could you say that? I thought we were past—”

“It’s not past anymore.” She held her hand to her face. “It’s all right in front of me again. You have no idea what you’re walking into. Get some help on this before you do anything. Before *we* do anything.”

At least she corrected herself and said “we.” He needed to get his wife some reassurance, quickly, before the trust between them deteriorated further. “Call Rita. See if she and Gavin can meet us at the house in an hour or so.”

“Kara’s working today. Rita’s got her girls and Shannon.”

“We’ll send the kids outside or something. I’m gonna call Glen.” Bobbi crossed her arms across her chest and paced away from him while he punched numbers on his cell phone.

Pastor Glen Dillard picked up quickly. "This is kind of a strange time to call. Is something wrong?"

"Yeah, Glen. I mean, nobody's hurt or anything, but something's come up. Can you meet us at the house in about an hour?"

"Sure, but can you give me a little to go on?"

Chuck glanced at his wife and lowered his voice. "The woman I had the affair with is back. I'll explain the rest at the house."

"How's Bobbi?" The seriousness in Glen's voice encouraged Chuck in an odd way.

"She's okay. I think she'll be okay."

"Can I call Laurie at work just to have her start praying?"

"Please, and tell her thanks."

Bobbi turned Chuck's desk phone around so she could use it. "You just dial like a normal phone, right?" she asked before pushing any numbers.

"Dial a nine first." Chuck reached across the desk, and pushed the buttons, turning on the speakerphone.

"I hate speakerphones."

"I want to hear what Rita says."

"You may change your mind on that." They waited three long rings before Rita answered. "Hello? Chuck?"

"No, it's me," Bobbi replied. "I'm at his office."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Are you sitting down?"

“You’re scaring me. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Listen to me very carefully before you go off, all right? I picked up my class list today, and there was a Jackson Charles Ravenna on it.”

“No. Tell me it’s not ...”

“It is.” Bobbi swallowed hard, and looked at him with a mixture of sadness and accusation. “And he’s almost certainly Chuck’s.” There was dead silence on the line.

“Did Chuck know about this?” Rita asked at last, each word sharper.

“Not until I told him.”

“And you believe him?”

“Yes.”

“You took a little while to answer that,” Rita said. Chuck closed his eyes and shook his head.

“I have to believe him.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Can you and Gavin meet us at the house in about an hour?”

“Of course. Kara was off today after all, so she came and took the girls to her house.”

“Perfect. Start praying and I’ll see you soon.”

“Baby, I am so sorry. I thought this was over for you.”

“It will never be over, Rita. Never.” Bobbi returned the office phone receiver to its cradle.

“Do you believe me?” Chuck asked.

She looked past him to the photos on the bookcase behind him, and then her eyes darted to the crinkled papers on his desk. “It felt just like that morning I read her email. All I could think was that you’d lied to me.” Chuck rounded the desk to take her in his arms. “I don’t have the strength to go through this again,” she whispered.

“You don’t have to. I didn’t lie.”

“I know. I know you didn’t.” She relaxed against him.

“Bobbi, I can’t do this without you.”

Across the lobby, Christine Gardner tried not to watch the Molinskys through the glass walls. When Mrs. Molinsky tore through the lobby without speaking, Christine knew something had happened. Seeing the angry confrontation, hearing the raised voices, confirmed it was something extraordinary. She could only think of one person who could get that kind of reaction from Bobbi - Tracy Ravenna.

Chad Mitchell, Chuck’s right hand man, passed through the lobby and caught her stealing glances at the couple. “What’s going on?” he asked, nodding toward Chuck’s office.

“I’m not sure.”

“But you’ve got a gut instinct, right?”

“I can’t say anything. I might be wrong.”

“I’d bet my life on your instincts.”

“Please don’t breathe a word of this, but Mr. Mitchell, I think Tracy is back.”