

PROLOGUE

Thursday, June 12

Edward Reynolds glanced in the window of Gateway Mission. The kid was there. His grandson. He was sure the boy was Teresa's son. He had her eyes. For the last twelve years, he tracked Teresa's movements across the country. He finally traced her to St. Louis, only to find out he was too late.

The kid was his last chance. He would go in and drop a few hints, make a few pointed comments and see if the boy reacted. He opened the door of the mission, and slipped into one of the chairs close to the door. The kid, Jack, never looked up from his task of straightening chairs, loudly scraping them across the tile floor. A broad-shouldered, sturdy-built young man, he had to take that after his father's people. The Reynolds and the Hickmans were both thin and slight. Moments later, he looked up.

"Mister, I'm sorry. They packed up the food already." He adjusted his baseball cap. "I can get you a sandwich, though."

Ed cleared his throat to make sure he could speak. "Just coffee, black."

Jack moved the broom away from the counter and leaned it against the wall so he could pour the coffee. When he brought the cup over, Ed invited him to sit at the table.

"I'm Jack," he said, extending his hand. "My brother runs this place."

"I'm Ed." Teresa just had the one son. Was he mistaken about the boy? Maybe Jack had a half-brother. Teresa never married, so it couldn't be a stepbrother.

"You need a place to stay?" Jack asked.

"Nah." Ed slurped the coffee loudly. "You make good coffee, Jack."

"I learned it from my mom. She's a big coffee drinker."

He talked about her in present tense. Ed studied Jack carefully. "You from around here?"

“Pretty much. We bounced around some when I was little, but I’ve been in St. Louis since I was six.”

“Ever been to Baltimore?”

“No. You?”

“That’s where I’m from. I had a daughter. You remind me of her. Thought you might be related.”

“That would be an incredible coincidence,” Jack said.

Chapter 1 Fruition

“How goes it?” Jack Molinsky leaned against the doorframe of the tiny office where his brother crunched columns of numbers on an outdated adding machine.

Brad spoke without looking up. “Slow. I’ve got board summaries and a bunch of filings to finish up before the thirtieth. Did somebody come in?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “An old guy. He just had a cup of coffee and left.”

“He didn’t want anything?”

“No. Said he had a place to stay and everything.” Jack twirled the broom in his hands. “It was strange. He asked me if I’d ever been to Baltimore.”

Brad put his pencil down and looked up. “Your mom was from Baltimore, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah. He said I reminded him of his daughter, even.”

“You don’t think . . . ?”

“What?”

“You don’t think that was Tracy’s dad, do you?”

“Here? After all these years?”

“Did he give you a name?”

“Just Ed, no last name.”

“Tracy’s dad was named Ed.”

“He was, wasn’t he?”

“He couldn’t have gotten far.” Brad headed for the front door.

Jack followed close behind. “He took a right when he got outside.”

Once out on the street, Brad said, “Don’t make eye contact with anybody unless I speak to them first. Got that?” He glanced at his watch. “I know a couple of guys who’ll be transacting some business. Maybe they’ve seen him.”

Jack stuck close to his brother, keeping his head down as instructed. Brad had become very streetwise in his years at the mission. He knew who was just down and out, and who the truly bad guys were. A couple of blocks from the mission, Jack could see a group of six or eight boys in their late teens, maybe early twenties, sporting gang colors. This was their turf. Great.

As they got closer, a black SUV with tinted windows turned onto the street, and drove slowly toward the group of boys, toward Brad and Jack. "This is wrong," Brad whispered, and Jack raised his head. He watched the boys closely, but they weren't reacting. Brad's eyes darted back to the SUV, and Jack turned to see the passenger side window inching down. Even from a half a block away, Jack could make out the glint of metal.

The same instant Jack's brain processed what he was seeing, the shooting began. The group of boys dove for cover behind parked cars while one or two returned fire. Paralyzed by shock and fear, Jack felt Brad's strong hands dig into his shoulders, and then he hit the sidewalk hard, feeling the burning scrape on his knee, hands and cheek. But in that split second, Brad left himself exposed.

Jack heard a strange thud, unlike anything he'd ever heard before. He rolled over in time to see Brad splayed against the brick building, and then he crumpled awkwardly to the sidewalk.

"BRAD!"

Jack crawled to his brother, and rolled him onto his back. Brad clutched Jack's shirt, but didn't speak. "I think you've been shot, Brad! It's gonna be okay!" Brad lifted a trembling hand to his chest, to the spreading red stain soaking his shirt. As soon as he saw the blood, his own blood, on his hand, Brad seemed to relax.

"Brad, hang on! Hang on. I'm calling for an ambulance, right now. Just hang on." Jack fumbled with his cell phone, trying to check Brad's pulse as he dialed. Then he held

the phone against his shoulder while he worked to take his shirt off. “My brother’s been shot!” he yelled as soon as the operator picked up. Holding his wadded shirt against the wound in a desperate attempt to slow the bleeding, he quickly relayed all the details he could, and waited the eternal minutes for the paramedics. “Brad, they’re coming. Hang in there.”

Bobbi Molinsky heard the phone ring, but when she saw her husband, ashen-faced, steadying himself against the wall, her breath pressed from her lungs.

“Jack, wait,” Chuck pleaded, then he looked at her. “He hung up.”

“What happened? Is Jack hurt?”

He shook his head and reached for her hand. “Not Jack.” In his effort to stay calm, stay in control, he sounded mechanical. “Brad. Brad’s been shot. They’re taking him to University Hospital.”

She heard ‘Brad’ and she heard ‘hospital.’ This was just like when his appendix ruptured when he was a sophomore in college. That’s all it was. Nothing serious, right?

“Shannon!” Chuck called, “we have to go to the hospital! Brad’s been shot!”

“Wait!” Bobbi grabbed his arm, and pulled him around to face her. “What did you say?”

He looked in her eyes, and spoke with patronizing clarity. “Brad . . . has been shot.”

“What?”

“Shot. With a gun. We have to get to University Hospital.”

“That’s impossible.” He was just there with them a few hours ago. The aroma of the roast and homemade bread from his birthday dinner still hung in the kitchen. He couldn’t be . . .

“Bobbi, we need to go.” He pushed her toward the front door, flipping off lights as he went. She could hear Chuck talking, but his words weren’t registering with her.

“Mom?” Shannon met them in the entry hall, terror in her eyes. “What happened?”

Bobbi shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“But he’s gonna be okay, right?”

“Of course.” Of course, he’d be okay. He was young and strong. And shot. That had to be a misunderstanding. Shot at, maybe. That she could believe. That had to be what happened. In the car, she reached her right hand back between the seat and the door, and Shannon immediately seized it.

Chuck drove like a maniac, but she knew better than to say anything to him. At every red light, he made another phone call. Their son, Joel. Her sister, Rita. Their pastor, Glen. He kept saying “Brad’s been shot. I don’t know any details.” It was so bizarre, so unreal to hear her son’s name and “shot” in the same sentence. People she knew didn’t get shot. Shootings were for the eleven o’clock news.

Jack ran to them as soon as they bustled through the automatic doors to the emergency room. Bobbi immediately noticed his shirt was inside out. Why . . . ? He threw his arms around her neck and sobbed. “I’m sorry . . . Mom, I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?” Bobbi asked gently. There was a policeman against the wall. Was he here because of Brad?

“We thought it was . . . Brad thought so, too . . .”

“Thought what?”

Jack took a deep breath. “An old man came in the mission . . . Just . . . some of the things he said . . . We . . . We both thought he could’ve been my mom’s dad . . .”

“Reynolds?” Chuck asked. “Edward Reynolds was in the mission? Did he threaten you?”

Jack shook his head. “No, it wasn’t like that. He just asked a bunch of questions, like if I’d ever been to Baltimore.”

“Your mom was from Baltimore.”

“I know. That’s what Brad said. So we tried to catch up with him. We weren’t three blocks away before . . .” He blinked back tears. “There were these guys on a street corner. And this big, black SUV cruised in. Brad said something was wrong. He threw me down, and that’s when he . . .”

Bobbi hugged him tightly, and smoothed his hair, the way she did when he was a little boy. “It will be okay,” she whispered.

Jack sniffled, glanced at the policeman, and took the tissue she offered him. “He’s in surgery, now. I haven’t heard anything else.”

“Where was he hit?” Chuck asked.

“Once in the chest,” Jack said, “but he was conscious and everything when the paramedics took him.”

“That’s good, right?” Shannon asked. “Conscious is a positive thing.”

Bobbi squeezed her hand. “Of course, it’s good, Baby.” Brad. Once in the chest. Your heart was in your chest. But if he was conscious, he couldn’t have been shot through the heart. So, he’s okay. He’d be okay.

Moments later, Rita and her husband, Gavin arrived. Chuck got directions to the surgery waiting rooms and the six of them headed for the elevator. Chuck filled the silence with details for Rita and Gavin. How many more times did she have to hear it?

“I called Danny,” Rita said. “He’s gonna drive straight through so he can get here.”

“I hate for him to do that,” Bobbi said. “His little ones . . .”

“They were gonna get here tomorrow anyway. There was no arguing with him.”

“Sounds like someone else I know.”

Rita managed a smile. “He’s not due in Norfolk until July first, so they should have a good visit.”

“Brad’s looking forward to seeing him. Joel’s not on call this weekend, so it’ll be like old times. Joel’s . . . where is Joel, Chuck?”

“He’s waiting on a delivery.”

“A delivery?”

“A baby. He’s doing the newborn exam. He’s got a call out for another pediatrician, so I’m sure he’ll get here as soon as he can.”

Good. She’d feel better with Joel here. But if Danny was driving through the night . . . Was it that bad? She felt Shannon slip an arm around hers, and when the elevator doors opened, she felt the teenager’s grip tighten. Bobbi took Shannon’s hand, and followed Chuck and Jack to the waiting room. Another policeman stood in the hallway. They were everywhere. Were they protecting Brad? Or Jack?

“You had Brad’s birthday tonight?” Rita asked.

Bobbi turned her head slowly toward her sister. That was this evening, wasn’t it? “Yeah, Shannon teased him about being middle-aged now.”

“At thirty-five? I don’t want to know what that makes me.” Rita smiled, and patted Shannon’s arm.

“We laughed because Joel got called out, so that meant Brad had a fair shot at the pie. Then he and Chuck talked about the mission’s board meeting next week . . .”

A man in scrubs. He slowly pulled his scrub cap off, and smoothed his hair. His face was drawn, his eyes weary. He had bad news. “Are you Brad’s family?” he asked, quietly.

Chuck extended a hand. “I’m his father, and this is my wife.” Bobbi slipped her hand into Chuck’s, and she felt Shannon’s hand fall away from hers.

The surgeon surveyed the room, all the anxious eyes on him. “Mr. Molinsky, Mrs. Molinsky, I’m very sorry.”

A dark heaviness enveloped Bobbi. She knew the surgeon was talking, explaining to them what efforts his team made to save Brad’s life, but he sounded distant, as if she were hearing him from underwater. As her heart and mind reeled, trying to comprehend the reality that her son was dead, she caught random words—aorta, bleeding, rare. She was vaguely aware that Chuck and maybe Jack were trying to steady her, and then everything went black.