

# Prologue

*Nineteen years earlier . . .  
Chevy Chase, Maryland,  
Sunday 10 January 10.30 P.M.*

‘**S**herri, give me the damn key.’

Rolling her eyes at her boyfriend’s growl, Sherri Douglas closed the driver’s-side door, locked up, and tossed the key to her old Ford Escort over its peeling roof. ‘There you go.’

Thomas’s scowl was interrupted by the grimace of pain that twisted his bruised face as he reflexively caught the key in midair. He froze for a second, then hissed as he lowered his arm. ‘Shit,’ he muttered.

Sherri sucked in a breath, instantly regretting her thoughtlessness. ‘Oh, Tommy, I’m sorry. That was stupid of me.’

He schooled his battered features and swallowed hard, pursing his lips then quickly opening his mouth because his lip was split too.

She wanted to cry. His beautiful face was . . . still so beautiful. But hurt. Her chest ached as she catalogued every wound. She wanted to hit something. Someone. Four someones, actually. She narrowed her eyes, thinking about the boys who’d done all that damage. Hating them. Her fists clenched and she shoved them in her coat pockets. Hitting them wasn’t going to help Thomas.

And her father would kill her if she got in trouble too. Her dad wasn’t terribly keen on her dating a white boy to begin with. Ha. A white boy. It would have been funny had it not been so frustratingly sad. Thomas’s dark skin wasn’t white enough for him to fit in here

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at school, but he wasn't black enough for her father. At least he hadn't forbidden them from seeing each other. Because Sherri would have disobeyed her father if he'd tried. But if she got expelled along with Thomas? Her father would make sure they never saw each other again.

*Expelled.* They'd *expelled* him. She still couldn't believe it. It was so *unfair*.

'Don't you *ever* call yourself stupid,' Thomas said quietly.

She blinked in confusion, then realized he was referring to what she'd just said. But it *had* been stupid to make him move so quickly. 'I should have thought.' Because it wasn't only his face that was battered. They'd kicked his arms and legs too. She clenched her teeth, willing the tears back.

They'd hurt him. *Those bastards.* They'd *hurt* him.

Thomas shook his head. 'It's all right. I'll live.' He walked around to where she stood and held out the car key, his expression one of weary defeat. 'Sherri, please. Give me the *right* key. I'm too tired for games. I just want to get my bass and get out of here. Get back in the car and keep it running. You should stay warm.'

Her eyes filled with tears she couldn't hold back. 'I'm going with you,' she whispered fiercely.

His dark brows lifted, his split lip bending down. 'No. You're not.'

'I'm . . . ' Her voice broke and she looked up at him helplessly. He was so big and strong and . . . *good*. Better than any of those bastards. One on one, it would have been no contest. At six-three, he was the tallest, strongest boy in their class. But there'd been four of them. *Four*. They'd beaten him and yet *he'd* been blamed. *He'd* been punished. *He'd* been expelled.

Because Richard Linden – even in her mind, Sherri hissed the entitled bastard's name – thought he had the right to touch any of the scholarship girls. *Just because we're poor. And he's not.* And because Thomas couldn't ignore poor Angie's terrified face as Richard held her against the wall and groped her. And because when Thomas pulled Richard off Angie, Richard and his posse of thugs attacked him and beat the crap out of him.

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The principal had blamed Thomas. *What a shock.* Dr Green did whatever the Linden family said because they were rich. And white. *And Thomas and Angie and I are not.* And to make it all even worse, somehow Richard or one of his crew had gotten to Angie, because she was denying Richard had even touched her.

So they'd expelled Thomas. He'd worked so damn hard to look good to the colleges. He'd needed a scholarship or he wasn't going. Now? He'd have to go to his local high school, the expulsion on his permanent record. Would the colleges even want him after this?

Richard Linden and those bully friends of his had stolen Thomas's future. She was going to make damned sure they didn't touch anything else of his. A blink sent the tears down her cheeks. 'I'm going with you,' she repeated. 'It's just the band room. It's not dangerous.'

'If you get caught, you'll be expelled right along with me.' He cupped her jaw in his huge hand, gently swiping at her tears with his thumb. 'I won't let that happen to you.'

'It shouldn't have happened to *you*. It's so unfair, Tommy.' She bit her lip hard, trying not to cry anymore. She knew her tears ripped him up.

He drew a deep breath. 'Yeah.'

'We need to fight this. *You* need to fight this. You did the right thing. You protected Angie. You were the hero.'

'Fighting it won't do any good.'

She held his gaze, desperately hoping to make him see reason. 'We can sue.'

He laughed, a huff of disbelief. 'What? No!'

She took his free hand in hers, twined their fingers together. Her skin dark, his a few shades lighter. 'We can get a lawyer.'

'With what?' he scoffed. 'Willy counts every bite of food I put in my mouth, for God's sake. You think he's gonna pay for a lawyer?'

Thomas's stepfather was a nasty, abusive man. Sherri didn't like being around him. He made the hairs stand up on the back of her neck. He didn't make any secret of the fact that he thought Thomas was inferior. Thomas, who was better than all the other men.

Thomas, who Sherri loved with all her heart.

'We can call the ACLU,' she said.

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Thomas blinked down at her. 'No way. I'm not suing anyone. Nothing ever gets solved in court.'

'That's not true.' Her voice was trembling again and she closed her eyes to fight back tears. 'Tommy, this is your life.'

Wearily, he leaned down until their foreheads and noses touched, a gesture he'd learned from his real father, with his Maori roots. His real father, long dead, whose memory Thomas quietly worshipped.

Sherri, only five feet nothing, leaned up on her toes so that he didn't have to bend down so far. She barely caught his whispered reply.

'I can't fight the Lindens, Sher. You know it as well as I do. Nobody is going to stand up for me. Nobody but you.'

'But some of the teachers might. Coach Marion or Mr Woods . . .'

The soccer coach loved Thomas, and their history teacher did too.

He closed his eyes, shook his head, pivoting against her forehead. 'They won't stand up for me either.'

'How do you know?'

He drew in an anguished breath. 'Because they *didn't*,' he snapped, then sighed. 'They had a chance on Thursday.'

'They pulled the boys off you,' she murmured. 'Then walked with you to the main office.'

Except that Thomas hadn't been walking, not really. He'd been too badly hurt, dizzy from the kicks to his head and limping because one of the boys had repeatedly stomped on his knee with a heavy boot. Coach Marion and Mr Woods had actually been holding him upright.

'They had the chance to tell Dr Green what happened, but they didn't.' Thomas shrugged. 'Woods started to, but Green called him out into the hall and said something about contract renewal.'

Sherri's eyes widened. 'He threatened Mr Woods's job?'

'Yes. I assume he said the same to Coach, because *he* didn't speak up for me either. And they were the best allies I had.' Another defeated shake of his head. 'Hell, Miss Franklin could have let you take my bass with you on Friday, but here we are, breaking into the school to get it. I bet Dr Green threatened her too.'

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It would have sounded paranoid, except that it was true.

Miss Franklin had said as much when she pressed three keys into Sherri's palm late Friday afternoon. One was to the school's outer door closest to the band room, one to the band room itself, and the third unlocked the instrument cabinet.

*I can't give him the bass myself. But if someone breaks in and takes it?* Miss Franklin had shrugged. *That would be a real shame. Especially if it happened on Sunday night. Nobody's here to stop any would-be thieves on Sunday night.*

Miss Franklin wanted to help, but she wasn't willing to defend Thomas either, and the realization was devastating.

'Tommy . . .'

He pressed his finger to Sherri's lips. 'Nobody's gonna stand up for me, Sher, and that's just the way it is. I'll go to the high school near my house. I'll be okay. I'm more worried about you, staying here without me.'

She wanted to say she'd go with him, that she'd leave this fancy school with its rich white brats and follow him wherever he went. But her father wouldn't allow it. Her parents wanted her to have a future, and Ridgewell Academy was her ticket to an easier life. There had to be an answer for Thomas, but she wasn't going to figure it out standing here in the school parking lot.

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. 'Come on. Let's get your bass.' It had been his father's – his real father, not that piece of shit who was his stepfather. His real dad had died when Thomas was five, and the bass was all he had left of him.

The instrument wasn't worth a lot of money, but it was everything to Thomas. He never left it at school overnight, but the principal hadn't let him get it Thursday after the incident. Dr Green hadn't allowed Sherri to get it for him either, the ass.

She set off at a half jog toward the rear of the building, well aware that one of Thomas's strides required two of hers. At least on a normal day. He was still limping and she reached the door before he did, scowling as she unlocked it and slipped through, holding it for him.

'Dammit, Sherri, go back to the car. I'll meet you there.'

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'Nope.' Because she wasn't sure what they'd find in the instrument closet. Yes, she had the keys, but it had been forty-eight hours since she'd seen the bass. She wanted to be there to support Thomas if someone – like Richard Linden and his friends – had gotten there first. If the bass was gone . . . or, even worse, broken?

Thomas was going to lose it.

The heavy outer door closed behind them, automatically locking with a click that echoed in the quiet. 'Let's do this,' Sherri said, and started jogging toward the band room. She could hear Thomas's heavy steps behind her. Normally he moved like a panther, swiftly and silently, but Richard's friends had done a number on his knee.

Abruptly, his footsteps halted. 'Sherri,' he hissed. 'Wait.'

She slowed and turned. 'I'm not going back to the . . .'

Thomas was limping down one of the side corridors, and Sherri followed, catching up as he reached the stairwell at its end. 'Sherri!' he shouted, panic in his voice.

'I'm here,' she said, a little out of breath. 'What's wrong?' A second later, her eyes adjusted to the dim light . . . and she saw. Horrified, she stumbled backward. 'Oh my God. Who is it?'

Because the boy on the floor wasn't recognizable. Someone had beaten him until his features were one big bloody mess.

Thomas crawled under the stairwell and pressed his fingers to the boy's neck. 'He's . . . still alive, but God, Sher. I don't see how. Looks like he was stabbed.'

'What do we do?'

'I'll try to stop the bleeding. You call 911.'

'I don't have any quarters.'

'You don't need them for 911. Go!' He shrugged out of his coat, wincing in pain because his arm still hurt. She turned to run, but from the corner of her eye she saw him freeze.

'Shit,' he whispered, then looked up to meet her eyes. 'It's Richard.'

'Oh no,' Sherri breathed. 'Oh no.'

Thomas's jaw tightened. 'Go. Call 911. He's lost a lot of blood. Go!'

She turned at the snapped command, then stopped short when he called her name again. He'd taken off his coat and was now

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ripping off the sweater she'd given him for Christmas. 'What?' she asked as he flung the sweater away and began taking off a long-sleeved T-shirt.

He balled the T-shirt up and pressed it to Richard's stomach. 'Once you've called 911, get out of here. I don't want you involved.'

'But—'

'Don't argue!' he shouted. 'Just . . .' His voice broke, and he blinked, sending a tear down his battered cheek. 'Just go,' he whispered hoarsely.

And then she understood. When help came, Thomas would be caught in the school. With a dying Richard Linden.

'They'll blame you.' She choked on the words. Dropping to her knees, she grabbed his arm, but he shook her off. 'Thomas, come with me. We'll call 911 and then leave. Together.'

Thomas shook his head and resumed putting pressure on Richard's stomach. 'Somebody has to stop the bleeding. He'll die otherwise. He's not even conscious. I can't leave him to die.'

She stared at him helplessly. 'Tommy . . .'

He met her eyes, his misery unmistakable. 'For God's sake, go! Do *not* come back. *Please*.'

She pushed to her feet and backed away, then ran for the payphone. She'd make the damn call, then she'd go back and sit with him. There was no way she was leaving him to face the blame for something else he had not done.

The payphone was next to the front office. With trembling hands she dialed 911.

'What is your emergency?' the operator asked.

'We . . .' Sherri drew a deep breath through her nose, tried to slow her rapid pulse. 'We need help. There's a guy—'

The doors flew open and men poured through them. Men in uniforms.

Cops.

Cops? How did cops—

A burly man grabbed her arm and squeezed hard. 'Drop the phone!'

'But . . .'

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The man clamped his other hand around her wrist, drawing a cry of shocked pain from her throat. 'I said drop it.'

Her fingers were forced open, releasing the phone, which hung on the tangled cord. She stared up at the cop, stunned. Roughly he spun her around and shoved her against the wall. The next thing she knew, he was snapping cuffs on her wrists.

Behind her, she could hear Thomas screaming her name. 'Sherri, run!'

She grimaced, her temple pressed against the wall so hard that it hurt. It was too late for that now.

*Montgomery County Detention Center, Rockville, Maryland,  
Wednesday 13 January, 11.15 A.M.*

Laying his head on the cold metal of the interview room table, Thomas closed his eyes, too tired to wonder who was behind the mirror and too exhausted to be worried about what this meeting was about. He hadn't slept in three days, not since they'd brought him to this place.

To jail.

*I'm in jail.* Words he'd thought he'd never say. *Goddamn Richard.* The fucker had died. *I ruined my life and he died anyway.* Bled out from stab wounds to his gut. Thomas's first aid had been too little, too late.

Murder. They'd charged him with murder.

He was almost too tired to be terrified. Almost.

He hadn't seen Sherri since he'd been here. He hadn't seen anyone. Not even his mother. His mom had written a letter, though. He laughed bitterly. Yep, she'd written him a letter, saying she was disappointed in him and how could he kill that nice Richard Linden? *And oh, by the way, we will not be paying your bail or for a lawyer.*

Thomas was on his own.

The door opened, but he was too exhausted to lift his head. 'Thank you,' a man said. 'I can take it from here.'

'Fine.' That voice Thomas knew. It was the guard who'd locked him inside this room. Leaving his hands cuffed behind him. 'If you need anything, just ask.'

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'Wait,' the new man said. 'Uncuff him.'

Thomas lifted his head enough to see the man's dark suit and tie. And his wheelchair. Thomas jerked upright, staring.

The man wasn't old. He was young, actually. Maybe thirty. It was hard to say. His hair was cut short, his suit expensive-looking. He was studying Thomas clinically.

'Thomas White?' he asked.

*Not for much longer.* He'd be ditching his stepfather's last name as soon as possible. He was sure the bastard was the reason his mother had turned her back. Part of him wondered what his stepfather had needed to do to force her to write that letter. Part of him worried about his mom. Part of him was too tired to care.

'Who are you?' he demanded.

'I'm your lawyer,' the man said blandly. He turned to the guard. 'Uncuff him. Please.'

The way he said *please* wasn't polite. It was . . . imperious. Commanding.

'If you're sure,' the guard said with a shrug.

'I'm sure,' the lawyer said.

Thomas gritted his teeth when the guard jerked his arms under the guise of unlocking the cuffs. 'One move from you, kid,' the man growled in warning.

Rubbing his sore wrists, Thomas glared and said nothing.

'That'll be all,' the lawyer said, waiting until he and Thomas were alone to roll his eyes. 'All right, then, Mr White. Let's start—'

'Thomas,' Thomas interrupted. 'Not White. Just Thomas.'

'I can do that. For now, anyway.' The lawyer rolled his wheelchair to the table, appraising Thomas with too keen an eye. 'Have you been eating?'

'No.'

'I didn't think so. I don't have to ask if you've been sleeping. You've got bags under your eyes.'

*Like you care.* This guy, with his expensive suit and lord-of-the-manor attitude. 'Who are you?' Thomas asked again, more rudely this time.

The man pulled a silver business card case from his breast

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pocket and gave one of the cards to Thomas. 'My name is James Maslow.'

The card was sturdy and not cheap at all. *Maslow and Woods, Attorneys at Law.*

*No way I can afford this guy.* 'I have a lawyer already.'

'I know. The public defender. If you choose to stay with him, I'll honor your wishes. But first let me explain to you why I am here. Your history teacher and my law partner are brothers. Your teacher asked me to speak with you, as a favor. He thinks you're innocent. I reviewed your case and thought he might be right.'

*Mr Woods talked to this lawyer? For me? Why?* His lungs expelled air in a rush. 'You believe me?' he asked, his voice small and trembling, because no one else had.

Maslow nodded once. 'Yes.'

'Why?' Thomas's voice broke on the single word.

Maslow's smile was gentle. 'For starters, because your teacher told me what really happened the day you defended that young girl from Richard Linden's advances.'

'Mr Woods will lose his job,' Thomas whispered, remembering the principal's barely veiled threat. Had that been only six days ago? Really?

'He decided to risk it,' Maslow said, and there was a spark of pride in his eyes. 'Mr Woods has written a letter to the school board on your behalf.'

'Wow.' Thomas cleared his throat. 'That's... really nice of him.'

'Well, he's a really nice guy. I think you probably are too.'

Thomas lifted his chin, stared Maslow in the eye. 'I didn't kill Richard Linden.'

'I believe you, but the prosecutor thinks he has a case. He wants me to tell you that he's offering voluntary manslaughter. Eight to ten years.'

Thomas came to his feet, shoving the chair backward. '*What? Eight to ten years?*'

Maslow patted the table. 'Sit down, Thomas, before the guard comes back.'

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Thomas sat, his body shaking. Tears burned his eyes. 'But I didn't do it.'

'I know,' Maslow said soothingly. 'But I'm required to tell you whatever they offer. Let's discuss your case and then you can decide what you want to do about representation.'

Thomas rubbed his eyes roughly, clearing the moisture away. 'I can't pay you. I can't even make bail.'

'Don't worry about my fees. If you agree, I'll be taking your case pro bono. That means for free.'

Thomas frowned. 'I know what it means,' he snapped. 'I got seven-eighty on my verbal.' Not that his SAT scores mattered anymore. No college would take him now. Nor was it this guy's fault. He drew a breath. 'I'm sorry, sir. I'm . . . tired.'

'You look it,' Maslow said sympathetically. 'You've also made bail.'

Thomas's mouth fell open. 'What? Where did my mother get the money?'

'It wasn't your mother. I'm sorry about that.'

His stomach pitched. *Not my mom.* 'She really has cut me off, then.'

Maslow's brows crunched in a disapproving frown. 'I'm afraid so.'

'That's why I don't want to be White. Her husband changed my name when he married her. I want to change it back. Take back my real father's name.'

'What name was that?'

'Thorne. I want to be Thomas Thorne.'