

Prologue

An intense foreboding gripped her when she heard the front door open. That feeling quickly became intermixed with nervous energy, causing her to take a deep breath to calm herself, then another. She listened to him go about his usual routine, imagining his movements in her head as she had watched him do day after day, week after week, year after year. First, he'd hang that ratty old thing he called a baseball hat on the peg in the hall. Then he'd toss the jean jacket he always wore, regardless of how hot it was, onto the chair against the wall and check his pockets for anything needing to be deposited in the wooden bowl sitting on the shelf. These days there wasn't anything to place in the bowl apart from his keys, but that didn't stop him from checking each pocket, anyway. Next, he'd make his way to the kitchen to grab the first of three beers he'd drink over the course of the night. Always three. Not two, not four, only three. It didn't matter if it was ten below outside. He drank the same thing in the same quantity every day. She always made sure there was enough beer to satisfy his curious habit. Not because it was a mother's responsibility to see to the needs of her children, but because she didn't want to face those black eyes again if he found the refrigerator empty.

When she heard his heavy footsteps making their way to the living room, where he would plop himself down on the couch in front of the television and zone out to a blank screen, it was time for her to become part of their daily ritual.

"Dinner is almost ready," she called out from the washroom. "I made your favorite, meatloaf."

He didn't respond, and she didn't expect him to. That's the one thing that had changed recently and why she had become so concerned. He used to be more communicative, at least attempting to interact with her, but over the course of the past year, he had become more and more internal. No matter what she tried or how she coaxed, her son was withdrawing further and further away from her. She realized now what had changed, but not the why of it. That she would never understand.

She made her way to the kitchen and pulled their dinner out of the oven. She lifted the tinfoil from the steaming meat, squirted ketchup across the top, then carried the pan into the dining room. The mashed potatoes and green beans were already resting on the table, so she placed the meat loaf in between the two bowls.

"It's hot and ready," she called.

A minute later, her son came shuffling into the room. At five foot nine, he was six inches taller than her. He wasn't overweight, but he wasn't particularly fit either. She had just given him a haircut the week before, but his hair still looked unkept and it was sticking to his forehead as if he'd recently been sweating. The same bland overshirt he wore over the top of a plain white T-shirt smelled of rotting waste.

"Did you get the Thompson's junk taken care of today?" she asked.

A grunt and a nod answered her question.

He watched him slip into his usual spot, his back to her ornate dish cupboard. She was especially protective of that one piece of furniture, along with the China dishes it held, since it had been in her mother's family for generations. She took her seat at the end of the table next to him, then

began dishing out the food. The two of them ate in silence. As she watched him dig into his plate, she reminisced about the times they discussed each other's lives while they ate. Those days were long gone. Tonight, it was probably for the best that they didn't talk.

After finishing, he pushed his chair back from the table, then glanced over at her plate. She had barely touched her food. He looked up at her and saw that she was staring directly at him.

"You didn't eat anything," he said flatly.

"I'm surprised you noticed. It's just that I'm not very hungry," she replied. "Was it good?"

He shrugged his shoulders, then finished the last of his beer.

"I bought a special dessert for you," she said, rising from the table.

"Why?" her son asked, using his pinky finger to pick a piece of meat from his teeth.

She moved to the cupboard and opened the drawer. "Because you deserve it, darling," she said.

"If you say so."

She removed the handgun from the drawer, cocked the hammer, and placed the barrel against the back of his head.

"Goodbye," she said.

Then she pulled the trigger.

PART ONE

One

Penelope Highsmith yanked the door open, then headed back into the room without bothering to greet the person who knocked. She navigated her way over to the desk and switched on the lamp. The light would make the pounding inside her head worse, but she couldn't stand not being able to see who was talking.

"Why is it so dark in here?" Penelope's personal assistant, Willa, remarked as she trailed her boss into the room. "And I thought you were cutting back," she added, referencing the drink in Penelope's hand.

"Is this really the largest hotel room you could find?" Penelope replied, ignoring her assistant's remarks. She walked barefoot to the couch, the bottom of her flowing gown trailing behind her on the carpet as she walked barefoot. She sat down, shifting her carry bag onto the floor beside the couch, her puffy blond hair glistening in the dim light due to the generous amount of hair spray she'd employed to keep it in place. For a woman in her mid-fifties, she didn't wear her age well, using makeup to compensate for the ever-increasing wrinkles invading her complexion. Moreover, the cosmetic procedure she had done years ago to make her lips fuller was making her mouth look misshapen. Except for the bare feet, Penelope appeared as if she were about to attend

a fancy reception, but she rarely looked any other way. The value of the jewelry she was wearing alone was worth more than the average wage earner's annual salary.

“This is the one that was recommended. It has a four point five rating, offers room service, and I verified that this is the biggest room in town,” Willa said, plopping a thick binder on the desk before slipping into the chair. She was twenty years younger than her boss, but Willa constantly struggled to match the older woman's energy level. Her dark hair was cut extremely short with purple-tipped highlights. Half a dozen piercings decorated each earlobe, and she sported a gold nose ring. “This is Willow's Bane, not Seattle. You should know. You grew up here.”

Penelope frowned, then gestured at Willa with her drink, causing some of its contents to spill. “I lived here decades ago. What about an Airbnb?”

“Again, not Seattle. This isn't that bad, though. Anyway, we won't be here that long.”

“But there's not near enough closet space for my clothes,” Penelope said, looking over at the four large suitcases still resting beside the king-size bed.

Willa sighed. “You won't wear a quarter of that. You never do.”

“Immaterial. I need options. I never know what I'll feel like wearing until I wake. You know that.”

Willa nodded, resigned. She had experienced enough versions of this conversation to know that further objections would be pointless. “I'll unpack everything in the morning, but your toiletries, makeup, and prescriptions are already in the bathroom. I'll make the rest work somehow.”

“Yes, you will. Now, is everyone here?”

“I saw Susan in the lobby with your publisher.”

“Good. And the invitations?”

“All sent.”

“The local newspaper and other media?”

“I’m pretty sure Trent took care of that.”

“I don’t pay you for *pretty sure*. Follow up and make sure.”

“Yes, ma’am. You still haven’t returned those messages I gave you earlier from *Rolling Stone* and *Entertainment Weekly*.”

“They can both wait until after tomorrow. That goes for anyone else you receive interview requests from. I’m not talking to a soul until after the launch, then I imagine it will be a journalistic blitzkrieg.”

“Hello, anyone in there?” came a voice from the door, followed by a brief knock. A few seconds later, a woman about the same age as Penelope, with brunette hair and wearing a peach pantsuit, stuck her head around the corner. “You left your door open.”

“I did that on purpose, Susan. I knew you’d be coming by soon,” Willa said.

Susan stepped into the room and looked around. “Your room is much bigger than mine.”

Willa glanced at her boss with the beginnings of a smile, but Penelope’s attention was focused on Susan.

“Have you been over to the bookstore?” Penelope asked.

“Just got back from there. Me and Trent both. Not very big.”

Trent was Penelope’s publisher, but not one of her favorite people. “It’ll serve the purpose.”

“Listen, Penelope, we need to talk before things get crazy tomorrow.”

Penelope drained the rest of her drink and banged the glass noisily on the wooden coffee table. “I don’t have anything else to say.”

A thin line formed on Susan’s lips before she turned to Willa. “Can you give us a few minutes?”

The expression on the assistant’s face resembled that of a grade schooler being sent to her room just as the conversation between her parents was getting interesting.

“Fine,” Willa said, rising from her chair. She picked up her binder. “I’m just next door if you need me.”

“Is that supposed to comfort me?” Penelope said, adjusting the way her gown fell upon her lap.

Willa and Susan glanced at one another before Willa turned and marched out of the room.

After the sound of the door clicking shut, Susan shook her head, taking a seat on the other end of the couch.

“I just don’t get it, Penelope. I’ve tried. God knows I’ve tried. But I can’t understand why you’re being so self-destructive. Why retire when you’re at the top of your game?”

“My reasons are my own.”

“You might look like you’re old enough to retire, but you’re only fifty-four years old.”

“I’m fifty-five, and screw you.”

“My mistake, fifty-five. I know you, Penelope. You’ll be going stir-crazy in less than a year.”

“What’s the matter, Susan? Can’t bear to see your cash cow ride off into the sunset?”

“Don’t be such a conceited bitch. I’ll survive—I have plenty of other clients. That’s not what this is about.”

“What is this about?”

“Penelope, we’ve been together for over thirty years. I’d like to believe that I’m more than just your agent, that I’m also a friend.”

The lines on Penelope’s face softened. “You are a friend.”

“Then tell me what’s going on with you.”

Penelope looked away and pulled on her ear. “You’re not that kind of friend.”

Susan pulled back, absorbing the blow. “Fine, at least tell me why you wrote the book we’re releasing tomorrow as your last book. You’ve solidified your place in the annals of prominent writers by churning out nothing but cozy mysteries. The characters you’ve created are beloved. You’re known in the industry as the queen of the plot twist. So, why on Earth did you switch to non-fiction, and a true crime book at that?”

Penelope’s attention returned to the gown on her lap. “You know why.”

“No, I don’t. What I do know is it’s about murders that happened in your hometown when you lived here as a kid. Sure, the tragedy was never solved and these kinds of novels are common. However, yours is mediocre at best. A few salacious bits of gossip and a tired take on how the murders ripped the soul from this small town. Even that title, *Malignant Doubt*. The critics are going to have a field day with that. There’s nothing truly revealing in the book, no new theories or suspects, nada. It shouldn’t be any surprise that the preorders have been disastrous.”

“Why don’t you tell me what you really think, Susan?”

“I’ve never misled you about the way I feel about this book. It’s a huge mistake. It can only tarnish the sterling reputation you’ve cultivated over the years. Everyone is already wondering why we haven’t sent out advance review copies like we always do. Our long-time relationship with Trent and Monolith Publishing is the only reason it’s being published in the first place.”

“That and the seven hundred fifty million books I’ve sold for them, you mean?”

“Yes, there’s that. But Trent is still unhappy.”

Penelope laughed. “Trent is never happy. That man was born with something pointy up his ass and has never removed it. I’ve never liked him since he took over the business from his father five years ago. He’s a conceited prick.”

Susan raised a brow. “Is he why you’re doing all this?”

Penelope shook her head. “He’s irrelevant.”

“He’s not irrelevant, and he has a point, Penelope. Holding back that final chapter was unprofessional.”

“That was unavoidable. The book stands on its own without it.”

“How would anyone know? You’ve not let anyone see it.”

“I suggest you focus on the book as it is and not worry about anything else.”

“Obviously, that’s all we can do at this point, but both Trent and I believe there are details in that last chapter that totally justify the book’s existence, but something made you change your mind. I’m not sure why you would do that, because it clearly handicapped the book. That’s what Trent is upset about. What’s done is done, but why keep it a secret is all I’m saying?”

“You and Trent have been reading fiction for too long. The last chapter was just some statistical crime data I combined with my commentary on negative trends in the US. I decided it was too preachy and removed it.

“I don’t believe you, Penelope.”

“I couldn’t care less.”

“Why is this book so important that you’d throw everything away? You really want this to be your swan song?”

“You’ll understand everything after the launch tomorrow.”

“That’s another thing. Why did you change everything at the last minute and want the event here in Willow’s Bane? I get that this is where everything in the book took place, but the local bookstore is so tiny it can’t possibly accommodate everybody, and I’m not getting a very welcoming vibe from the locals.”

“This is the only place that it makes sense, and you’ll understand that tomorrow.”

“Christ, is that going to be your response to everything now? *You’ll understand after the launch?*

What are you going to say *then* that you couldn’t put in the book? When did you get so secretive?”

“I’m an open book, Susan, you know that.”

“You certainly used to be.”

The two women regarded each other, one looking confused, the other resolute.

Susan rose from the couch. “I’m tired of banging my head against the wall and I think I’ll turn in. Let me just say one last thing. It’s not too late, you know. We can publicize *Malignant Doubt*, let it run its course, then go back to writing what you’re good at. I’ll just tell everyone that you were in a rut and needed a change of pace. We can even look for a new publisher if you want. But retirement is off the table for now. What do you say?”

A knock on the hotel room door interrupted Penelope’s response.

“What I say is good night, Susan. Would you mind letting in whoever is at the door? It’s probably Willa.”

Susan sighed, looking deflated. “Good night, Penelope. Breakfast tomorrow?”

“I’ll meet you in the lobby at nine.”

“See you then,” Susan said as she disappeared around the corner. A few seconds later she called,

“Penelope, there’s someone here for you.”

Penelope rose and headed for the door. Susan was still there conversing with a young woman with curly hair who was wearing a polo shirt bearing the hotel's name. The new arrival was holding a paperback copy of Penelope's latest mystery.

"One of your fans," Susan said before walking away.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Miss Highsmith. I know you must be terribly busy. I'm the night manager here at the hotel and... well... I'm a huge... huge fan of yours. I've read all your books, most of them more than once. Never in a million years did I think I'd ever meet you in person, but here you are."

Penelope displayed one of the brightest smiles in her arsenal. "Here I am, indeed. What's your name, darling?"

The woman returned the smile. "Belinda. Belinda Ferguson."

"Well, Belinda, I'm always happy to meet a fellow book lover."

"Oh, that I am, especially yours. My boyfriend is always complaining that I have my nose buried in a book when I should pay more attention to him."

Penelope frowned. "How long have the two of you been together?"

"Just a couple of months."

"Then take my advice, honey, cut him loose. Any man who's that needy will only bring you trouble down the road. Trust me. Save yourself some time and heartache."

Belinda looked concerned. "Oh, I'm sure he was only joking."

“He may have let you believe that, but men have a way of camouflaging their true feelings with humor or witty repartee. But it only works on the naïve, so don’t be naïve, Belinda. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Belinda replied, although her expression made it clear she wasn’t so sure.

“I’m guessing from that book in your hands that you’re wanting an autograph?”

“Oh, yes, I won’t be able to make your book launch tomorrow because I have to be here, but I was wondering if it might not be too much trouble if you could sign my book for me?”

Penelope reached out and took the book from Belinda. “Do you have a pen?”

Belinda appeared stricken. “I forgot to bring one. I’m sorry, I’ll run back to the desk—”

Penelope put up her hand. “I have one inside.”

The author started back into the room, then paused, turning back to face Belinda.

“I can do you one better. Are you interested in the book I have coming out tomorrow? *Malignant Doubt*?”

Belinda’s eyes narrowed. “It’s true crime, right?”

“It is.”

“I don’t read much true crime, and honestly, I’ve never read any. But I’ll read anything written by you.”

Penelope smiled genuinely. “Hang on just a minute then,” she said, before disappearing into the room. A few minutes later, she returned with the paperback and an additional hardback book.

“I’ve signed them both. You’re only the second person to possess the new book. I hope you enjoy it.”

Belinda was beaming. “I’m certain I will. Thank you so much.”

“Anything for a fan. You have a good evening, Belinda.”

“You, too. Don’t hesitate to call the front desk if you need anything. I’ll be here all night.”

“Nice to know. Good night.”

As the door closed, the smile on Penelope’s face faded quickly. She put her back against the door, closed her eyes, and drew in a deep breath. When a single tear rolled down her cheek, she pushed herself away from the door and headed straight for the makeshift bar on the kitchen counter. She poured two fingers of bourbon from the already open bottle, downed it in one swallow, then quickly refilled. She contemplated the glass in her hand for several seconds before finally consuming the alcohol and placing the glass on the counter. Wandering around the room, moisture now covering both cheeks, Penelope seemed lost. She plodded over to the bathroom, stood in front of the mirror, and gazed at her reflection. When she reached for the tissue box, her eyes locked onto the prescription medicine sitting next to it. She continued to stare at one bottle for a long time.

Another knock at the door interrupted her trance. Penelope plucked a pair of tissues from the box, dried her eyes, then went to answer the door.

She opened the door and regarded the person standing there.

“I was wondering when you were going to make an appearance.”

