

## PROLOGUE

JIM TURNED the knob on the gas stove. The deafening explosion thundered throughout the house creating an immense fireball engulfing the kitchen, living room, and baby's bedroom. The tremendous force tossed Jim against the wall, knocking him unconscious. He awoke to Anna's cries as smoke billowed through the house. "My God, the house is on fire! What happened?"

Staring in shock at his charred arms, Jim's senses ignited as the excruciating pain tore through his battered body. After lightly touching his throbbing face, he winced while closing his eyes. Swallowing hard, he lifted his arm, trying to loosen an aching shoulder.

Anna's terrifying screams intensified. *I must get to my daughter.* "I'm coming, sweetheart. Daddy's coming!" He struggled to his feet as a burst of adrenalin numbed the intense pain. Still unsteady from the blast, he braced himself against the wall and caught a glimpse of the living room. He watched in misery as various family pictures adorning the large bookcase disintegrated one by one in the blaze. Pushing himself forward, he staggered toward Anna's room. Looking inside, his face twisted in horror as he yelled, "Oh no, my baby!"

Anna's crib was on fire! The searing inferno surrounded her, forming an inescapable death trap. Even though Jim had never seen her take a step, she stood in the middle of the crib, crying hysterically. Her little arms flailed about as if she were trying to make the fire disappear.

The flames surged, causing her to collapse into the fire laden bars of the crib. She easily crashed through and tumbled to the floor. While falling, the lacy nightgown caught fire setting her ablaze. Anna's horrifying screams amplified and pierced Jim's heart as only a loving parent could know and feel.

"No!" Jim wailed. He grabbed a nearby blanket and slapped at the flames as Anna thrashed about on the floor. Finally, he tossed the blanket over her and wrapped it tightly to smother the fire.

"*Mama,*" she cried out with as much force as her little lungs could endure. Although muffled by the blanket, her powerful screams reverberated throughout Jim's trembling body. "Hold on, sweetheart, Daddy's here."

Cradling her in his arms, he ran back into the kitchen. The fire now fully engulfed the living room blocking their escape, and the intense smoke made it difficult to see and breathe. He stared at the kitchen window, but it was much too small. “Damn!” he cursed. “We’re trapped.” Jim placed a loose end of the blanket over his mouth and nose, realizing if he were overcome by the smoke, they would die.

Loud crackling and popping noises were prevalent throughout the house as the fire roared in full force ravaging everything in its path. His body wavered while stepping back to avoid the onset of seething flames lapping at his legs. Bumping into the doorway of Anna's room, he turned and watched her crib collapse into a worthless pile of burning embers.

“God, please don't let us burn to death,” he pleaded while looking upward. Lowering his head to the blanket, he held it there, sensing this might be his last chance to embrace his daughter before they perished.

A slight whistling noise caught his attention. “What’s that?” Looking up, his eyes widened as he could see smoke rushing around the rear of the wall unit in Anna’s room. “The window!” he yelled.

Behind the wall unit was a low-lying window. Sharon knew that someday Anna would be tall enough to climb out, so she had Jim position the unit as an obstruction.

His lungs ached and he coughed violently as the thick smoke continued to displace the life-giving oxygen with its poisonous vapor, but he pushed himself on to fight for their lives. With one hand, he reached up and pulled over the wall unit. It crashed to the floor spewing toys and pictures about. He raced over to the partially opened window and struggled to lift it higher, but years of accumulated dirt left it stuck in that position.

The flames were now only seconds away from consuming them. He snatched a musical snow globe from the floor and threw it with all his might. When it smashed the window, the loud rupture hurled glass everywhere. Dense smoke poured through the large opening, caused by the instant release of toxic air. When the pressure equalized and visibility cleared, he climbed out carrying his baby to safety.

Faint sounds of wailing sirens could be heard off in the distance, as Jim collapsed on the front lawn still holding Anna. A few concerned neighbors rushed to his aid, while others came running toward the burning house.

Jim's face and arms were blackened from the smoke, and most of his hair was reduced to stubbles. He inhaled long, deep breaths, trying to cleanse his lungs of the menacing fumes. The anxiety of the fire and the ultimate escape acted as a decongestant to clear his chronic sinus problems. He never knew the smell of fresh, vibrant air could be so sweet and extraordinary.

"I called the fire department!" one of Jim's neighbors yelled.

"Call the paramedics, too. My daughter's been *burned!*"

Gruesome thoughts of Anna's condition sifted through his mind while removing the smoke-filled blanket. Her cries were now quieted as shock settled in, but she groaned little agonizing whimpers when he moved her. The ever-increasing repulsive odor of burnt skin turned his stomach, but he continued. Seeing part of her face, his initial thought was favorable, but after removing the entire blanket, the lines on his face deepened in anguish at the sight of her severely burned neck and shoulder.

Anna's body quivered as she stared at her father with lifeless eyes.

Jim's breathing weakened before his eyelids fluttered and he passed out.

## CHAPTER ONE

THE GRADUAL RISE of the early morning sun directed a small light beam through the partially opened window blinds of Sharon's bedroom. She awoke to the sun's warmth on her face. Her entire body ached. "What time is it?" she whispered while massaging her head and neck.

The surroundings appeared obscure as she scanned the bedroom of her meagerly furnished apartment. The diminutive clock on the wall hung in plain view, but she couldn't distinguish its features. The tiny bedroom seemed quiet, but even the mundane sounds, like the slight rattle of the blinds as a gentle breeze passed through the open window, tormented her.

Sharon tried to rise, but her languid body just wouldn't respond. Eventually, she pushed herself up and staggered across the room, her aching head feeling as if it would burst with each step.

"What's that awful taste?" she mumbled while smacking her lips and opening the medicine cabinet for some toothpaste. After brushing, she splashed some cool water onto her face, and allowed the rejuvenating moisture to flow down inside her nightgown. She arched her neck, so the last few refreshing droplets could slide down her listless body. *Oh, that feels so good.*

Staring at the mirror, she turned her head from side to side and sighed. *God, I'm a mess. Not only do I feel terrible, but I look terrible, too. Maybe a nice, long shower will revive me.*

She slid open the glass door of the shower enclosure, reached inside and turned the hot water faucet on full force. While the water warmed, she undressed. Unbuttoning the nightgown challenged her trembling fingers, so she pulled it up over her head and tossed it toward the clothes hamper. It missed the ample opening and floated to the floor.

Sharon welcomed the watery massage as the revitalizing liquid cascaded down her twenty-nine-year-old, tall shapely body. Being a scant few pounds overweight didn't bother her, because she wore it well. Her curvaceous figure enticed many a roving eye, so the subtle additional weight only enhanced her allure. She justified carrying the extra weight in case she got sick, but it was simply an excuse to indulge in her number-one passion; chocolate.

Even with a candy obsession, her beautiful pearly-white smile would leave many beauty contestants envious. Sharon's complexion looked and felt silky smooth, and she never exposed her lily-white skin

to the sun for any extended period. A long line of Scottish ancestry contributed to her fair complexion.

Depending on the surroundings, her emerald eyes would absorb the natural light and ignite with brilliance whenever she smiled. A beautiful, captivating woman, Sharon never flaunted her loveliness.

“This is wonderful,” she whispered while rotating her aching head under the soothing spray. The pulsating shower awakened her senses, and the effects were stimulating. After a few minutes, the throbbing diminished and a calming ensued, allowing her mind to search for answers.

*What happened last night at Cam’s birthday party? I don’t know why I went; he’s such a jerk. She rolled her eyes. Why did I let myself get involved with another man, especially my boss? I’m still married! What am I doing with my life?* She shook her head in disgust.

*I remember feeling lightheaded after drinking one glass of champagne, so it just doesn’t make any sense. Why would I have such a terrible hangover? I don’t even remember driving home. She heaved a deep sigh. Oh well, maybe I have a touch of the flu. I’ll probably feel better after my shower.*

While rinsing off, the telephone rang. “Wouldn't you know it,” she muttered. After lifting a towel from the rack, she raced toward the telephone on the nightstand. By the time she arrived, the answering machine was playing the ‘leave a message at the beep’ tape. She picked up the receiver and switched the machine off. “Hello.”

“Sharon, this is Joyce. Do you know what time it is?”

She stole a quick glance at the clock. “Yes, it’s just after nine,” she replied while towel-drying her hair with one hand.

“So, are you planning on taking off today?” Joyce’s words dripped with sarcasm.

“What do you mean? It’s Sunday.”

“Sunday!” Joyce exclaimed. “Are you kidding?” She didn't wait for a response. “Today is Monday, babe. It starts the normal workweek and *you're* not at work. I guess you were much worse

off Saturday night than everyone thought. Do you remember my taking you home from the party and putting you to bed?"

Sharon's eyes widened. "Not really. I just woke up a few minutes ago and thought it was Sunday morning. My God! What's wrong with me? I must've slept all that time."

"Don't worry," Joyce replied. "I've done that before. It might be your body just catching up on some well deserved rest."

Sharon inhaled a deep breath. "I sure hope so. I bet it's all my stress catching up with me."

"That must be it."

"Well, let me get dressed, and I'll come in as soon as possible."

"Okay, but no need to hurry. Cam is tied up at a big meeting in the conference room with the 'suits' on mahogany row."

"Don't knock it," Sharon chided. "Someday you may get promoted and have an expensive desk of your own."

"That may happen sooner than you think. I'm getting another call, gotta go. See you soon, babe."

Sharon tossed on a business suit and hurried down the stairs of her second floor apartment. *Where's my car?* She lightly slapped the side of her head. *Hmmm, Joyce must have driven me home Saturday night in her car. What else can go wrong today?* She trudged back upstairs and called a taxi.

"Where to lady?" the homeless-looking cabby asked in a squeaky voice rivaling fingernails on a chalkboard.

"Downtown area," she said. "Prescott Incorporated on Seventh Avenue."

"Why don't you come and sit up here with me," he suggested while flicking his eyebrows and

patting the seat beside him. ‘It's much cooler next to the air conditioner.’”

Sharon made eye contact with him in the rear-view mirror. Seeing part of his face, she recognized he needed help in the hygiene department. Unshaven for days, his beard formed an irregular pattern and length of mixed black and gray stubble. What few teeth he had left were discolored and crooked, and his straight greasy hair appeared as if he combed it with his fingers. His short-sleeved faded shirt looked soiled and frayed. It probably needed ironing too, but she couldn't tell because it fit so tight to his flabby body. With his window partially down, she got a disgusting whiff of his manliness. He tried to mask his offensive body odor with a cheap men's cologne, but the combination of smells only made it worse.

“No, that’s okay,” she replied giving him a condescending look. “Just pay attention to your driving and please hurry. Could you wind up your window, too?” She wrinkled her nose and waved a hand to clear the air.

As he drove, the loud squawk of the cab radio reverberated throughout the car. After tolerating it for awhile she asked, “Can you please turn that down a little?” She rubbed her forehead. “I have a bad headache.”

He didn’t reply but reached over and adjusted the volume control.

“That’s much better, thank you.”

Now relaxed, she stared out the window and drifted into a melancholy daze. *Less than a year ago, my life was so different. I loved staying home taking care of my family. However, on that one fateful day everything changed.*

\* \* \*

Noon Sunday, November 27, 1995  
(Approximately eight months earlier)

Sharon lived in San Diego, California, with her husband and nine-month-old daughter. Before they met, she worked full time as a department store sales clerk for three years after high school. After saving enough money, she decided to only work part-time so she could attend college, and in 1992, graduated from San Diego State University with an accounting degree. Within a few weeks, she landed a position in the comptroller's office of a small manufacturing company. There she met Jim, fell in love and they married a year later. Soon thereafter, she quit work in anticipation of having a child, a beautiful baby girl they named Anastasia; Anna for short.

Anna was the light of their life. Jim often came home for lunch just to hold his precious little princess. Anna's curly, fine, blond hair coupled with her deep, dark-blue eyes left everyone singing the praises of her childish beauty.

One Sunday afternoon, Sharon's best friend, Katie Moss dropped by and suggested just the two of them go out for lunch. Katie had a son named Thomas, who was born on the same day as Anna. Although Sharon and Katie saw each other almost daily, they seldom shared time together alone.

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Katie was an extra special person; a devoted wife, mother and a good friend to everyone. Being the supreme optimist, she only saw the good in everything and everybody. She always remained upbeat and sustained the energy level of a top athlete. Being the ultimate handyman, Katie could fix or do just about anything around the house. Mowing lawns, car oil changes, wallpapering, electrical repairs, retaining walls, leaky faucets, she could do it all. Many of the neighborhood men would willingly come to her for advice when they were about to embark on a home-improvement project. Amazingly, she maintained her femininity, and once her tomboy work-clothes were shed, she could transform her tall, wispy, body into an attractive woman.

Although Sharon and Katie were quite different, their personalities meshed perfectly. They became fast friends from the first day they met and were inseparable.

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Sharon felt hesitant at first, but Jim convinced her otherwise. “Go ahead out and have some lunch. It’ll be fun, and you deserve some quality time for yourself. You’re stuck here every day with Anna.”

Sharon placed her hand on Katie's arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Okay, let’s do it. Give me a minute to change, and I’ll be right with you.”

While she changed, Katie engaged Jim in some small talk. “Is Anna sleeping?”

"Like a baby," he replied with a sheepish grin. They locked eyes for a moment and then both of them laughed out loud. Jim clapped his hands, applauding his subtle, yet clever humor. “What's Don doing?”

“Oh, you know my husband. He has to play golf at least one day every weekend; thinks its good therapy.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “Do you agree?”

Katie shook her head. “It's only good therapy if he plays well, and I might add, that isn't very often.” They laughed again.

Sharon peeked out from the bedroom. “Do you think I'll need a light sweater, Katie?”

“No, it's really nice outside.”

“Okay, let me check Anna before we leave.”

Katie followed her through the kitchen and into the baby's room. The living room and Anna's room were adjacent to the big country-style kitchen. A regular doorway separated Anna's room from the kitchen, but there wasn't a wall between the kitchen and living room. The joining of the living room carpeting and the kitchen tile provided the distinguishable separation between the two large rooms.

Being an older home, the floor plan seemed odd and old-fashioned, and probably why their home was affordable.

Jim switched on their new forty-five inch big screen television set and settled into his favorite easy chair to watch a professional football game. They didn't watch much television, but Jim loved sports and always wanted a big screen, so Sharon reluctantly agreed. Today, the Raiders were playing the Chargers and since Jim's brother lived in Oakland, they always had a wager when their favorite teams played one another. Just a few bucks to make it interesting, but more importantly, each of them wanted the bragging rights.

Sharon and Katie were engrossed in girl talk as they made their way from Anna's room to the front door. Before leaving, Sharon turned back toward her husband. "Good-bye, honey. Anna's still asleep, but you can feed her when she wakes up. There's a bottle in the fridge."

Jim waved good-bye without looking up. "Have a good time you two. I love you."

Sharon blew a kiss in his direction. "I love you, too."

Jim peeked around the television set and gave a sly grin. "I was talking to, Katie," he said while pretended to be serious.

Sharon and Katie laughed as she closed the door.

After a few minutes into the game, Jim heard his daughter stirring in her crib. Anna seldom cried when she awoke from her afternoon nap. She would just entertain herself by playing with her stuffed animal and talking gibberish. Anna couldn't say many words, but she was fast building a repertoire of funny sounds and squeals. Sometimes she would pull herself up by holding on to the crib rail. It would take her several attempts, but once standing, she would babble away as if she were bragging about her triumph. At nine months old, it wouldn't be long before she could walk on her own and learn more words.

Jim decided to check in on her, so without taking his eyes off the television, he got up and walked backward toward her room. He paused for a moment at the doorway until a commercial break and

then rushed inside.

“Is Daddy's little girl awake?” he asked in baby talk.

Anna's room was decorated in a feminine, infant theme. The light pink wallpaper was garnished with colorful Raggedy Ann dolls, each one a different size and in a different pose. The old-fashioned, solid wooden crib was situated in the middle of the room. Jim found it at a garage sale and with his woodworking skills, knew he could transform it into a classic piece of furniture. Sharon provided the final feminine touches with a new mattress and a lacy skirt surrounding the bottom part of the crib. When they finished, it turned out to be the main conversation piece in the house. Also at the garage sale, Jim bought a number of brand new infant outfits and sleepwear. The elderly lady selling the clothes said they were purchased many years ago for her own baby daughter, but she never used them. She stored them in her old cedar chest, hoping some day to have a granddaughter, but unfortunately her daughter delivered all boys.

Jim stood by the edge of Anna's crib and smiled as he admired his daughter. “Are you hungry?” he asked while raising his eyebrows, half expecting a response. Without getting an answer, he cocked his head to think. “How about having a nice, thick, juicy steak?” He patted his stomach. “No, you had that yesterday.” His eyes widened and he snapped his fingers. “I know, how about a pizza?”

Anna grinned her one tooth smile and blurted out a few funny squeals.

He translated her gibberish. “You want a beer too, huh? Okay, I'll be back in a jiffy.”

While watching the game from the kitchen, Jim switched on a stove burner and adjusted it to a low flame. Opening the refrigerator door to retrieve her bottle, he spotted some leftover fried chicken. *Maybe I'll join my daughter and have some lunch, too.*

Just then, the football announcer yelled, “He's got it! He's on the forty, the thirty, the twenty!”

Jim tossed the plate full of chicken onto the kitchen counter and raced into the living room. As he rushed past the stove, he unknowingly caused the burner flame to extinguish.

“All right,” he exclaimed as the Chargers were about to score a touchdown. Jim imitated a running back dodging would-be tacklers, while witnessing the final ten-yard sprint down the sideline. He leaped into the air, pretended to share high fives with his imaginary fellow teammates.

After calming down and returning to his easy chair, he watched the various replays, each one showing the touchdown from a different camera angle. They were all in super slow motion so he could relish the moment. “That's an easy five bucks I'm going to win from my brother,” he boasted.

When the television announcers finished their accolades and cut away for the usual lengthy commercials, he took the opportunity to finish preparing lunch. Passing by Anna's room, he heard her fussing. *Oh no, I bet she needs changing.*

Playfully waving the air with his hand, he asked, “Did you stinky-poo?” He had to ask because of his chronic sinus problems, which sometimes left him at a distinct disadvantage when Sharon and he were trying to decide who should change her.

Jim picked up Anna and carried her over to the changing area. “Well, I think we'd better get you cleaned up before we do lunch together. Daddy can't smell, but I bet you can.”

She clapped her hands and smiled when he started to remove her diaper.

Jim removed the baby powder, wipe towels, diaper and a toy from the shelf. “Thank goodness Mommy is neat and organized, so Daddy could easily find everything. Here, play with the rattle while Daddy changes you.”

Jim turned his head while removing Anna's diaper. “Whoa, what did you eat?” he asked with a wrinkled face. “Daddy's glad he can't smell this mess,” he said while choking back his gag reflex.

After wiping her behind, he aligned the fresh diaper under her bottom. “Okay, Daddy has a fifty-fifty chance of getting this on right.” Half way through and noticing the Velcro part was on backwards, he stopped and shook his head. “Sorry sweetheart,” he said with a pitiful smile. “I got it wrong. We're going to have to do it over, but at least Daddy didn't say any bad words this time.” She laughed as he tickled her tummy with his finger.

“There, all finished. It’s not a perfect fit like Mommy does, but at least it’s on straight. I bet you smell good now,” he said while lightly tossing Anna in the air. She giggled when he caught her. He tossed her a few more times before putting her back into the crib. “Now, I’ll get us some lunch.”

Returning to the kitchen, he stared at the empty stove top. *I thought I put a bottle on already.* He scratched his head. *I guess I forgot.*

All this time, noxious gas continued to ooze from the unlit burner, filling the kitchen with its lethal vapors. On this particular day, Jim couldn’t smell anything and was oblivious to the fumes accumulating everywhere.

Jim opened the refrigerator and removed one of Anna’s bottles. As he moved toward the stove, he checked to make sure the lid was on tight. The pots and pans were stored in the cupboard to the right side of the stove. After removing a pan, he started toward the sink to fill it with water, but first stopped to turn on a burner. The igniter touched off the accumulated gas and a huge explosion rocked the house.