

CHAPTER ONE

Sunday began like any other lazy weekend morning for Sharon and Jim Nogal.

Their newly purchased home in the central area of San Diego had been built in the 1930's, but the middle-class neighborhood of preserved vintage homes remained a desired area to live. Although most of the homes were small and lacking of architectural flair, the pleasurable Southern California weather contributed to the plush lawns and healthy vegetation fronting each home, displaying a warm and inviting charm.

Sharon felt this area was a perfect place to raise their baby Anastasia—Anna for short. A few months before their baby was born, Sharon and Jim decided she would quit her accounting job to stay home and care for their daughter. Maybe, if and when they had more children, she and Jim could look for a larger place, but for now, this was ideal.

Jim looked forward to this sunny November day in 1995 because the San Diego Chargers were playing the Raiders, but it was more than just a team rivalry. Since Jim's brother lived in Oakland, the two of them always had a wager when their favorite teams played each other. Just a few bucks to make it interesting, but, more importantly, each wanted the bragging rights.

Sharon wasn't much of a football fan, but planned on helping her husband cheer on the Chargers to victory, that is, until her best friend Katie Darrow stopped by. Katie lived a couple doors down from them and had a son, Thomas, who was born the same day as Anna. Though Sharon and Katie had long been friends, the coincidence of their babies' births created an even stronger bond.

"I have a free afternoon," Katie said. "I finished replacing our rain gutters and my mom's watching Thomas. Any chance you and I could sneak away for a bite of lunch and do some shopping? I don't remember when we've had some time alone together."

Sharon glanced at Jim and raised her eyebrows. "What do you think?"

"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 a hand on Katie's arm and gave it a squeeze. "Okay, let's do it. Give me a minute to freshen up, and I'll be right with you."

While waiting, 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 both 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 it's good therapy."

"Do you agree?"

Katie shook her head. "That's only if he plays well, and I might add, that isn't very often." They laughed again.

"Why didn't he stay home and help you with the gutters?"

Katie wrinkled her face. "I wanted it done right. As you know, he has trouble changing a light bulb."

Sharon straightened her collar as she walked out of the bedroom. "Katie, do you think I'll need a light sweater?"

"No, it's really nice outside."

"Okay, let me check Anna before we leave."

Katie followed Sharon through the open kitchen into the baby's room.

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 various poses. An old-fashioned,

solid wooden crib was situated near the middle of the room.

“I love what you guys did to this crib, especially the lacy skirt surrounding the bottom part.” Katie whispered. “I never find buys like this at garage sales.”

“That’s not the half of it. The elderly lady selling the crib *gave* us some clothes she bought many years ago for her own baby daughter, but never used them.” Sharon pointed at her sleeping daughter. “That nightgown is one of the items she gave us. Isn’t it adorable?”

Katie nodded and frowned. “Sometimes I wish I had a little girl to dress up. It’s all jeans and tee shirts for boys, even as a baby.”

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 toward her husband, who was engrossed in the pre-game show. “Good-bye, honey. Anna's still asleep, but you can feed her later. There’s a bottle in the fridge.”

Jim waved good-bye without looking up. “You two have a good time, I love you.”

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

Jim peeked around the television set with a sly grin and a gleam in his eyes. “I was talking to Katie,” he said, pretending to be serious.

Both women laughed as Sharon closed the door.

A few minutes into the game, Jim heard his daughter stirring. Anna seldom cried when she awoke from her afternoon nap. She would just entertain herself by playing with a stuffed animal and talking gibberish. Anna couldn’t say many words, but she was quickly building a repertoire of funny sounds and squeals. Sometimes, she would pull herself up by holding on to the crib rail. It usually took 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.

Without taking his eyes off the television, Jim got up and walked backward toward Anna’s room.

He paused for a moment at the doorway waiting for a commercial break and then rushed inside.

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

Jim leaned over Anna’s crib and smiled as he admired his daughter. “Are you hungry?” he asked, raising his eyebrows, half expecting a response. Without getting an answer, he cocked his head. “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 keeping an eye on the game from the kitchen, Jim switched on a stove burner and adjusted it to a low flame. He opened the refrigerator door to retrieve her bottle and spotted some leftover fried chicken. *Maybe I'll join my daughter and have some lunch, too.*

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

Jim tossed the plate of chicken onto the counter and raced into the living room—not seeing the burner flame extinguish as he rushed past the stove.

“All right,” he exclaimed as a Charger player raced toward the end zone. Jim imitated a running back dodging would-be tacklers, while vicariously living the final ten-yard sprint down the sideline. He leaped into the air and pretended to share high fives with his imaginary fellow teammates.

Returning to his easy chair, he watched the 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, Jim returned to the kitchen. Passing by Anna’s room, he heard her fussing. *Oh no, I bet she needs changing; not looking forward to this.*

Fanning the air with his hand, he asked, “Did you stinky-poo?” He had to ask because of his chronic sinus problems, which sometimes gave him a distinct advantage when it came to whether he or Sharon would be the first to notice that the baby needed changing.

Jim lifted Anna from her crib and carried her over to an area that Sharon set aside for changing diapers. “Well, I think we’d better get you cleaned up before we do lunch. Daddy can’t smell a thing, but I bet you can.”

She clapped her hands and smiled as he playfully tugged at her diaper.

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

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

He wiped her behind and 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, 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 already put water on to warm a bottle.* He scratched his head. *I guess I forgot.*

All this time, noxious gas oozed from the unlit burner, but Jim was oblivious to the fumes gathering everywhere.

He opened the refrigerator and removed one of Anna's bottles, checking to make sure the lid was on tight. The pots and pans were stored in the cupboard beside the stove. He retrieved a pan and then turned on a different burner. The igniter touched off the accumulated gas and a huge explosion rocked the house.

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?"

Jim stared in shock at his charred arms, and his senses ignited as the excruciating pain tore through his battered body. He lightly touched his throbbing face and winced as his eyes closed. Bewildered and unable to focus, he lifted his arm, trying to loosen an aching shoulder.

Anna's terrifying screams brought him to his feet with a burst of adrenalin that numbed the intense pain. *I must get to my daughter.* "I'm coming, sweetheart. Daddy's coming!" 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. He staggered into Anna's room, and 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 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 blanket and slapped at the flames a few times as Anna thrashed about on the floor. He then tossed the blanket over her, wrapping 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 clattered 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. He bumped into the doorway of Anna's room and watched her priceless crib collapse into a worthless pile of burning embers.

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

A slight whistling 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 replace the life-giving oxygen, 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 exposure and accumulated dirt left it frozen 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 toward the window. The loud rupture hurled shards of glass everywhere,

and the dense smoke poured through the opening. When the pressure equalized and visibility cleared, he climbed out carrying his baby to safety.

The wail of sirens could be heard off in the distance, as Jim collapsed on the front lawn still holding Anna. A few neighbors rushed to his aid, while others ran 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.

"I called the fire department!" a neighbor 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 encouraging, 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 through lifeless eyes.

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

CHAPTER TWO

(Approximately seven months later)

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.*

She stared in the mirror, and turned her head from side to side. *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 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-eight-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 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 some 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. Sharon lifted a towel from the rack and 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.

“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 the 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. She recognized he needed help in the hygiene department, and with his window partially down, she got a disgusting whiff of his body odor.

He tried to mask his offensive scent 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.” She wrinkled her nose and waved a hand to clear the air.

As he drove, the loud squawk of the cab radio resonated 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, but everything changed on that one dreadful day. I’ll never forget it.*