

# Baby Sins

## Chapter 1

Spring had finally arrived, at least for the day. The same thing had happened ten days earlier—blue skies, calm winds, temperature approaching sixty—yet it had been a cruel trick.

Winds had picked up from the northwest, pushing dark clouds spitting snow and sleet, blades of new grass shivering, shaking off the flakes. Bewildered robins wondered why they had been in such a hurry to come north. But spring had fought back, the sun now too high to allow the intrusion to continue. Except for heavily shaded areas, the lots and lawns had lost their snow cover. Mountains of snow still remained in the mall parking lots, however, tinted dark with dirt and sand, jagged and covered in mold, dying a slow death. Temporary streams leaked from the snow piles, their life slipping away, flowing across the lots and to the curbs before finally finding their way to storm grates or low spots where they formed blockades to walkers and joggers.

The thermometer said sixty, but the survivors of a long Minnesota winter climbing out of their caves would have sworn it was much warmer.

Maggie Braun had ventured out on the balcony of her small apartment, two miles north of the campus of St. Cloud State University (SCSU). She sat in a sagging lawn chair borrowed from her parents, never to be returned, textbook in her lap, water bottle on the ground next to her. Her long, wispy hair was the color of wheat, and she twisted the ends of it into her mouth as she studied. She had nibbled at her hair throughout high school. Her mother scolded her constantly about it, but Braun had persisted, saying it helped her focus. Her grades seemed to bear her out. The girl had received partial scholarship offers from several schools after her junior year, Maggie choosing the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities.

But those plans had changed in her senior year when her boyfriend, Blaine Meyers, had accepted a football scholarship to St. Cloud State, a small state school an hour north of Minneapolis. He had begged Braun to join him there, and Maggie had agreed. Her parents had been furious at the change.

Freshman year had gone well, Maggie making the Dean's list, her boyfriend getting playing time. But in the summer, things had changed. SCSU had announced it was dropping the football program. Braun had also discovered she was pregnant.

The young couple had fought, with Meyers deciding not to return to school, going to North Dakota to work in the oil fields instead. Their relationship had ended, and Braun's parents wanted her to take a year off from school, have the baby, and then give it up for adoption. Maggie refused. She liked school, and she wanted to keep the child.

And so, she had waddled her way through the winter on campus, living on her own, wondering more than once if her parents were right. But she never gave in.

Her parents had then tried to get her to take the spring semester off, saying she would miss too many classes when she gave birth, but Maggie would hear nothing of it. And the baby took her side, deciding to come just as spring break arrived. But it was hard.

Up all night, taking the baby to campus daycare while she was in class, having to express milk. She dragged through the days and nearly slept through class. She felt overwhelmed, lonely, crying through nighttime feedings.

But tonight, she felt a spark of energy for the first time since the birth of her baby, a boy she had named George, simply because she liked the name. And it was just too nice to study.

Maggie got up from her chair, walked inside her apartment, and laid her textbook on the counter. She walked over to the baby in the bassinet and saw the child's tiny eyes crack open. She picked him up and said, "Come on, George. We're going for a walk."

Five minutes later, Braun was pushing George in a stroller along the walkway that paralleled the river. Couples walked hand-in-hand while others jogged past her. A couple came by from behind, biking, calling out as they approached that they were passing on Maggie's right. Braun was deep into the beautiful evening and startled, pushing George off the path, then watched the couple on bikes continue on their way.

George, jostled as the stroller left the concrete walkway, fussed. The spark Maggie had felt was extinguished, a dark cloud seeming to roll in front of the setting sun for Maggie as the couple pedaled from view.

Maggie forced herself to continue on, and George quieted, but her mood did not lighten. Her pace slowed, and her thoughts drifted. Questions on how she would ever make it, if she would ever find someone now that she had a child, circled through her mind. She kicked herself for being so stupid to get pregnant, something she had done a thousand times.

*"How could someone so smart do something so stupid?"* her mother had said more than once.

She was paying little attention to what she was doing when the stroller hit a bump in the sidewalk, and the baby immediately protested again.

Braun had pulled even with a small park. A couple of benches were close to the river, a few picnic tables scattered under old oaks to her left. As the park moved away from the river, it backed up against a concrete retaining wall; the wall cracked and bulging in spots. A sidewalk cut through the park away from the river, leading to steps in the retaining wall, up to the sidewalk bordering Front Street that ran parallel to the river. A silver-haired couple sat on one bench, watching the

river pass, its water high from the spring melt. There'd be no flooding here, but folks along the Minnesota River to the south and west would not be so fortunate.

A woman sat reading a book at a table along the path, but otherwise, the remaining tables in the area were empty. The shadows from the oaks stretched over the path along the river like long fingers and seemed to bring a chill to the night with them.

George continued to fuss. He was hungry.

Maggie turned the stroller off the path, struggling with it on the uneven ground. The woman with the book looked up and smiled as she came by. Braun continued to the table farthest from the river, close to the retaining wall where she could nurse the baby with some privacy.

Dead leaves covered the ground by the picnic table, most damp and rotting, sticking to the stroller wheels. They came to a stop, and Maggie lifted the baby from the stroller, grabbing his blanket as she did, and sat at the bench.

George had only been part of her life for a few weeks, but feeding him had quickly become second nature. Braun lifted her sweatshirt, and her son's greedy mouth soon found the nipple. She draped a blanket over him and was glad to have the warmth of the small body next to her in the deepening shadows. They'd head back to the apartment as soon as he was satisfied.

"Hello."

Maggie's attention had been on her son, so she hadn't noticed the stranger approach. Her head jerked to the left, her eyes popping open.

"Oh my. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

It was the woman from the table by the path, holding her book in her left hand. She had dark hair, cut short and neat. Her clothes were casual, but nice. Braun guessed she was a professional woman, in her mid-thirties. Something about her seemed familiar.

“I saw you come by with the baby, and I just had to stop and have a look. I hope you don’t mind.” The woman had a friendly smile, kind, like her grandmother’s.

“Not at all.”

The woman sat opposite Braun, setting her book on the table. “Boy or a girl?”

“Boy,” Maggie replied. “George.”

“I love that name. Would you mind if I had a peek?”

Maggie was a little embarrassed but lifted the blanket for the woman to see her son.

The lady half-stood, leaning on the table, peering at George. “He’s darling. How old?” she asked as she sat back down.

“Thanks.” Braun covered the baby again. “Six weeks.”

“Is he a good baby?”

“Most of the time. He’s pretty much sleeping through the night.”

The woman focused on the baby for a moment before looking up at Maggie. “I’m sorry. I’m Jana.” The woman offered her hand.

“I’m Maggie.”

“It’s a beautiful night for a walk, isn’t it?”

“Finally.”

“I agree. It was a pleasure just to be outside for a while and not freeze,” Jana said. “I thought winter would never end.”

“Me, too.”

Braun had laid a hand on the table, and the woman reached across, putting her hand on top. “You poor thing. You had to go through the winter carrying around the baby, too. I hope your husband took good care of you.”

“I’m not married,” Maggie said. “My boyfriend and I split up.”

“Oh dear. I am so sorry.” A look of concern spread across the woman’s face. Both women were silent for a moment, then Jana said, “Do you live close by?”

“Not far. I have an apartment less than a mile from here.”

“Are you working?”

“No. I’m a student at SCSU.”

Jana brightened. “Good for you. But I bet you have your hands full with classes and a baby.”

“Yeah. It’s a little overwhelming at times.” Maggie checked on her son then looked at the woman across the table. She was nice, and it was nice to have someone to talk to. A woman with a baby didn’t fit into the college social scene.

“Are you in the young mothers’ program at the university?”

Braun shook her head. “Never heard of it.”

“You need to sign up,” Jana stated. “I volunteer there once in a while. They’ve got all kinds of resources for girls like you, and most importantly, they give you someone to talk to.” Jana proceeded to talk more about the program, her enthusiasm increasing as she did. As she finished, she looked at her watch. “You know what? It is still open for another forty-five minutes. You should get over there and sign up right now.”

“Oh, I think I should really get him home and into bed. It would be too late by the time I got home, anyway.”

“Nonsense,” Jana said. “Is he done feeding?”

Maggie checked. George’s eyes were closed, his mouth open. “Looks that way.”

“All right, then. My car is just up the steps. I’ll drive you over, and then get you back home before he even wakes up.” The woman slid off the bench, grabbed her book, and set it in the stroller. “I’ll take this, and you carry George. Come on.”

Before Braun knew what was happening, Jana had placed the stroller in the back seat of a silver Camry, an infant carrier already there. “Just put George in the carrier,” Jana said.

Maggie watched as the woman buckled George in and close the door before Jana’s hand was on her elbow, steering her to the front passenger seat. Then the woman hustled around the front of the car and hopped in.

As they pulled away from the curb, Maggie glanced back at her sleeping baby then asked, “Why do you have a baby carrier?”

Jana sighed. “I lost my baby recently. Miscarried, I’m afraid,” she replied as she watched the road.

“I’m sorry,” Maggie said.

Jana showed a tight grin. “Thanks.” She took the first left, and then the next right until they hit Third Street. After a right on Third, they proceeded over the bridge, and then over Highway 10, heading northeast.

The sun was gone, the lights of the Camry following Third for another two miles before turning left. Now in a wooded area, moving back toward the river, an occasional home provided the only light.

“Are you sure this is right?” Maggie asked.

“I know. But I guess the owner of the property gave the land to the university. They didn’t really know what to do with it. Almost there.”

The car slowed, the woman signaling for a right turn. They bumped slowly through the wash-outs and low spots on a single-lane gravel road, pines on either side, a black tunnel in the night. George remained quiet.

Braun could see nothing except the long branches that seemed to reach for them. She had just spotted what looked to be an abandoned house to their left when Maggie found her hand reaching for the dash as the car came to an abrupt stop. She turned to her left, the woman next to her a ghostly presence in the lights of the dash.

Jana held a gun.



