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# The Abortionist's Daughter

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PART ONE

# DECEMBER

# CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM WAS, Megan had just taken the second half of the ecstasy when her father called with the news.

Earlier that day, her roommate had bundled up and trudged out into a raging Front Range blizzard to buy two green clover-shaped pills: one for herself, and one for Megan, as a kind of pre-Christmas present. Natalie had meant to wrap them up in a little box. But the day got a little hectic, what with exams and all, so after dinner, when they were back in their dorm room together, Natalie simply dug in her pocket and took out the little pills and without any fanfare set them on the open page of Megan's biology text. "And don't wuss," she warned.

Megan screwed up her face. The green pills reminded her of those pastel dots you got when you were a kid, the kind you peel off a long strip of paper. She didn't have time for this tonight. She scooped up the pills and put them into a clay pinch pot that sat in the back corner of her desk. Lumpy and chipped, the pot looked as though someone had stuck his elbow into a ball of clay. Which is exactly what Ben, her brother, had done, eleven years ago. A major accomplishment, for Ben.

But Natalie wouldn't let the matter go, pointing out that they could start with just half. And so instead of studying for her biology exam as planned, Megan Thompson, pre-med freshman at the university, found herself giving in to something larger and decidedly more fun that evening. Not only that, but she gave in with no clue as to what had transpired earlier that evening two miles west, in the two-story stucco house she'd grown up in—the house that had been on the Home Tour three years in a row, the one that backed up to Open Space, with the model solar heating panels and the evaporative cooling system that kept the temperature inside a mere seventy-five when outside it soared above a hundred. She had no suspicions, no worries, no funny feelings that might have caused her to think twice, to resist the temptation and opt out of what she knew from experience would be another evening of all-night bliss. Forgetting about everything else—her exam, the argument with her mother earlier that morning, that last *very* strange e-mail from Bill—Megan placed half the pill on her tongue, washed it down with water, and waited.

That was at eight o'clock.

At eight-thirty they weren't feeling much different.

At quarter to nine Natalie wondered if they should take the other half.

And it was right after they split the second pill that the phone rang. Natalie recognized the number on Caller ID. "It's your mother again," she announced.

When Megan didn't reply, Natalie said, "I think you ought to straighten things out. Maybe she changed her mind. Maybe she'll buy you the plane ticket. I'm answering it." She picked up the phone, singing "Yell-*low*?" before even bringing the phone to her ear.

Seated cross-legged on her bed, Megan slumped against the wall. The reason she didn't want to talk to her mother was simple. That

morning they'd argued over whether or not Diana would buy Megan a ticket to Mexico for spring break. Mean things were said—by both of them—and Megan shuddered when she recalled how pleased she'd felt with that last wicked remark about killing babies. Why did it make her feel so good to make her mother feel so bad?

Speaking of feelings, the drug was kicking in and she was beginning to feel pretty good—so that when Natalie told her it wasn't her mother but rather her father on the phone, she felt a welcome surge of love and affection.

"That's my dad," she said fondly, "wanting to play the guy in the middle. He's always doing that, you know? Whenever Mom and I get into a fight, there he is, Mr. Mediator. It wasn't even a big fight," she went on. "He just wants everything perfect, since it isn't with him and Mom. Freaks him out to think that she and I—"

"Take the fucking phone," said Natalie.

Megan took the phone and cradled it to her ear. "Hi, Dad."

"Sweetheart," he began.

"It wasn't a major fight," she told him. "Did she tell you? A bunch of people are going to Mexico. I'll pay for the ticket, I'll pay for everything. I didn't mean to lay it all on Mom." She heard her father clear his throat but felt a rush of apology coming—not just for things said earlier that day but for all the wrongs she had committed over the course of her nineteen years.

"I was rude," she said. "I shouldn't have yelled at her. Jesus, it's Christmas. What was I thinking? I hate it when I yell."

"Megan," her father said.

Megan stopped. There was something black and buggy in his voice that made her heart skip. And it took her less than a second to realize why. It was the voice he'd used ten years ago, when he'd called her at summer camp with the news about Ben.

"Megan," he began.

Frank Thompson couldn't tell if it was the reflection of pool water bouncing off the windows, or the shriek of his daughter over the phone, or the flapping sound of the sheet as the paramedics covered his wife that made his legs begin to wobble and shake. All he knew was that the ground beneath him was falling out from under, and he had to get down, fast, or he was going to be sick.

He squatted, set the phone on the slate floor that Diana had chosen when she put in the pool, and covered his face with his hands. He listened to the pool pump as it sucked and squirted from somewhere underground, and breathed in the moist, chlorinated air that filled the solarium. A few feet away a young woman in a police uniform was conferring with the paramedics. Next to him lay Diana's peach-colored bathrobe, along with a pair of purple flip-flops with the darkened imprints of her heels.

A shiver passed through him, and he turned his gaze to the water in the pool, which continued to dance as though some ghost were out there sculling in the middle. It was a small elevated pool, framed in by blond birch panels—not much bigger than two hot tubs end to end, really, with a motorized current that allowed Diana to swim nonstop without having to turn. Although he hadn't wanted to put the pool in, he'd later conceded to one of his colleagues that it was a worthy investment, since it gave his high-strung wife a chance to come home and mellow out. After twenty years of marriage, he knew that a mellow Diana was a cohabitable Diana.

Frank lifted his head, and a sparkle of light caught his eye from underneath the ficus tree across the room. Broken glass, needly shards—and Frank cringed as he recalled how earlier that afternoon he'd thrown the glass across the room to get his wife's attention. It was wrong of him, he knew that. But after coming across the pictures

online—pictures that no father should have to imagine, let alone see—well, everyone has a breaking point, and it was the way Diana was so oblivious to the problem at hand, the way she assumed he was upset because she'd skipped out on lunch earlier that day: he felt his shoulders clench, and the glass just flew.

*Three clicks.*

It would seem that a man in Frank Thompson's position, with over twenty years' experience as a prosecuting attorney, would know better than to start tampering with things in a room with a dead person. A man in his position would get out of that room and call his own attorney. But Frank didn't have his wits about him at the moment, certainly not his professional wits, and all he could think was that broken glass would convey the wrong impression about his marriage. (Though *lord* it felt good to shatter a glass like that; the gratification was unmatched, like saying *shit* or *fuck* in front of small children.)

Rising stiffly, he walked over to a little poolside closet to get a broom and dustpan. Nobody seemed to notice him; the patrol officer was on her cell phone and the paramedics were conferring with each other. As if making up for all the times during their marriage that he hadn't cleaned up after himself, he knelt down and swept up the ficus leaves and shards of glass and emptied them into a wastebasket. He didn't want people to have the wrong impression.

Outside, a blast of grainy snow pelted the sliding-glass doors. Now the cop and the paramedics were kneeling beside Diana's body.

"That's not good," the cop said, glancing up. She was new on the force, blond and blue-eyed like someone straight off a farm in Minnesota; but she already had that bossy, black and white air that you find in cops, and older siblings. "Did you know about this?"

"Know about what?" asked Frank.

"Come see," said the cop. "If you get down, you can see better."

Reluctantly, Frank squatted. He hadn't looked at Diana since the

paramedics had arrived. They held the sheet away from her head, and Frank, who'd harbored the lay belief that maybe it was all a mistake, now forced himself to look.

For all the times he'd seen a dead body—and there were plenty, his having been with the district attorney's office for twenty-four years—nothing could compare to this. His wife's dark corkscrew curls fanned away from her face, Medusa-like. Her skin was white and waxy, her lips the color of plums. Her eyes stared up, flat and fishy. He looked away.

"What concerns us is this," the cop said, and she nodded to the younger of the two paramedics, a man with a long straggly ponytail. Gently taking Diana's head in both hands, he turned it slightly and splayed the hair above her ear.

"Right there," said the cop. "You see?"

What he saw made him choke. The bruise was huge and ripe and living, a fat, blue-gray slug in her tangled hair.

"Any idea how this happened?" the cop asked Frank.

Numbly Frank shook his head.

"Well, it's some bruise," the cop said. "Hard to imagine what could have made a bruise like that. And look at those knuckles."

Frank heard himself suggest that she'd perhaps fallen.

"Maybe it's that simple," said the cop, "but I'm calling the coroner."

Frank stared at the cop, and for the first time he recalled that on two separate occasions he'd had her on the witness stand; both times she'd not flinched when the defense attorney had implied she was a forgetful, inattentive liar.

"—crime scene from now on," she added. "Frank, you need to have a seat."

"You mean you think this wasn't an accident?"

"Frank," she said, "your wife is a national figure. There are a lot of people out there who don't like what she does."

"Could she have been swimming too fast?" the older paramedic asked. "Maybe she swam into the edge of the pool."

"This is two-four-oh-five," the cop was saying into her radio. "Where's Mark? I need backup *now*."

Frank just stared at the three of them.

"Or maybe she tripped and hit her head and fell into the pool," suggested the paramedic.

Frank couldn't answer. It wasn't sinking in. He looked at his wife's face. The night before, she'd been complaining about the frown lines between her eyebrows; now her forehead was perfectly smooth and unlined. The night before, she'd informed him that for the past five years she'd been coloring her hair without his knowing; now for the first time he noticed that, yes indeed, it was a shade darker.

He wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, how young she looked, but the words kept catching on little fishhooks in his throat. What had he said earlier that afternoon? Something about photo ops and Ben? *The great Dr. Duprey,* he'd said. Now he cringed, recalling his words, and he bent down and rested his cheek against hers, wanting to take back everything he'd said that afternoon.

He might as well have tried to take back his wedding vows.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her ear. "I'm so, so sorry."

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His name was Huck not because of any affinity his parents had for Mark Twain but for the color of his eyes, which reminded his grandmother of the huckleberries that flourished throughout Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where she'd grown up. Blue as a huckleberry pie, she'd said when she first saw the child. Blue as Lake Superior in October. And so Huck it was, even though his parents christened him Arthur Harold.

Only two people in the department knew his real name: Deb in

Payroll, and his partner, Ernie. Ernie was a happily married man who spent his weekends coaching Little League and watching his daughter play soccer, and he liked to tease Huck about his name. So where are your glasses, *Arthur*? he would say. Where's your bow tie, *Arthur*? But Ernie never let it go beyond their private company. At the department, with the rest of the guys, it was Huck, and nothing but.

Which Huck appreciated.

He and Ernie didn't see eye to eye on everything. They carefully avoided the subject of religion, for example, since Ernie was Catholic and the last time Huck had gone into any church was for his grandmother's funeral eight years ago. Yet they worked well together, for the simple reason that their thoughts consistently dovetailed, making every investigation move just a little bit faster. Which is not to say that they were equals. Ernie had a good ten years on Huck and clearly saw his role as that of mentor. "Trust your instincts, Arthur," he would advise, as though Huck had never thought of this himself. "Nine times out of ten, what you're looking for is staring you in the face."

Ernie's advice extended into the personal sphere as well. "Don't go looking for love," he'd warn. "It'll come looking for you." This he said while undertaking a near-mythic search himself by fixing Huck up with every single woman who crossed his path—colleagues, neighbors, friends, his wife's friends, even his dog trainer. It became a joke; as the social occasions mounted, Huck began asking for a dossier before the fact so that he and the woman could skip over the basics. It was well on its way to becoming a Very Bad Joke when Ernie introduced Huck to a woman from his wife's office named Carolyn, who upon meeting Huck made no comment whatsoever about either his name or his eyes. That was one year ago. This spring, when Carolyn's lease was up, Huck and Carolyn were going to move in together—a development for which Ernie had volumes of wisdom. "The key to a good relationship is you gotta have more than just good

sex," he advised Huck. "Do stuff together. Crosswords. Movies. Anything. Above all don't screw around. I guarantee you, complicating a good thing is a bad thing to do." As usual, Huck listened to all of this with the dutiful appreciation of a good son who needed a little advice now and then.

"And put your sunglasses on," Ernie would growl. "You're gonna kill people with those eyes."

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Tonight Carolyn was on her way to Minneapolis, because earlier that day, as the snowstorm raged, she'd received a phone call from her father, telling her that her mother had had a small stroke. Although her father assured her it was not that serious, nevertheless Carolyn felt bound to go back and help. And so late in the afternoon, as the snow continued to pile up, Huck drove her to the airport.

"I'm not ready for this, Huck," she said in the car.

Huck tried to be reassuring, but his words sounded generic and cowardly. This troubled him, because he prided himself on his ability as a cop to comfort people in frightening situations. Why not here? Why not now?

"You'll take care of the cats?" Carolyn was asking.

"I'll take care of the cats."

"And the mail?"

Huck reached over and took her hand. "Your mother is going to be fine," he promised.

"I'm sure I'll be back in a few days," she said, adding, "because I'm really not ready for this."

By the time he got back in town, it was after seven, and the snowplows were barely keeping up with traffic. He picked up some Chinese takeout, stopped at a 7-Eleven for orange juice and throat lozenges, then headed home.

Huck lived in a remodeled outbuilding that sat tucked behind a small neighborhood fire station. Originally used by the firemen to store worn hoses and whatnot, it had been Sheetrocked and painted but still occasionally smelled of mildew, which explained why Huck was able to rent it from the city at a reasonable price. (After living in the house for several years, he'd noticed something odd about the smell: it grew noticeably worse whenever a fire raged in the hills nearby. This he didn't like to ponder too much.) It also had a faulty heater that on these cold nights refused to kick off. Several times he'd mentioned it to the building manager, assuming that, since the city was paying for the utilities, they'd be financially motivated to fix it. Yet they didn't, and on nights like these he simply opened up the windows and let the heat blast out, an act of environmental lawlessness that could get a man banished in this town.

At nine o'clock he stepped outside for some air, and it was then that he experienced what would be the first in a series of odd coincidences that evening. The wind was blowing everything sideways in great angry gusts, and he was in the process of gauging how much snow had fallen, when he caught sight of a yellow VW Bug idling out in the parking lot of the fire station. The driver's window was down, and the driver seemed to be rummaging around inside. Without bothering with a jacket, he waded through the snow to see if whoever it was needed help. It was his nature; he was a cop.

As he approached the car, he was struck by a moment of recognition: the driver was the daughter of Frank Thompson over at the district attorney's office. She wouldn't have recognized him, because they'd never been formally introduced, but he'd been present at a swearing-in last year at which Frank had introduced the judge, and his wife and daughter were up there at the podium with him. Like mother, like daughter—the two of them looking so foreign, with their Arabian eyes and wild dark curly hair. Huck remembered how nervous everyone had been, worrying that Frank's wife, Dr. Diana

Duprey of the Center for Reproductive Choice, would take advantage of the opportunity to make a speech about the latest incident, in which their walkway had been coated with fresh tar. (Dr. Duprey, scheduled to perform a midterm abortion at eight-fifteen, had simply glopped through the sticky sludge as though it weren't there; upon reaching the door, she calmly removed her heavy Swedish clogs, left them by the door, and stepped inside.) But up there at the podium that night, Dr. Duprey had remained quiet. Frank made his speech, the judge got sworn in, and everyone went home happy.

Huck didn't envy Frank, being married to a woman like Dr. Duprey.

"Do you need any help?" he asked, bending down to the girl's level. She shook her head and mumbled something. He noticed her windshield was icing over and offered to get her some de-icer, but she refused that too. She seemed awfully jumpy, in fact, and he contemplated telling her he was a cop to put her mind at rest—but then he realized he didn't have any identification on him and why should she believe him, a man in a T-shirt who came wading out of nowhere through the snow on a cold dark night? He knew the kinds of things that could happen to a young woman alone with car trouble on a night like this.

Nevertheless he pressed, worried that she might drive off with poor visibility. She ignored him, though. As soon as she got a small circle cleared, she drove off with a quick pop of the clutch.

Fine, he thought. Not my problem.

Returning to his house, he unloaded clothes from the compact washer in the hall closet and stuffed them into the dryer above. He opened a beer and put on some music and settled down onto the sofa. It had been a long day, and he was looking forward to a day off tomorrow. He could get the oil changed. Do a little Christmas shopping, find something for Carolyn.

He was flipping through the channels when the telephone rang.

Now: Huck Berlin wasn't the spookable type. He didn't believe in ghosts and he didn't believe in ESP, and except for that strange thing with the mildew smell, he really didn't believe in crystals or seances or any of that New Age stuff this town was so full of.

Tonight, though, when he picked up the phone and heard Ernie informing him that Diana Duprey was dead—just minutes after her daughter had been stalled in his driveway with a fogged-up windshield—Huck felt an unmistakable chill run down his spine. He turned off the television.

"The abortion doctor?"

"That's right, my friend."

"How?"

"She drowned in her pool."

"They have a *pool*?"

"One of those little indoor jobbers. You swim against a current."

It sounded like Ernie was eating something. Huck opened the door to let more cold air in. "When?"

"We don't know exactly. Sometime after five this afternoon. Frank found her about eight-thirty."

"How can you drown in a pool like that? What'd she do, bonk her head?"

"Something like that."

"And they don't know how she did it—"

"—and that's why they called us," Ernie finished. "You got it. Anyway, the coroner's on her way over there now. What are you doing at the moment?"

"Laundry."

"Where's Carolyn?"

"Off to Minnesota."

"Why?"

"Her mother had a stroke this morning."

"Bad?"

"No. I just got back from the airport. Long day, bud."

"Well, not as long as Diana Duprey's. Pick you up in ten."

Huck hung up the phone and rubbed his eyes. Truth be told, he really wasn't a big fan of Frank Thompson's. It was a personal thing that had to do with an old case. Three years ago one Sally Templeton had been found dead in a frat house on a Sunday morning with a blood alcohol level of .38 and multiple semen stains on her legs. Huck and Ernie had gotten matching DNA samples from five different boys, but Frank wouldn't go forward because of one arguable screwup with chain-of-custody issues. Huck always felt that Frank's decision had had more to do with one of the frat boys being the son of a prominent businessman than any chain-of-custody issues; this was a huge mistake, in Huck's view, and it was compounded when the press started hinting that the police department couldn't be trusted to collect so much as a fingerprint without screwing up.

So there was no love lost between the two of them. Still, it was wrong to hold a grudge. And in the end, whatever the professional gripes, right now they didn't matter. Frank Thompson had lost his son a while back, a terrible thing, one of those kids with Down syndrome. And now to lose his wife, right before Christmas? Huck had seen stable, well-adjusted men at the height of their careers spiral into a ruin over things like this.

And the girl. What was she, a freshman in college?

He pulled a gray sweatshirt over his head and waited for Ernie.

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The Reverend Steven B. O'Connell got the news as he and his family were negotiating over the appropriate pose for the annual Christmas photo. Emotionally drained from his own day's unfortunate events, Steven was in no mood for a picture, but his wife Trudy had booked the photographer months ago. For their part, three of the four chil-

dren were disgusted with both parents for operating on the assumption that they'd be able to pose with smiles, for they all felt that the world at large would be better off if their respective siblings would go off and die in a plane crash. And Scott, the fourth, had his own set of problems—big problems, nasty problems—that made any notion of smiling into a camera seem ludicrous to all.

Steven took the phone call in his study. One of his friends was a reporter for the local newspaper, and he listened now as the reporter told him that Diana Duprey had drowned in her lap pool. Her husband had discovered the body. An autopsy had been requested. Did he have any comments?

"I don't understand," said Steven. "How did she drown in a lap pool?"

"Might have bonked her head. They don't know. But hey, people drown in hot tubs," the reporter said. "It's nothing new."

Steven sat down in a daze. "I just saw her this morning. She was fine." Trudy poked her head in. Steven waved her away.

"What, like you had coffee or something?" said the reporter.

"Or something," Steven said. "How do you know about this?"

"I'm outside the house as we speak," said the reporter. "Freezing my butt off, I might add. But they just carried out a body, and it wasn't Frank."

Trudy poked her head in again. This time Steven pivoted in his chair. On the wall behind his desk was a framed photo of himself standing alongside the Reverend Jerry Falwell, both wearing grins as wide as collection plates.

"So I was wondering if you had any comment," said the reporter. "On the record, as spokesman for the Coalition."

He was referring to the Lifeblood Coalition, an anti-abortion group Steven had founded six years ago. In the past two years the Coalition had stepped up its protests at Front Range abortion clinics; some suspected it was behind the bombing of a clinic down in Colo-

rado Springs last summer, which had left a twenty-three-year-old student in a wheelchair. Steven O'Connell, of course, denied any involvement and continued to maintain that his organization did not condone violence of any kind.

Right now Steven felt too stunned to say much of anything, let alone something for the record. But as spokesman for the Coalition, he groped for the right words.

"This is terrible news," he finally said. "Dr. Duprey and I had our obvious differences, but this is a terrible tragedy and I extend my heartfelt sympathies to the family. May the good Lord bless them with the strength and courage to get through the coming days and months."

"Some people in the Coalition have made threats," said the reporter. "Is this the work of an activist?"

If Steven had been less drained, he would have bolted up and vehemently denied the suggestion. As it was, he wearily reiterated his position that the Coalition did not operate in that manner.

"Some of your members do," said the reporter, referring to a young man who had gone to jail for firing three shots through another doctor's window a few years ago.

"We never condoned that," said Steven. "We do not condone the taking of any life—that of a fetus *or* a doctor."

"Some people think that if you kill the abortion doctor, it's a net gain for mankind," said the reporter.

"Well, that is not our group," said Steven.

From down the hallway came the sound of a scuffle. "Flamer!" someone yelled.

"You'll have to excuse me," said Steven.

"One more thing," said the reporter. "Did you have any kind of a personal relationship with Dr. Duprey?"

"Excuse me?"

"Were you having an affair?"

Steven was dumbfounded. Diana Duprey was certainly an attractive woman, with her bright smile, her jangly bracelets, and that wild mane of curly black hair. But to suggest—

"Don't you have better things to do?" he said icily.

"I was just asking," said the reporter.

"Well, you have my denial," said Steven. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have family obligations." He hung up the phone and swiveled around to find Trudy with her arms folded tightly across her large breasts. Behind her the photographer fussed with his camera.

"Send him home," Steven said wearily. "This is no day for pictures."

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The rest of the town wouldn't find out about Diana Duprey until the next morning, when big black headlines announced her death all over the state. Jack Fries, a local divorce attorney whose daughter Rose lay recovering in the hospital, learned about it on public radio, while shaving. Bill Branson, Megan's ex-boyfriend, got the official news when he walked past a newspaper machine; the size of the headline alone caught his eye. The chief of police, who'd been notified the night before but was unable to get over to the Duprey house because his son was spiking a fever of 104, immediately assigned their public relations person to the investigation full time. And Dixie LaFond, the receptionist at Diana's clinic, learned about it only when she arrived at the clinic at seven-thirty the next morning and found the building cordoned off with yellow crime tape.

"My goodness! What happened?" she asked the security man.

He raised his eyebrows. "You didn't hear? Why, somebody killed the abortion doctor."