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The Lies We Told

Written by Diane Chamberlain

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The Lies We Told

Diane Chamberlain

Maya

Every family has a story, told and retold so many times it seems firm and irrefutable. Etched in granite. Here are the bare bones of my family's story:

My parents were murdered by a masked stranger, who shot them in our driveway.

My sister, Rebecca, is beautiful, wild, coolheaded and fiercely independent. She needs no one to make her happy. She does, however, need danger.

I am sensitive, quiet, brilliant and fearful, in many ways my sister's opposite. I need safety, protection and a man who loves me.

More often than not, family stories turn out to be etched in sand rather than granite. Even the parts we think are true—even the parts about ourselves—crumble under scrutiny. These are the lies we tell everyone who knows us. These are the lies we tell ourselves.

Prologue

Maya

I KNEW THE EXACT MOMENT DADDY TURNED FROM THE street into the driveway of our house in Annandale, Virginia, even though I was curled up on the backseat of the car with my eyes closed. I was very nearly asleep, a half-fugue state that I wanted to stay in forever to help me forget what I'd done. The rain spiking against the roof of the car was loud, but I still heard the crunch of gravel and felt the familiar rise and fall as the car traveled over the portion of the driveway that covered the drainpipe. We were home. I would have to open my eyes, unfurl my aching fourteen-year-old body and go into the house, pretending nothing was wrong while the truth was, my world had caved in on me. Or so I thought. I had no idea that I was mere seconds away from the true collapse of my world. The moment that would change everything.

Daddy suddenly slammed on the brakes. "What the…"

I sat up, wincing from a sudden bolt of pain in my gut. In the glow of the headlights, I saw my mother running toward the car, her arms flailing in the air. I couldn't remember ever

seeing my mother run before. I'd never seen her look wild like this, her wet, dark hair flattened to her head, her dress clinging to her thighs.

My breath caught in my throat and I let out a soft moan. *She knows,* I thought. *She knows where we've been.*

My mother yanked the passenger door open and I braced myself for what she would say. She jumped into the car. "Drive!" she screamed, pulling the door shut. "In reverse! Hurry!" I could smell the rain on her. I could smell *fear.*

"Why?" Daddy stared at her, his profile a perfect silhouette—the wire-rimmed glasses, the slightly Romanesque nose—that would remain in my memory forever.

"Hurry!" my mother said.

"Why are you—"

"Just *go!* Oh my God! There he is!" My mother pointed ahead of us, and the headlights picked up the figure of a man walking toward our car.

"Who's that?" Daddy leaned forward to peer into the half-light. "Does he have on a…is that a ski mask?"

"Dan!" My mother reached for the gearshift. "Go!"

I was wide awake now, fear flooding my body even before the headlights illuminated the man's ice-blue eyes. Even before I saw him raise his arm. Even before I saw the gun. Instinctively, I ducked behind the driver's seat, arms wrapped over my head, but no matter how loudly I screamed, I couldn't block out the *crack* of gunfire. Over and over it came. Later, they said he only had five bullets in the gun, but I could have sworn he had five hundred.

My sharpest memories of that day will always be the blast of that gun, the ice-blue eyes, the silhouette of my father's face, the skirt of my mother's dress sticking to her thighs.

And my sister.

Above all, my sister.

1

Maya

I HAD PASSED THE ENORMOUS LOW-SLUNG BUILDING ON CAPITAL Boulevard innumerable times but had never gone inside. Today, though, I felt free and whimsical and impulsive. All the moms in my neighborhood had told me there were great bargains inside the old warehouse. I needed no bargains. Adam and I could afford whatever we wanted. With the income of two physicians—a pediatric orthopedist and an anesthesiologist—money had never been our problem. It wasn't until I stepped inside the building, the scent of lemon oil enveloping me, that I realized why I was there. I remembered Katie Winston, one of the women in my North Raleigh neighborhood book club, talking about the beautiful nursery furniture she'd found inside. Katie had been pregnant with her first child at the time. Now she was expecting her third. *I'll finally fit in,* I thought, as I walked into the building's foyer, where the concrete floor was layered with old Oriental rugs and the walls were faux painted in poppy and gold.

Every single one of the fifteen women in my book club had children except for me. They were always warm and welcom-

ing, but I felt left out as their conversations turned to colic and day care and the pros and cons of Raleigh's year-round school program. They thought I didn't care. Being a doctor set me apart from most of them to begin with, and I was sure they believed I'd chosen career over motherhood. Every one of them was a stay-at-home mom. Most had had short careers before getting pregnant, and a couple still did some work from home, but I knew they saw me outside their circle. They had no idea how much I longed to be one of them. I kept those feelings to myself. Now, though, I was ready to let them out. I'd tell my neighbors at our next meeting. I hoped I could get the words out without crying.

Today marked sixteen weeks. I rested my hand on the slope of my belly as I walked down the aisle on the far left of the building, past cubicles filled with beautiful old furniture or handcrafted items. I was safe. *We* were safe. Most people waited until the first trimester had passed to tell people the news, but Adam and I had learned that even reaching the twelve-week mark wasn't enough. I'd made it to twelve weeks and two days the last time. We'd wait four months this time, we'd decided. Sixteen weeks. We wouldn't tell anyone before then—except Rebecca, of course—and we wouldn't start fixing up the nursery until we'd passed that sixteen-week milestone.

Smiling to myself, I strolled calmly through the building as though I was looking for nothing in particular. Some of the cubicles were filled with a hodgepodge of goods, crammed so tightly together I couldn't have walked inside if I'd wanted to. Others were a study in minimalism: shelves set up just so, each displaying a single item. Some of the cubicles had shingles in the entryway to give the appearance of a shop on a quaint street corner instead of a small square cubby in a warehouse. Rustler's

Cove. Angie's Odds 'n' Ends. North Carolina Needlepoint. There were few other shoppers, though, and absolutely no one who appeared to be guarding the merchandise. If you wanted to slip a knickknack into your pocket, there was no one to see. No one to stop you. That sort of trust in human nature filled me with sudden joy, and I knew my hormones were acting up in a way that made me giddy.

I ran my fingertips over a smooth polished tabletop in one cubicle, then fingered the edge of a quilt in the next. I passed one tiny cubby that contained only a table with a coffeepot, a plate of wrapped blueberry muffins, a small sign that read *Coffee: Free, Muffins: $1.50 each* and a basket containing six dollar bills. I couldn't resist. I took two of the muffins for tomorrow's breakfast and slipped a five-dollar bill into the basket. I walked on, the irrational joy mounting inside me. People could be trusted to pay for their muffins. What a wonderful world!

I felt like calling Adam just to hear his voice. How long since I'd done that? Called him for no reason? I hadn't seen him before he left for the hospital that morning, and I'd spent the day seeing patients in my office. If all went well with Adam's surgeries today, he'd be home in time to go out to eat. We could celebrate the sixteen-week milestone together. The baby was due New Year's Day. What could be more fitting? The start of a new year. A new life for all three of us. Things would be better with Adam now. Ever since learning I was pregnant, there'd been a tension between us that we hadn't really acknowledged because we didn't know how to get rid of it. If I was being honest with myself, I had to admit the tension had been there much longer than that. Now, though, I was sure it would disappear. We'd talk at dinner that evening, our future finally full and glowing ahead of us. Maybe we'd make lists of names, something we hadn't

dared to do before now. Then we'd go home and make love—*really* make love, the way we used to before all our lovemaking had turned into baby making. Once upon a time, we'd been good together in bed. I wanted that back.

I saw a sign hanging from a cubicle several yards in front of me. *BabyCraft,* it read, and I walked straight toward it. This was the place Katie had mentioned, I was sure of it. The lemony scent grew strong as I walked inside the rectangular cubicle. It was filled with furniture, but there was order to the layout. White cribs and dressers and gliders on one side, espresso-colored cribs and changing tables and rockers on the other. I shivered with anticipation, unsure what to look at first. Tags hung from each piece of furniture, telling me the original pieces had been refinished to meet twenty-first-century safety requirements. Lead paint removed. Crib bars moved closer together. The pieces were exquisite. Although Adam and I had held back from turning one of the bedrooms into a nursery, we'd already planned everything to the final detail, lying awake at night, talking. How many men would take that much interest? It had been easier to imagine the mural we'd have painted on the nursery wall than it was to imagine the baby. That would change now.

I spent nearly an hour in the broad cubicle, typing notes into my BlackBerry about the furniture. Prices. Contact information for the BabyCraft shop owner. Everything. And finally, reluctantly, I walked on. I couldn't buy anything. Not yet. I wasn't ready to tempt fate.

I'd be nearly thirty-five when the baby was born. I would have preferred to have my first earlier, but I didn't care at this point. *My first.* There would be more to come, at least one more baby to use the furniture. Maybe two. *Maybe a houseful,* I thought, the giddiness returning.

★ ★ ★

Adam called on my cell when I walked into the house.

"Going to be a long night," he said. "Couple of emergency surgeries, and I'm it. You doing okay?"

"I'm great," I said as I slid open the back door to let Chauncey into the yard, spotting the four deer munching our azaleas a second too late. Chauncey tore down the deck steps, barking his crazy head off, and I laughed as the deer raised their indifferent eyes in his direction. They knew he wouldn't take a step past the invisible fence.

"What's with Chaunce?" Adam asked.

"Deer," I said, leaving out the part about the azaleas. Adam thought the deer were funny and beautiful until it came to the yard. "You'll get something to eat at the hospital?" I asked, knowing our celebration would have to wait until the following night.

"Right." He paused for a moment. "I'll be working with Lisa tonight," he said, referring to one of the surgeons who was a good friend of both of ours. "Can I tell her about the Pollywog?"

I smiled. The baby would have his last name—Pollard—and he'd started calling him or her "the Pollywog" a couple of weeks ago. I knew then that he was confident everything would go well this time. I felt the slightest twinge of anxiety over him telling Lisa, but tamped it down. It was time to let the world share our happiness. "Absolutely," I said.

"Great, My." I could hear the grin in his voice. "Let's stay up late tonight and talk until dawn, okay?"

Oh, yes. "I can't wait," I said.

I fed Chauncey and ate a salad, then went upstairs to sit in the room that would become the nursery. The only piece of furniture currently in the room was a rocker. That was one thing

we wouldn't need to buy, and if our battered old rocker didn't match the rest of the BabyCraft furniture, I didn't care. It was the rocking chair of my childhood. My mother had nursed and cuddled both Rebecca and myself in that rocker. It was one of the few pieces of furniture I owned that had belonged to my parents. Rebecca had none of it, of course. She lived in an apartment on the second floor of Dorothea Ludlow's Durham Victorian, and her furniture was slapped together from whatever she could find. She was rarely there and couldn't have cared less, but I wished we'd had the foresight to keep more of our parents' belongings. We'd been teenagers then, and furniture had been the last thing on our minds. It was only because the social worker had told us we'd one day appreciate having the rocker that we kept it, too numb to argue with her.

Sitting in the rocker, I imagined the BabyCraft furniture in the room. It would fit perfectly and still leave space for the mural on one wall. I rested my hands on my stomach. "What do you think, little one? Mammals? A Noah's ark kind of thing? Or fish? Birds?" *I'm dreaming,* I thought. How long had it been since I'd let myself dream?

"You're a rarity," Adam had told me early on, when we were still new to each other and everything about our relationship seemed to sparkle. "Part doctor, part dreamer. A scientist and a romantic, all in one endearing package." Oh, how right he'd been, and what an uneasy blend of traits that could be at times. I could see myself as a stay-at-home mom like so many of my neighbors, my life filled easily and completely with the needs of my children. Yet I loved the challenge of my work. I knew I would find a way to do both. My plan for the next five months was to keep working, stopping as close to my delivery as possible as long as everything went well with my pregnancy. *Sixteen weeks.* I was going to be fine.

★ ★ ★

The streets of our neighborhood were deserted as I walked Chauncey before bed. The full moon was veiled by thin gray clouds and a fine mist fell, weaving itself into my hair. It had been a wet August. As we walked beneath a streetlamp, I saw Chauncey's fur glow with tiny damp droplets. The houses were set far apart on the winding, sidewalkless streets, and they were a mix of styles. Brick colonials, like ours, and cedar-sided contemporaries. Woods divided one lot from another, and the trees hugged the road between the houses. Usually Adam was with us for this late-night outing, and walking through the darkness in our perfectly safe neighborhood still sent a shiver through me. Chauncey was a big dog, though. A hundred pounds. Some mix of Swiss Mountain dog and German shepherd, perhaps. He was dark and fierce looking with the personality of a lamb. He was wonderful with kids, and that had been the most important criterion when we found him at the SPCA three years earlier. We hadn't realized then that the wait for those kids would be this long.

The pain was so subtle at first that another woman might not have noticed it. But I'd felt that pain before, the fist closing ever so slowly, sneakily around my uterus.

I stopped in front of a long stretch of fir trees. "Oh, no," I whispered. "No. Go away."

Chauncey looked up at me and I pressed my hand to my mouth, all of my being tuned to that barely perceptible pain.

Was it gone? I focused hard. Maybe I'd imagined it. Maybe just a twinge from the walk? Maybe some stomach thing?

Chauncey leaned against my leg and I rested my hand on top of his broad head. I thought of walking home very slowly, but my feet were glued to the road. There it was again. The sly, sneaky fist.

My fingers shook as I reached for my BlackBerry where it was attached to my waistband. If the surgery was over, Adam would pick up. But when I lifted the phone, it was my sister's number I dialed.

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