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THE  
**SURROGATE  
MOTHER**

**FREIDA McFADDEN**

  
*Poisoned Pen*  
PRESS

## PROLOGUE

In the next twenty-four hours, I will be arrested for first-degree murder.

I don't know how this could be happening. I'm not the kind of person who goes to jail for murder. I'm *not*. I've never even gotten a speeding ticket. Hell, I've never even jaywalked. I'm the most law-abiding citizen who ever was.

"They have a pretty solid case against you, Abby."

My lawyer, Robert Frisch, does not sugarcoat things. I've only known him a short time, but I already know he's not about hand-holding and gumdrops and lollipops. He has spent the last twenty minutes enumerating all the police department's evidence against me. And when I hear it all laid out for me like that, it sounds bad. If I were some neutral third party listening to everything Frisch was saying, I'd be thinking to myself, *That woman is definitely guilty. Lock her up—throw away the key.*

The whole time I was listening to Frisch, my heart

was thumping wildly in my chest. It actually made it a bit hard to hear him for stretches of time. To my right, my husband, Sam, is slumped in his chair, a glassy look in his eyes. Sam was the one who hired Frisch. *He's your best chance, Abby*, he told me.

So if Frisch can't help me, that means I have no chance.

"It's all circumstantial evidence," I say, even though I'm not certain that's the case or even exactly what circumstantial evidence is. But I know one thing: "I didn't do it."

Frisch lets out an extended sigh and folds his arms across his chest. "You have to understand that if this goes to court, you're going to be convicted."

"If this goes to court?"

"I'd recommend a plea bargain," he says. "When they arrest you—"

I imagine the police showing up at my door, snapping metal cuffs on my wrists. Reading me my rights. *You have the right to remain silent*. Is that something they really say in real life? I don't want to find out.

"If they arrest me," I correct him.

Frisch gives me a look like I'm out of my mind. He's been a criminal attorney for nearly thirty years. One of the best. You can tell how successful he is by the leather sofa pushed up against the wall and the mahogany desk where he's got a photo of himself shaking the hand of Barack Obama. I've got money, but the length of a full trial might bleed us dry.

"Second-degree murder is fifteen years to life," Frisch says. "Whereas for murder one, you could get life without possibility of parole. If you plea down to murder two—"

"Fifteen years!" I cry. I don't want to go to jail for fifteen years. That's a lifetime. I don't want to go to jail for one day, but fifteen years is unthinkable. I can't wrap my head around it. I can't make a plea bargain that will guarantee me fifteen years of prison. I *can't*.

I look over at Sam, hoping for an equally indignant expression on his face. Instead, he still has that glazed look on his face. He's staring at the wall behind Frisch, and even though I'm trying to catch his eye, he won't look at me.

Does he think I did it?

Does my own husband really believe I'm a murderer? He knows me better than anyone else in the world, so if he believes I'm guilty, what chance do I have with a jury?

But I'm not guilty. I didn't do it. I didn't kill anyone...

Did I?

# CHAPTER 1

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ONE YEAR EARLIER

**A**t this moment in time, my life is just about perfect. A couple of years ago, I couldn't have said that. A couple of years ago, I would have rather slit my wrists than stood up in front of a room full of executives from Cuddles, "the new name in diapers," and presented them with a new ad campaign filled with dozens of pictures of cherubic babies with halos on their heads and the tagline: "Because your little angel is worth it." I would have done the presentation, of course, but the smile on my face wouldn't have been genuine, the way it is today.

But right now, everything is exactly the way I want it to be. Well, not *exactly*, but very close. I have the job I always wanted. I'm married to a wonderful man. And in a few short weeks (depending on the whims of the labor gods), I'm going to become a mother for the very first time.

You might say I have a glow about me.

"This new campaign," I say as I gesture at the

projected image on the screen, “has the potential to propel Cuddles into the same league as Huggies and Pampers.”

I turn my gaze to Jed Cofield, the executive VP of marketing at Cuddles. Jed is in his forties with thick, chestnut hair, penetrating dark eyes, and a suit from Hugo Boss. Even though he wears a gold band on his left hand, in the two years I’ve worked with him, he always stands a bit closer than he needs to when we talk—close enough that I can accurately identify what he ate for his last meal. Even now—even with my impending motherhood—I notice his eyes traveling down the length of my body.

Back before I was promoted to my current position as director of content strategy at Stewart Advertising, I learned a lot about how to appear confident. Eye contact is key. So I lock eyes with Jed, straighten my posture, and throw my shoulders back.

I have every reason to be confident. I know my campaign is fantastic. I worked my butt off making sure of that.

“How did this campaign perform with the twenty-five to thirty-four female demographic?” Cofield asks.

It’s an excellent question. In the diaper market, twenty-five to thirty-four females are essentially *the* demographic, as far as Cuddles is concerned. Few sixty-year-old men buy diapers for babies, no matter how compelling our commercials are. Of course, I’ve aged out of this key demographic, yet I’ve got a package of newborn diapers stuffed in the closet, but no need to point that out.

Denise Holt, the chief marketing officer and also my

boss, opens her mouth to answer the question. Three years ago, I might have let her. But part of being confident is not letting your boss answer questions for you.

“They love the campaign, Jed,” I say before Denise can get a word out. I click on a button on my remote, bringing up a screen of data. “After viewing our campaign, they were 53 percent more likely to choose Cuddles over the other leading brands.” I watch his eyebrows raise and add, “And in addition to your original target group, this campaign also resonated deeply with women aged thirty-five to forty-four. As you know, older mothers contribute at least 30 percent to the diaper-purchasing market.”

Cofield nods, impressed. “Very true.”

I make eye contact with him again. “We’re going to crush it.”

Cofield is smiling now, but Denise isn’t. I’ve known Denise Holt for a long time, and I know she doesn’t enjoy being upstaged. Denise was the one who hired me way back when—over a decade ago now. I still remember stumbling into her office and being terrified by her ice-blue eyes and blond hair swept back into a perfect French knot. I fiddled with my suit jacket collar as I fumbled through my rehearsed list of reasons why I wanted to work for Stewart Advertising and specifically for the infamous Denise Holt.

She hired me. Then she taught me everything I know, including how to tie my jet-black hair in a French knot, which is apparently called a *chignon*. (Who knew?) It wasn’t until she found out I was trying for a baby that our relationship deteriorated.

“They love it, huh?” Cofield says.

I nod. "They do." His smile broadens. "Well, so do I. I love it. It's brilliant."

Outwardly, I remain calm, but inside, I'm doing cartwheels. *The VP of Cuddles loves my idea. He loves it! He says it's brilliant!*

I can't help but flash a triumphant smile at Denise, who has been nothing but negative during the entire time I've been working on this campaign. As recently as yesterday, she was urging me to postpone this meeting because "it's not nearly ready." When I insisted on going forward, she accused me of having "baby on the brain."

Denise has chosen to remain free from maternal obligations. When I started out as her assistant, she drilled into me time and again that nothing wrecked a career faster than popping out a couple of rug rats. Denise's career means everything to her, and she's been extremely successful. Back then, I thought my career meant everything to me. Then Sam came along and convinced me otherwise.

I have no regrets. Everything is working out perfectly for me.

"Tell me, Abby." Cofield raises his eyebrows at me. "Will you be purchasing Cuddles for your baby?"

"Of course," I lie. "I want the best."

Yeah, there's no way I'm putting those shoddy diapers on my own child.

We iron out a few more details, then shake hands all around. Jed Cofield winks at me when we shake, and I squeeze his fingers firmly in the way Denise instructed me years ago. His warm fingers linger on mine for a beat longer than necessary. Cofield has been my biggest fan

since I started working on the Cuddles campaign, so I won't begrudge him a handshake that lasts a second or two longer than I'd like.

But if he thinks he's getting anything more out of me, he's sorely mistaken.

"Congratulations," he tells me.

I'm not sure if he's referring to my successful pitch or impending motherhood, but I simply smile and say, "Thank you."

As Cofield and his associates clear out of the room, Denise and I are left alone. There was a time when I got a thrill out of any chance to be alone with my role model, but these days, I avoid it like the plague. Given how well everything went in the presentation, it would be appropriate for Denise to say something positive or even *complimentary*, but there's a sour look on her face that tells me I will not be receiving any praise today.

"I've been meaning to speak with you, Abigail," she says.

Denise is the only person at work who calls me "Abigail" rather than "Abby." I used to like it: the name made me sound like an executive, rather than a girl at the playground with freckles and pigtails. (I used to have freckles and pigtails.) I tried to get everyone at work to call me Abigail for a while, but it didn't stick. Now the sound of that name on her lips makes my skin crawl.

"What about?" I ask. I plaster on that fake smile I now use when I talk to my boss, although it gets harder every day. One day, I will be speaking to Denise and simply won't be able to smile. It will be physically impossible.

Denise eyes my outfit. My suit jacket and skirt are

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from Armani. In the month I made the purchase, Sam came to me with the credit card statement and a horrified look on his face. “Someone stole our credit card, right?” he said. “We didn’t *actually* spend this much, right?”

I had to tell him that yes, we did. I absolutely did spend that much on a single outfit, and it was *worth it*. Sam claims his suits from Men’s Wearhouse look identical to anything he’d get at Armani or Prada, but he’s wrong. Maybe there’s no difference across a lecture hall, which is all that matters to him—but close up, anyone worth their salt can tell an expensive suit from a cheap knockoff. And the executives I pitch to respect someone who dresses well. In that sense, my clothes pay for themselves.

Another lesson I learned from Denise.

“How are you doing?” she asks.

“Good,” I say cautiously, because anything more positive than that is a cue for Denise to make my life worse.

“Wonderful, wonderful.” Denise taps a dark-red manicured finger against her chin. “Remind me how long you’re planning to take for your family leave? Eight weeks?”

A muscle twitches in my jaw. “Twelve weeks.”

“Twelve weeks?” Denise’s eyes widen in astonishment, despite the fact that we’ve had this exact conversation nearly a dozen times. “That long?”

The muscle twitches again. I had my first migraine earlier this year following a particularly tense discussion with Denise. I can’t let her get to me.

“Twelve weeks is allowed as family leave,” I say.

“I realize that.” Denise’s ice-blue eyes narrow at me.

“But that doesn’t mean you *must* take twelve weeks, does it? It seems like an awfully long time. Your clients will be disappointed.”

“I can do some of my work from home during the last month,” I say. That’s a compromise we’ve worked out. “Everyone is going to take on some of my workload. And of course, my assistant, Monica, will be around to help out.”

“*Monica will be around to help,*” she repeats in a vaguely mocking tone. She blinks a few times. “Well then, perhaps we should give *Monica* your position?”

If I slugged her in the face, I’d get fired. I have to remind myself of that. Again and again.

“I’m just kidding,” Denise says, even though she’s not smiling. “Of course, you are entitled to your twelve weeks, Abigail. I was just hoping you might reconsider.”

I will not reconsider. I love my career, but I have thought long and hard about my priorities. I will not rush back to work. I don’t care if Denise hates me because of it. And let’s face it—she wouldn’t hate me any less if I took four weeks.

“Anyway.” Denise pats her flawless chignon, which makes my hand go automatically to my own French knot. I feel a strand has come loose, and I quickly tuck it behind my ear. Denise must use a bottle of hair spray each day to keep hers intact, but it doesn’t appear that way. Her hair looks silky and perfect. “I believe Shelley has planned some sort of...*party* for you in the break room.”

I’m well aware that my best friend Shelley has scheduled a baby shower for me to follow this meeting. She

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would have preferred to surprise me, but given my tight schedule, that was impossible. It's sweet of her, but after fifteen minutes, I'll definitely have to make my excuses and slip away. My afternoon is packed. As it is, I won't get home till eight or nine tonight.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to make it," Denise tells me, which is no surprise. She's made no secret of the fact that she does not approve of events that "waste everyone's time" such as baby showers. "But please make sure you clear away all the trash from the room when you're done."

I bite my tongue to keep from reminding her that I am no longer her assistant, and she can't tell me to clean up garbage anymore. But I keep my mouth shut because I'm happy. I've impressed the Cuddles people, and I'm about to go to a baby shower in my honor. A *baby shower*. For *me*.

In the time I have worked at Stewart Advertising, I have made an appearance at roughly two million baby showers. Okay, that could be a slight exaggeration. It's possible I've only been to one million baby showers. Maybe three-quarters of a million. Definitely no less than half a million.

But now, for the first time, the shower is for me. Not for Elsa in reception, who has had at least a dozen children in her time working here. Not for Shelley, who has had a more respectable two. This shower is for *me*. The finger sandwiches that will be piled in the corner will have been brought in *my* honor. The presents stacked neatly in the corner of the room will be for *me*. The first piece of chocolate hazelnut cake will be handed to *me*.

There's only one thing different about this baby shower from all other baby showers thrown for the other women in my company:

I'm not pregnant.