

Chapter One

Abbi Jacobi sat in the huge high school auditorium and looked around at the familiar faces surrounding her. She smiled up at her husband, Jordan, as he squeezed her hand in reassurance.

Seated next to her was her mother, who was holding Abbi's sleeping three-year-old son, Jonathan. Hayley Jo, her five-year-old daughter, sat next to her other grandmother, Mari Jacobi.

They were all there, the group of family and friends who had supported each other through the years. Her parents, Jordan's family, her brother and his family, along with the O'Gradys, the Harts and, of course, the Grays, all sat near her. They were there to see sweet Madison Rose receive her high school diploma, along with the rest of her class.

Madison was Abbi's biological daughter, the result of a date rape eighteen years ago, when she was fifteen. The Grays, Michael and Angie, unable to have children of their own, made the difficult decision to adopt the baby girl legally, entering into an open adoption with Abbi and her family. Maddi had grown up believing the Youngs to be close friends of the family, and she and Abbi had shared a close relationship. Until that fateful night, when the time finally came for the girl to learn the truth, the night Michael and Angie told her the story of how she came to be. Abbi shuddered involuntarily as the memory came rushing back to her.

Three years earlier...

Abbi was sitting in the great room of the new home she shared with her husband, Jordan. She was tired, hot and pregnant, awaiting the arrival of their son. Their little girl, Hayley Jo, was asleep in her room. She heard Jordan's phone ring, but thought nothing of it. When he walked into the room, and she saw the look on his face, she asked, "What is it, babe?"

She wasn't prepared for the words that came out of his mouth. "Sweetheart, that was Michael on the phone."

"Michael...is Maddi okay? Please, tell me she is all right!" Fear gripped her heart, tightening around it like a vice, as thoughts of an accident ran through her mind.

Jordan sat down next to her on the couch and took her hand. "There was a bit of an argument, when Madison wanted to attend an unsupervised party, apparently."

Abbi closed her eyes. "It could be me, all over again, at that age," she said.

"Exactly, which is why, after arguing with her and getting nowhere, Michael and Angie decided the time had come to tell her everything."

Abbi sighed. "We knew this day was coming. How did she take the news?"

Jordan hesitated. Finally, he replied, "Not well, I'm afraid. Michael said she stormed out of the house. He thinks she may be on her way here, to confront you. They are on their way. If she doesn't come here, we will have to start looking for her."

"Oh," was the only word she could get out of her mouth, which had suddenly gone dry.

"You have to remain calm, Abbi. You know what the doctor said, no undue stress."

"How can I stay calm? My *daughter* is on her way over here to ask me why I gave her up, fifteen years ago."

"Fifteen years ago, you were a frightened teenager, who had been raped at a party. For years, you didn't even know the identity of the boy who spiked your drink."

"At least Michael had the foresight to call and warn us," she answered glumly.

"I hear a car in the drive. I'll bet it's her. Michael and Angie shouldn't be too far behind." He got up and went to the window. Peering out between the blinds, he saw Madison get out of her car and stop. She was standing in the driveway, as if she was unsure of what to do, now that she was here. He turned to his wife. "She's here. Maddi and I have always had a good rapport. I hope I am able to calm her down."

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. Jordan took a deep breath and opened the door. He smiled warmly, "Madison, what a nice surprise. Come on in." He stood aside and waved his arm in invitation for her to enter.

The girl, who had obviously been crying, said, "Hi, Jordan, is Abbi at home? I need to speak to her, please."

"She is resting in the great room. You know, the doctor ordered lots of rest and minimal stress," he reminded her as he led her to his wife.

"I don't want to stress anyone out, but there are some questions I need answers to. My *parents* told me some distressing news earlier. Or should I say, the people I always thought were my parents. But that's not really true, is it? You guys are my real parents. And now, you have another daughter, and, soon, you'll have a son, kids that you'll raise together and love, in a way you never loved me."

Stunned by the assumption that Jordan was her father, Abbi answered her slowly, "Honey, please sit down. I think you misunderstood. Maybe, in your shock at hearing this news, you thought they said that Jordan is your biological father. I need to tell you what really happened."

"So, you slept around, told everyone you got raped." Turning to Jordan, she spat out, "I can't believe you married her anyway. You had to know the truth."

"Sit down, Madison. You need to listen," Jordan said kindly.

The ringing of the doorbell interrupted them. Jordan watched as Madison sat down in one of the chairs facing the couch, before he went to answer it. "Michael, Angie, thank God you're here. Maddi is under the impression that I am her father. When we dispelled that notion, she accused Abbi of sleeping around. You were right, she is not thinking clearly, and the news has thrown her for a loop. Come in. They are in the great room."

When Jordan came back into the room with the Grays, Madison rolled her eyes. "Great, so you followed me."

Jordan whispered to Abbi his intentions and then excused himself, while the others got comfortable. He went into the kitchen, put on a pot of coffee and phoned Abbi's parents. When he asked them to join them, they agreed to drive over as soon as they could.

He returned to find the four of them sitting in cold, stony silence. Abbi wiped a tear that had fallen onto her cheek. Immediately, he went to her and sat down. Taking her hand in his, he told her that her parents were on their way.

"Oh, this just keeps getting better and better. Let's just have a party and invite all the Fabs over. I'm sure they were all in on this from the start, anyway," Maddi said in agitation.

"Madison Rose, please, I know you are upset. Yelling and screaming isn't going to solve anything. You need to calm down and listen to what Abbi has to say," Michael admonished.

"Might as well wait until *Granny and Gramps* get here, so I can get the whole scoop."

Abbi began to cry again. Jordan took her in his arms and spoke soothingly to her. Angie went to Madison and tried to comfort her, but her daughter rewarded her by pushing her away.

Michael stood up. "I'll go into the kitchen and get us all a cup of that coffee you just made."

"Herbal tea for me, please," Abbi said. "And there are sodas in the fridge for Maddi."

"Yeah, I guess I always wondered why you were so nice, always taking me to the park when I was little and having me over to visit," Maddi said. "You always said to make myself at home, hmph, seeing as how this should be my home, it makes sense now."

Fresh tears rolled down Abbi's cheeks.

Michael returned with a tray containing coffee, herbal tea and a soda for Maddi. He set the tray down just as the doorbell rang again. "I'll get it. It's probably Todd and Cyndi." He ushered them into the room with the others and went to get each of them a cup of coffee. He put on another pot and joined the others again.

"I think we should start by letting Abbi explain her situation to Madison," Michael began. "Madison, you need to stay quiet until she is finished. Then, you can ask questions. Does that seem fair to everyone?" he asked.

"I guess so," the young girl said as she took a sip of her soda and set the can down.

Abbi took a deep breath before starting. She hated reliving the incident. But her training as a social worker told her that Madison needed to hear the truth from her, so she began, "I was your age, Madison, fifteen. I went to a party with friends. I wasn't sure if the parents were going to be home or not. As it turned out, they weren't. I spent the night with a friend, as planned, after the party. I had no recollection of what happened that night, and four months later, I found out I was pregnant. Slowly, we pieced it all together and figured out that someone spiked my drink, with what they call the date rape drug. I didn't know who your biological father was, until about five or six years ago. Jordan and I were broken up at the time, and I ran into a guy I went to high school with. He asked me out, and I went. We dated for several months, and he was the perfect boyfriend, until I tried to break things off. He asked where our baby was. I was stunned. Up until that moment, I had no idea that I had been dating the same person who had violated me so cowardly ten years before that. I lied to him, to protect you. But he found out where you were and actually attempted to take Michael and Angie to court for parental rights. Luckily, we were able to prove the truth, and he didn't win."

Madison listened intently. "So, that would have been the summer I was shipped off to visit my family in Indiana."

Angie nodded. "Yes, honey, we thought it best to get you away from all the court drama."

"Jordan is not my father. This other guy...the one who raped you...is."

Jordan replied, "Yes, that's true. However, I grew up with Abbi and her brother, Dustin. I went through the whole, horrible ordeal with the family. I was at the hospital when you were born. My dad assisted in the surgery that night. My folks were the ones who suggested Michael and Angie adopt you."

Cyndi went to Maddi and took her hand. "Angie and Michael were gracious enough to agree to allow us to be a part of your life. Abbi was a child, your age, and in no way prepared to become a mother. It was a hard decision, but the best for everyone, including you. Michael and Angie have given you a wonderful life, and we have been a part of it. Put yourself in Abbi's place. If this happened to you, would you be prepared for it?"

After a long period of silence, Madison spoke. "I understand, sort of. But to know that every single one of you knew the truth hurts deeply. I feel like a fool."

"Oh, honey, no. That was never the intention. We were waiting until you were old enough to understand. You've always loved Abbi, Jordan, too. Why should that change?" Michael asked.

"I just need some time...to think about all of this. I mean, you have to get it. One day, I am Madison Rose Gray, only daughter of Michael and Angela. In an instant, I find out that my whole life has been a lie. I am actually the daughter of the woman I have considered a friend of the family for my whole life. Then, I hear that my real dad is some low-life rapist, who had the nerve to come back into my life and try to see me. It's a lot to take in."

"Yes, it is," Angie agreed. "But, we will all help you."

"That's right," Todd said in agreement.

"So, do I call you Grandpa or Todd now?" the girl asked in earnest as she wiped a tear from her eye.

"You can call me and Cyndi anything that makes you comfortable."

"And Abbi, what are you to me now? I mean, I really can't call you Mom."

"I am still the same person who loves you very much," Abbi replied.

"We all love you, Madison. It's as simple as that. We've always loved you, and we have always wanted the best for you," Cyndi replied.

"I want to go home now, if you don't mind. I want to be in my room, in my house, by myself. I am not going to do anything crazy. I just can't talk about it anymore, right now. It's going to take some time," Maddi said finally.

"Of course, honey. I don't want you to drive, though. I'll take your car home. You ride with your mother," Michael said.

Maddi looked up. "If I wasn't still so shocked, that would almost be funny. I could ask which mother you meant."

Abbi saw Jordan and her dad exchange a glance at Madison's words. This was not going to be easy.

Angie spoke softly to Abbi before she left. When the Gray family departed, Cyndi and Todd remained for quite some time that night. The next few months were going to be hard, and with Abbi's pregnancy, stress was the last thing she needed, according to her doctor.

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As it turned out, the next few years proved to be difficult, for all of them. There were Madison's bouts of rebellion, when she blatantly stayed out late, worrying Michael and Angie to no end. Her grades suffered so extremely for a while that she'd had to take summer classes one year, to catch up. One day, she would stop by to visit with Abbi and her family, and it would seem all was well. Then she would go for months, without a word. She did, however, maintain a close relationship with Cyndi, her biological grandmother. And then, the summer before her senior year of high school, something happened to change all that.

Lizzie and Rex Hart owned an ad agency in the Dallas area. Lizzie was one of the group of friends, who had grown up together in Indiana and lovingly referred to themselves as the Fab Five or the Fabs. Years later, all the women and their spouses had ended up in the Dallas area. The group consisted of Angie Gray, Madison's adoptive mother, Lizzie, Mari Jacobi, Jordan's mother, and the O'Grady wives, Katy and Chloe. Chloe had not grown up with the women, but they included her in their circle many years ago, during a vacation the women had taken to Dallas. After meeting the O'Grady clan, Chloe, her husband, Shane, and her brother-in-law,

Ryan, on that fateful trip, all of their lives had changed. Ryan later married Katy, and eventually, each of the Fabs became involved in some way in the O'Grady business, a restaurant chain, known as Chloe's Place.

The Hart Agency's main office was in Columbus, Ohio. Cara, their daughter, and her husband, Nick, along with their son, Colt, and his wife, Kendyl, ran that division. Cara had a son, Caleb, from her first marriage. A plane crash, shortly after Cara learned she was pregnant, took her husband, Caleb, from her. Later, she married her high school sweetheart, Nick, and gave birth to the son she named after his deceased father. Now, Caleb was in college, and he planned to join the family business. Rex suffered from heart trouble, and it made sense that Caleb would learn the business from the man who started the company from the ground up, with the intention of, someday, taking over the Dallas office.

Caleb came to Dallas for the summer, to intern for his grandfather. He was only a year ahead of Madison in school. He was actually several months younger, but he had taken college courses in high school and was starting as a sophomore in the fall. Angie and Michael had held Madison back when she was younger, thinking she needed an extra year of preschool. So that was how he happened to be ahead of her by the time they were ready to start college. The two of them had maintained a friendship across the miles since they were babies. That summer, the two were inseparable when they were not working. Madison's whole outlook on life seemed to change, as if by magic.

Caleb returned to school in Ohio that fall, and Madison began her senior year in Texas. Her grades excelled. She stopped dating local boys, and she and Caleb managed to see each other a few times, when the families got together that year. They kept in touch via social media, email, texts and phone calls. It was apparent that a romance was slowly blossoming, and the people who loved Madison could not have been more relieved.

And now, they were all in attendance at her graduation. In a few minutes, Madison Rose Gray would walk across the stage and receive her diploma. Her journey into adulthood was just beginning and what it held was anyone's guess. She planned to attend school at the same college as Caleb, who was moving in with his grandparents. Yes, this was growing serious, Abbi thought with a smile.

In the past year, she and her firstborn had reached a point in their relationship where they could finally be honest and open with each other. Madison visited often, became close to her

younger half-sister and half-brother, and, once again, she was the cherished, loving, only daughter of Michael and Angela Gray.

It had been a hard road, to get to where they were now, but it was worth every tear to have Madison in her life again.

Jordan's gentle nudge brought Abbi back to the present. "It's her turn," he whispered.

Abbi watched with the others as Madison made her way across the huge stage and accepted her sheepskin. She looked out into the crowd as she walked off the stage and blew a kiss to her family and friends, the light shining in her beautiful eyes giving away the sheer joy she felt in that moment.

Abbi wiped a tear from her eye, a happy tear, as she watched Madison take her place with her classmates. And when the ceremony ended, and the graduates were free to join their families, Madison sought her out first.

"Abbi, thank you so much for your support all these years, I love you," the girl said as she hugged her.

It meant the world to Abbi to hear those words, as she watched Madison then turn and go to her mother, Angie Gray.