

## Prologue

Amanda Connors awakened with a start. The shrill, piercing scream echoed around the walls of her bedroom, jarring her further. She bolted upright in bed gasping for air, heart beating wildly and erratically. She'd had the same nightmares for over a year; each one had a different twist. The 'woulda-coulda-shoulda' of the situation haunted her and kept her in post-mortem despair.

A year ago, she'd suffered two of the most shocking events of her life. The fact that they happened on the same day was even more devastating. The circumstances had left the thirty-four year old rattled and unsure about her choices in life. She'd lost sight of herself and, tormented by these nightmares, she feared the perplexity would never end.

The first incident was the death of her mother, Susan Toole. It was a long and painful, dreaded disease, but the last year was the worst. Susan's illness was terminal. Amanda became her caretaker, spending several hours each day with her to ensure that Susan had what she needed. On the weekends, Amanda was at home with her husband Billy.

At first, she cooked meals for Susan to encourage her to eat and tidied up before Gabriella, the weekly housekeeper, arrived. She made sure her mother got a little exercise each day and drove her to the grocery store and other errands. They'd taken small excursion to the library to find new books for Susan—that helped on the days that she needed to lie down, but couldn't sleep. Amanda took her mother to the monthly doctor's appointments and listened carefully as the oncologist explained his treatment plan. She gathered the mail, and watched as Susan struggled to pay bills and take care of personal correspondence and financial interests. Amanda stayed with Susan from ten in the morning until four o'clock in the afternoon; getting home in time to prepare Billy's dinner. More and more often, Billy called to say that he was working late and would eat at the cafeteria when he took a break. She was actually grateful for that—she was too tired after the long days to cook anyway. It wasn't that attending to Susan was physically taxing, but it was emotionally draining to watch the progress of the illness. Most of the time, Amanda didn't wait for Billy to get home. Too exhausted, she took a hot, soothing shower and went to bed.

As time wore on, and Susan's illness progressed, Amanda increased the hours she spent with her mother. She stayed late into the evening, long after the dinner hour. Billy didn't complain. He was involved in a new project and offered to eat in the cafeteria at work. Amanda thought Billy's responses were attentive and considerate. She was grateful that she didn't have to worry about him. Near the end, Amanda devoted herself completely to Susan's physical care and she took on the household chores as well. She paid her mother's bills, handled the daily and weekly correspondence, and took care of all financial interests and shopping.

Susan's medication made her feel loopy and foggy—she couldn't concentrate on the finer details of her previously active life. Amanda hired Gabriella to tidy-up the home she shared with Billy once a week. The long hours as her

mother's caretaker were taking their toll and she was simply too tired to do normal household chores at her own home.

Susan, once fit and healthy, had lost forty pounds during the course of the last year. She wasn't much bigger than Amanda had been in seventh grade before she'd hit a final growth spurt. She was frail and skeletal. It was heartbreaking to watch her mother waste away. Amanda tried different tactics in an attempt to get Susan to eat, but she simply wasn't hungry. At one point, the doctor suggested adult nutritional drinks as a supplement to her non-existent diet. Susan tried, but she simply couldn't get the shakes down. Amanda grew sick-at-heart over her mother's declining condition.

When the doctor recommended nursing assistance, Susan was reluctant to allow strangers in her home. Amanda understood her mother's worries, but Susan needed help. She twisted and worried over the decision before resolving to do it herself. Her love for Susan superseded everything else at that time, including her own home and marriage. As the end drew closer, the doctor's appointments were more frequent too. Amanda arrived at seven each morning and stayed late into the night. She knew her mother needed to be in a hospital or possibly a long-term care facility, but again, Susan resisted.

"Please, Amanda," Susan begged, "I want to be home surrounded by the happy memories of my life with you and your father."

Amanda abided her mother's wishes and soothed her, promising that she'd remain in her home as long as it was possible. At the end of each long day, Amanda fed and bathed Susan, making sure she was clean and tucked in before kissing her goodnight. Amanda wasn't sure how long she could keep the promise, but she silently vowed—"I'll do whatever it takes to keep Mother comfortable, happy, and at home. I swear it!"

Amanda didn't complain. She did what was necessary. She was confident that doing these tasks for her mother was the 'right' thing to do.

*"Mother cared for me throughout the feeding and diapering stages of infancy. She was there for me throughout all childhood illnesses suffered. She was there for me each time a boy hurt my feelings and when a mean girl was particularly cruel in middle school and high school. She was there to support me when I fell in love with Billy and when I went to college to pursue an art career. Mother encouraged and supported me in all endeavors,"* she silently and religiously reasoned. *"Yes, this is the right thing to do. It's the only thing to do."*

The oncologist sent hospice to assess the situation at Susan's home. Two nurses arrived and set up an IV that would allow a limited dose of morphine at the press of a button. These changes frightened Amanda.

"It will keep her comfortable during the end. It won't be much longer now," one of the nurses explained when she recognized the fearfulness on Amanda's features. "It's time to place your mother in a long-term care facility, dear."

"No, I can't do that. I won't do it!" Amanda refused. "If she doesn't have long then I'll spend what time she has left with her here."

"You don't understand, dear; your mother's health will decline rapidly now. She won't even know where she is. She won't know that you are here. Make it easier on both of you and let us call to make the arrangements," the elder of the two nurses encouraged.

"She might not know, but I will...I promised that I'd keep her at home and that's what I intend to do," Amanda stubbornly insisted.

"But...she needs around the clock care now. You don't understand how difficult this will be on both of you. You can't do all of it on your own...," the second nurse spluttered

and argued; frustrated that she couldn't persuade or bully the daughter.

"I can and I will!" Amanda remained steadfast. Somehow, she had to find the strength to do it. She wouldn't give up now.

After hospice left, Amanda thought carefully about their advice and admonishments. She looked at the card they'd given her. She was to call that number when her mother passed away or if she changed her mind. She didn't think she'd change her mind or that it was an option. She'd made a promise—it was that simple in Amanda's mind. She took the card to the kitchen and placed it under the corner of the telephone so that she could find it easily when the time came. Next, Amanda called Billy; she wanted and needed his approval about the decision.

"Hey, baby," Billy said as he answered the phone using his silky voice, "what's going on?"

"Hospice came today. The nurses said it wouldn't be long now. They wanted to send Mother to a nursing home for the last short while of her life..." Amanda said as her voice trailed off and she fought to hold back hot tears.

"And I'm guessing from your tone of voice that you don't want to do that."

"I promised her, Billy. I promised that I'd keep her home as long as possible." Amanda began to cry. The decision was overwhelming—she didn't want her mother to suffer needlessly—and yet she stubbornly held onto a promise she'd made months ago.

"Is it still possible to keep her home, Amanda?"

"I think it is if I stay with her day and night now." The enormity of that hit hard, but she swallowed the doubt down, nearly choking on it.

“That’s a lot of pressure and responsibility on you,” Billy said.

“Yes,” Amanda replied, “but I can do it. I have to do it.”

“Do whatever you feel you have to do, Amanda. Stay with her to the end. I support your decision whatever it might be,” Billy said with a resigned sigh.

That was all she needed to hear. She’d needed one other person to support her decision and Billy had done that. She knew it would be difficult, but there wasn’t any other choice or decision to make.

“Thank you.”

“No worries, baby. Do you need anything else?” Billy asked.

“No, I have everything I need. I can always wash clothes here and I still have a few things in my old bedroom that will tide me over. If the nurses are right then it won’t be much longer.”

After the call ended, Amanda checked on her mother again. When she saw that Susan was resting comfortably, she breathed a sigh of relief and then went to her childhood bedroom. She looked through the dresser and closet to see whether there was anything she could use. She found several pairs of flannel pajama bottoms and a few tee shirts that still fit. She’d manage just fine.

The last few days passed by in a quick blur. She prepared fresh chicken broth each morning and took it to Susan in a china cup encouraging her to drink. She supported her mother’s head and put the cup to her lips. Susan took a small sip and then shook her head. It wasn’t that she refused to eat; she couldn’t eat. Amanda silently cried. The horrible and terrifying disease ate away at her once beautiful mother, taking everything with it. She sat beside Susan’s bed and held

her hand. There didn't seem to be much more that she could do other than make sure she was comfortable.

The morphine affected Susan's mind and she often talked to others while staring into the corners of her room. It was as if she held a full conversation with someone. It was unnerving. She was startled when Amanda called her back to the present.

"Mother, who are you talking to?"

"Why honey, I'm talking to your father," Susan replied with confusion. Still, her eyes wandered around the room, searching.

"Mother, Dad's been dead for eight years. Have you forgotten?" Amanda asked with real concern and a shiver streaking down her spine.

"No, he's right there waiting for me," Susan replied as she looked into the corner of her room again and smiled.

Then, it was finished.

Thursday night, Amanda tucked her mother in and made sure she was resting comfortably before she went to bed. The next morning when she returned to check on her, Susan was gone. She'd slipped away sometime in the early morning hours. Amanda, overwhelmed at the loss, sat beside her mother's bed for a long while. She cried, allowing the hot tears to wash away some of the anxiety. After the tears were spent, she began the practical responsibilities required after death. She looked through Susan's desk and found the will and instructions detailing her final wishes.

Her mother and father had made these arrangements years ago. They'd gone together to set up what they wanted at the funeral home when Amanda was still in college. A business card attached to a folder showed everything paid for and the funeral home had the information on file.

“This is so like them,” Amanda mumbled aloud as she read over the instructions and the will. She picked up the card that she’d tucked underneath the corner of the phone and placed the call. When the ambulance arrived to remove her mother’s body, she gave the driver the name of the funeral home. By then, Amanda was dressed and she took the packet of papers she’d found earlier and followed the ambulance. After everything was taken care of at the funeral home, Amanda went back to find Susan’s address book. She placed the necessary calls to longtime friends announcing the news and the time for the wake. Susan’s last wishes were simple. She wished that her body be cremated immediately and to have a small memorial at her home the following day.

“*No lengthy drawn-out time of mourning,*” Susan’s instructions read.

The second shocking occurrence happened shortly after Amanda realized that she had nothing to wear for her mother’s farewell. It was only a twenty-minute drive across town to the home she shared with Billy. The black dress she wanted to wear was sleeveless, but had a long-sleeve jacket that fell to the thighs and flared out stylishly. Both the dress and jacket were made of crepe and fully lined. The suit would be ideal to wear to honor her mother.

Amanda parked the Jeep in the circular drive and used a key at the front entrance. When she neared the upper level, she heard noises coming from the master bedroom. “*Billy’s been working a lot of overtime on a new project,*” Amanda silently reasoned; “*he’s probably taken some comp-time now that Mother’s gone. He knows I need him. Perhaps he’s changed his mind and plans to come to the wake tomorrow.*”

Amanda opened the bedroom door expecting to find Billy on the phone with someone, but what she found instead boiled her blood and froze her heart at the same time. The smile of greeting for her husband hardened like glass. The bedcovers were on the floor and Billy was naked. He wasn’t



alone. Jennifer Costner was there too—and she was as bare-butt as Billy. Her short blonde hair was damp with perspiration as long tanned legs encircled him.

In an instant, Amanda's mind captured every detail. Like a movie, the scene played out in time-lapse snapshots. Jennifer's lusty gaze as she stared up at Billy with slender arms wrapped around him...Billy's hands on either side of her, posed to give her all of himself...his body glistening with sweat as he worked to get Jennifer over the edge...his buttocks clenched tightly as he pumped.

When the door clicked open, they both turned to look at Amanda. Shock and surprise replaced the previous pleasure on each face. Jennifer's blue-grey eyes grew wide and her mouth formed a perfect 'ohm' even though no words escaped the pouty lips. Billy's daze turned to embarrassment as his eyes glinted recognition. Caught in the act of betrayal, his face turned a brighter shade of pink as his lips tightened into a shame-filled grimace.

Amanda closed the door softly—an icicle of hurt stabbing deeply in her chest and stomach. She stood outside the bedroom for several moments, not knowing what to do. Nothing in her sheltered and perfect life had prepared her for this inevitability. Then, as if sleepwalking or hypnotized, she went to the kitchen and began to make coffee. Her movements were mechanical and robotic as she preformed the task by rote.

*"I have to do something normal,"* she silently reasoned. *"If I don't do something sane, I'll lose my mind! What on earth am I supposed to do?"*

Her mother had just died and now she'd discovered that Billy was having an affair with Jennifer, one of her close friends. *"He hasn't been working on a new project; he's been fucking Jennifer—and in our bed! Oh my god, what do I do?"* she silently raged as the shocking bedroom scene ricocheted around in her head.

It was too much. She took a sip of the coffee to calm her panic, hoping the hot liquid would melt the cold that had encased her heart. She waited for something normal to return. It didn't and she suspected that nothing would ever be the same again. In only a few minutes, Billy was dressed and came to the kitchen to find her.

“Amanda, I know how this looks, but honestly, honey, it's not your fault...” Billy began and then hesitated. His face, flushed from exertion and emotion, embarrassed her. She couldn't bear to look at him. Everything about him made her feel sick and queasy. She looked away to stop the nausea that rolled through her body. Her knees were weak and she held onto the counter with all her strength in an attempt to stay upright. She wanted to be anywhere else than standing in the kitchen with Billy.

Amanda could smell Jennifer on her husband—the scent of their lovemaking permeated the kitchen. She didn't respond to anything Billy said; she was afraid she'd gag if she opened her mouth to speak. She didn't know what to say anyway and everything inside her had simply stopped moving and working. Rendered speechless, she simply stood there facing him, but unable to actually look at her husband.

“Look, I'll pack my things and move out today. I know you have to take care of your mother's funeral arrangements and you'll be tied-up with that today and tomorrow—I promise to be completely out of the house by the time you return. I'm really sorry that you had to find out this way...” he said as his voice trailed off until it was finally only a whisper.

*“That's it!”* Amanda silently screamed. *“You're sorry I found out this way and you're more than ready and willing for our marriage to be over. You're moving out today!”*

Outwardly, she appeared calm, but Amanda was utterly floored. She'd lost her mother and her marriage in a single

day, within hours of each other. Billy scuffed his foot across the floor, looking at his feet. Amanda remained silent.

*“What are the odds of this?”* She silently mused.

Jennifer finally came out of the bedroom fully dressed and stuck her head in the kitchen briefly. “I’ll wait for you in the car,” she said to Billy and then left through the lower level to the garage. Amanda heard the garage door open and then Jennifer’s car engine as she revved the motor twice. Billy went back to the master bedroom and packed a duffel bag and two large suitcases with his clothing and toiletries. He sat the duffel bag on one of the rolling suitcases and managed to get all of it down the split landing to the garage without dropping anything. He left without saying another word.

Amanda remained in the kitchen for a long while. Frozen in place, she couldn’t manage to move a muscle even if she’d wanted to. She didn’t know if she could even speak. Her throat was constricted as if a large bite of steak was lodged there, cutting off her air. She hadn’t been able to utter a word to either Billy or Jennifer.

After they’d been gone for a while, Amanda finally found her legs again. She went to the master bedroom and took the black dress-suit she’d come home to get out of the closet along with a pair of black leather pumps. She found the strand of pearls also and wrapped them around the hanger. She got back in the Jeep and returned to her mother’s home. She hadn’t made a sound in over an hour now. She coughed to make sure her voice worked and was still functional. It was—and then she began the preparations for the wake as if nothing had happened. She called the caterer and her two best friends, Bobbie Pierce and Marty Anders. The wake was the following day, but that night she needed her closest friends.

Bobbie and Marty were there by six o’clock that evening with food and drinks and Amanda tearfully told them what had happened when she went home to get a dress to wear to

the wake. They listened in silence as good friends often do and when the tale was done, they each hugged Amanda and comforted her.

“I’ll get you an appointment with my good friend, Jonas Peterson,” Bobbie said, once the comforting was over.

“He’s good,” Marty commented.

“Who is he?” Amanda asked.

“A damn fine divorce attorney,” Bobbie said. “You need to file first and I’ll try to get you in to see him Monday or Tuesday.”

“Do I need to rush like that?” Amanda asked.

“Amanda, you caught your husband with one of your close friends doing the deed in your own bed. He moved out and abandoned you. Yes, you need to act fast,” Bobbie replied. Bobbie had always been more sophisticated and worldly than any of her other friends; she trusted her advice.

By Monday morning, everything was settled. Bobbie went with her to the appointment with Jonas Peterson. Amanda sat quietly in his very plush offices and silently waited—she was still in shock. The receptionist showed the women to the conference room and Amanda sat down without even thinking about it. When the attorney joined them at the table, Amanda was still dumbstruck. Bobbie explained why they were there and told Jonas what had happened. Jonas finally directed the questions to Amanda.

“Mrs. Connors, what grounds do you choose for the divorce petition?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Amanda replied feeling overwhelmed. Divorce was one thing she’d never dreamed she’d have to consider.

“She should file for both abandonment and adultery,” Bobbie spoke up.

“It has to be her decision, Bobbie,” Jonas replied with a quick smile. “I can see that you’re close friends. You want to protect your friend, but Amanda is the client and I must hear it from her. Mrs. Connors, will you file for divorce on the grounds of abandonment or adultery?” Jonas continued as he directed the conversation to Amanda. The room was very quiet as they waited to hear her response.

“Abandonment,” Amanda finally replied.

“That’s actually better in the long run. It should ensure that you keep the marital home,” Jonas said matter-of-factly. The rest of the appointment flew by as Bobbie gave the attorney addresses and other pertinent data while Amanda remained sitting quietly, barely aware of the proceedings. She’d never imagined herself in this situation and, if Bobbie hadn’t been there to lend assistance, she wouldn’t have gotten through it. Soon, Amanda was signing legal papers notarized by the receptionist.

“Your husband will be served the day after tomorrow. He’ll have about a month to respond. I’ll let you know once his attorney contacts me. This is a community property state and assets divide equally. That can take some time,” Jonas said.

“How long does it take?” Amanda finally joined in the discussion, not sure what ‘some time’ meant in legal jargon.

“It depends on how fast he responds and how fast the property settlement agreement is reached. You own a home together. You also own part of his pension and company perks with Sandi Labs. The estate your mother bequeathed to you is off limits to your husband. Considered personal property, he has no rights to it. I don’t foresee any problems or obstacles that would keep the settlement from being completed in the normal and appropriate time, perhaps six months at the latest,” Jonas said easily. “After I hear from his attorney, I’ll know more. It’s just a waiting game now.”

It had been a grueling waiting game—especially for Amanda. The current situation had been in the making for a long time. It had been dangling there even before she caught Billy with Jennifer, but she hadn't known it at the time. It wasn't over with the filing of the petition either. Billy delayed signing the appropriate papers. He refused to provide the necessary information requested by the court. His attorney filed numerous delays on his behalf because Billy couldn't seem to make up his mind.

When Amanda thought she couldn't stand one more second of the delays, he finally agreed that she should keep the marital home. If she signed-off on any rights to his pension and company benefits, he'd quitclaim the deed. When looking at both assets on paper, the equity amounts were about the same. Amanda was fine with that and signed away her rights to Billy's company retirement and 401K. It had taken a year before Billy finally stopped putting off the inevitable and Amanda felt like a trapped animal chewing off her own foot to get free. After it was over, Amanda Connors once again became Amanda Toole.

Amanda had continued to live in the marital home after returning from her mother's wake, but each day there was miserable and wretched. She'd moved her personal items and clothing to the guest bedroom and kept the master bedroom door closed in an attempt to shut out the memories. She thought the gesture had helped, but she couldn't say for sure.

The nightmares started the very first night she was there alone and they'd been relentless ever since. That was the reason she'd sought Marty's professional help as a therapist. She had terrible nightly dreams where she relived the images of Billy entwined in nakedness with Jennifer in vivid details. Amanda felt responsible in some way, but it was more than that—she couldn't shake the embarrassment or the indignity at being speechless. She'd felt as helpless as a child. She had lost her voice when she'd walked in on them. She'd shut down completely when she should've screamed out her

wrath. The idea that she'd stood there like an idiot without telling both of them to go to hell, to get out, or any other appropriate response to the adultery she witnessed tormented her. Overall, Amanda's response caused her to feel deeply ashamed and it held her bound in despair.