

## Chapter One

**April 1998**

Dave Baldwin sat on a bench in Atlanta's Centennial Park, listening to the water cascade over the sculpted rocks in the Water Garden. It was an exceptionally warm day, and he was dressed too warmly for the weather. He could feel beads of perspiration rolling down his back, so he took off his jacket and laid it over the back of the bench. Most of his day had been spent in meetings with a wealthy developer and a team of lawyers negotiating the contract for a downtown renovation project. The meeting was extremely important to his firm, so he'd worn one of his power suits, custom tailored to perfectly fit his frame. He looked good, but Italian wool was better suited for the boardroom than the mid-day sun of Georgia.

Classically handsome, and sporting a tan from spring break in the Bahamas with his daughter Cathy a few weeks ago, Dave easily attracted the eye of women who walked by. Normally he welcomed the looks, and enjoyed playing a well-practiced game of making small talk as they walked by, seeing how many would pass before one sat down. Once they sat down, he was certain to get their phone number. Sometimes he called and sometimes he didn't. It was no reflection on them, but merely how lonely he was feeling.

Right now, he knew his heart was too fragile to enter into a romantic relationship with anyone. All he wanted was companionship; someone to spend time with and to stand by his side at the countless dinner parties he was forced to attend. Someone to make him feel alive, to make him feel anything besides the abject loneliness that permeated his life.

*Today would be a good day to take the boat out — if I still had a boat*, he thought wryly. He was trying not to let his mind wander to all he had lost in the past few years, but it was a battle he knew he would lose. It was a battle he always lost. The fact that Ginger had left him two years ago today made it impossible to think of anything else.

Everyone thought he was over her because he said he was, and because he pretended to be, but thinking of her still made him feel like he'd been punched in the stomach.

No one knew how badly he missed her. He loved her so much and would have done anything to make her happy. He had thought she was happy, but apparently she had been miserable. When she left, she stopped just short of saying she hated him. He felt like a failure, and no one could convince him otherwise. In his mind he was a failure because he failed at what mattered most. He had failed Ginger.

To those who knew him, Dave appeared to have everything. At thirty-seven, he was a partner in a prestigious Atlanta architectural firm. He had the luxury of working from his home in Savannah or his condo in Atlanta. In spite of a costly divorce, he had all the material trappings that showed the world how successful he was. He had memberships at all the right clubs. He was confident, charismatic, intelligent, and handsome enough to have an attractive woman on his arm nearly any time he desired. The only thing he didn't have was his wife.

It was still hard to believe she was gone. He should hate her for what she'd done, but he didn't. Despite hating what she had done, he didn't hate her. Quite the contrary — he hated himself, and blamed himself for everything.

He had never told anyone what she had done, and he doubted she had told anyone other than him. It was a secret he planned to carry to his grave. It was a secret he wished she'd carried to hers. He knew why she had told him, but knowing why she told him hurt almost as much as knowing what she had done.

Dave remembered every detail of the day she left. The complete silence in the house had immediately told him something was wrong. Ginger couldn't stand silence. It wasn't uncommon for every radio and television to be blaring, rarely on the same station. She had been sitting on the sofa, wearing white jeans and a red sun top, her dark hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. Even after ten years of marriage, Dave still thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

“Where's Cathy?” he asked nervously, slowly making his way into the room. “What's going on?”

“Cathy's spending the night with Rachel,” she replied, her voice flat and emotionless.

She took a deep breath, and then added, “And I'm leaving,”

“What do you mean you're leaving? Why?” He collapsed into a chair opposite her, his mind reeling.

“I met someone.”

Dave felt like the air had been sucked out of the room. One sentence changed his life.

Ginger sat watching, waiting with prepared answers for the questions she knew he would ask. Choking on his tears, the questions poured out.

The longer they talked, the more he realized no amount of crying and begging could convince her to stay. She wasn't interested in even trying to work things out. With sickening clarity, he realized she'd actually left a long time ago. Even before she'd met this guy, her body had been here, but not her heart.

When had she quit loving him? How had he not noticed she was so unhappy? How could she carry on an affair for six months without him seeing some sign of it? At that moment, nothing made sense. After all they had gone through with her accident, the drugs, and the rehab. He thought they were closer than ever. She'd been clean and sober for five years. To Dave, those five years had been the best years of his life, yet Ginger described them as dreadful.

Ginger wasn't interested in custody of Cathy. She told Dave she'd get in touch with him later and

arrange for a visit with her, but she wasn't interested in any set visitation. "I don't want to see Cathy right now. She'll just remind me of a life I'm trying to forget."

As she left, she stopped in the doorway "I need to tell you one more thing — a little secret I've been hiding."

Dave froze. If she was about to tell him Cathy wasn't his, he didn't want to know.

Ginger saw the look of alarm on his face and knew what he was thinking. "Relax," she said. "It has nothing to do with Cathy."

And then, in the same tone one describes a mundane household task, Ginger told him her secret. Her confession left him speechless. A million questions ran through his mind, but he couldn't form the words to ask even one. How could she have kept a secret like that? Why had she told him now? If she had intended to hurt him, it had worked. He was devastated.

Dave sat in the darkened house, staring into space, wondering what to do. He started crying, which only made him feel worse. Men weren't supposed to cry. He wiped away the tears but it was a futile effort, as they were instantly replaced. What was he going to tell Cathy? How do you tell a child their mother wants to forget them?

The next morning, the sun was streaming through the windows. Dave opened his eyes slowly. For a moment, he didn't know where he was. He was still in his suit. He must have fallen asleep — then he remembered. Ginger was gone. A wave of nausea swept over him.

A few moments later, he heard a key turning in the front door. Ginger — she'd come back! Relief flooded over him. He looked up expectantly, his heart racing, as the footsteps drew nearer. Cathy bounded into the room. When she saw her disheveled father sitting on the sofa, she laughed. "You look like you slept in your clothes," then asked, "Where's Mom?"

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Though Ginger had been gone two years, the pain was still fresh. His heart was still bleeding and raw. While he was over the humiliation of being left for another man, he couldn't get past the fact that he had failed at being a husband. How could he be so self-absorbed that he never even saw it coming? He was terrified of history repeating itself.

There had been a lot of women since Ginger left, but he never stayed with any of them long. He dated for companionship, and the sex if it was offered. To his pleasant surprise, it usually was. He would like to have someone special in his life, but after the way he failed Ginger, he couldn't allow himself that pleasure. He hoped he wouldn't make the same mistakes, but he could never be sure.

He had never been unfaithful to Ginger, but for many years he hadn't loved her and that had hurt her worse than any affair ever could. If there had been another woman, she could have identified and quantified the enemy. As it was, there was no one to direct her hatred towards. In the beginning, she directed it to herself. He wasn't sure when it happened, but at some point, she had directed the rage toward the person she perceived to be its rightful target — Dave.

He thought back to when he first met Ginger. They began dating his last year of college. She was one of several women he'd been seeing. As far as he was concerned, it was all in fun. She was tall,

beautiful, and liked to party. He wasn't looking for a serious relationship. He had big plans for his life, and it didn't involve being tied down to one woman, not yet anyway.

Immediately after graduation, Dave was offered an internship with an architectural firm in Atlanta. He loved Savannah and had hoped to be able to stay there, but the job was too good to turn down. He didn't tell Ginger he was moving to Atlanta because it never occurred to him that she would care that he was leaving.

Ginger discovered she was pregnant a few weeks before graduation. She wondered how Dave would take the news. They'd only known each other a short time, and had been intimate only a few times. She was crazy about him, but was unsure of how he felt towards her, so she decided to wait until after the stress of finals and his graduation to tell him.

After graduation, she drove past his apartment nearly every day, but his car was never there. She left messages on his answering machine, but they were never returned. A few weeks later, as she was driving by, Ginger noticed lights on in the apartment. Kevin, Dave's roommate, looked embarrassed when she asked if he knew where Dave was. He told her Dave had moved and hadn't given him his new address or phone number yet, but he expected to hear from him soon. Ginger did her best to act nonchalant, but she was crushed, and her voice quivered as she thanked him.

From the window, Kevin could see her sitting in her car, crying. He picked up the phone and left a message on Dave's answering machine. "Dave, that tall chick, Ginger, stopped by to see you tonight. I told her you'd moved, but I didn't give her your number. You might want to call her. She seemed pretty upset. Later, Dude." He hung up the phone and looked out the window again. Ginger's car was gone.

At the end of that long ago summer, Kevin had invited Dave to spend Labor Day with him and his family at their beach house on Tybee Island, one of the barrier islands protecting Savannah and the Georgia coast. He was supposed to meet Kevin for a beer before they headed to the island. He was low on cash, so he crossed the street to the ATM, standing in line behind a rather large woman wearing a dress that looked like it had been made from the same draperies as a dress worn by Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*.

Ginger walked out of the bank and saw Dave standing in line for the ATM. Her first impulse was to flee, but she stopped herself.

"Dave?"

He looked up at the familiar voice. "Ginger," Dave exclaimed, trying to ignore her very swollen belly. "How've you been?"

"Fine," she said, nervously touching her stomach. "Actually, I've been better."

He could see tears welling up in her eyes. He really didn't want to listen to a hormonal pregnant woman rant and rave about the loser who had gotten her pregnant. He'd find an ATM later. "Hey, I've got to meet up with some friends, but it was great to see you." He gestured toward her protruding mid-section, "Oh, and congratulations."

Dave turned to walk away when she spoke, barely above a whisper. "It's yours. The baby is yours."

He spun around.

"It's yours. I got pregnant in April. I was waiting until after finals and graduation were behind you

before I told you, but I couldn't find you. Why didn't you call me?" Tears were streaming down her cheek and people were beginning to stare.

"Come on, we need to talk."

They walked side by side, not talking until they reached Johnson Square, just a few blocks away. Johnson Square was the first of the now famous Savannah Squares laid out by General Oglethorpe when he founded this city on the bluff in the early 1700's. Dave and Ginger sat facing the fountain, watching the water dance down the tiers. The benches surrounding the fountain were nestled among a brilliant array of azaleas, and ancient live oak trees dripping with Spanish moss. Tourists were everywhere, but they were too busy admiring the beauty to notice the two of them.

Dave stared straight ahead, resting his elbows on his knees. "Are you sure it's mine?"

"Of course I'm sure. I'm positive. I don't sleep around."

"I didn't mean it like that. Look, I'm sorry." He wiped his face with his hand. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"How? I didn't know where you were. I stopped by your apartment once, but Kevin didn't know how to get a hold of you. Why didn't you call me? Didn't I mean anything to you?"

Dave was caught, and he knew it. "Of course I cared about you, but everything happened so fast, and, you know, time just got away from me. I figured a beautiful woman like you wouldn't wait around for someone like me. I knew someone would scoop you up as soon as I was gone."

She wasn't crying as hard now. "You're quite the charmer. No wonder I fell so hard for you."

Dave knew this conversation deserved more than a few minutes. "Ginger, can we meet later?"

She exhaled loudly and rolled her eyes. She opened her mouth to say something, but Dave cut her off.

"No, I didn't mean it like that. I have plans with Kevin. I just need to go tell him something came up. Can you meet me back here in an hour?"

She looked at him and nodded, wondering if she'd ever see him again. "Sure. Wait for me if I'm a few minutes late." She knew she wouldn't be late. She had no where else to go. She'd be sitting on this bench the entire time, but he didn't need to know that.

Dave caught up with Kevin sitting at a sidewalk table at a bar on River Street, sipping a nearly empty beer. He motioned to the waitress to bring two more as Dave sat across from him.

"I just ran into Ginger."

"Yeah? I hope you invited her to Tybee. As I recall, she's pretty hot." He raised his eyebrows up and down for emphasis.

"She's pregnant."

Kevin's mouth fell open, but he said nothing.

"She says it's mine."

"Do you believe her?"

"I don't know what to believe right now. I'm supposed to meet up with her again in about a half hour. I need to talk to her and see what's going on. I'll catch up with you on the island."

The waitress brought the beers as Dave walked away. Noticing he was alone, she asked "You still

want both of these?"

"More than ever, Darlin'."

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Dave and Ginger were married a few weeks later. He walked through the door of his apartment with his very pregnant bride. An awkward silence hung between them. He barely knew her, and he didn't love her, but something told him the child growing within her was his. Marrying her, he told himself, was the honorable thing to do, but it sure didn't feel honorable. It felt confining.

He watched Ginger look around her new home. Even six months pregnant she was gorgeous. Tall and curvaceous, her long dark hair hung in soft curls down her back. He could do worse, he thought. They'd always had a good time together. Maybe, he told himself, things wouldn't be so bad.

So why did he feel like a condemned man listening to the cell door slam shut?