

Chapter 1

• 1954 •



THE KILLER GOT INTO the house again today. We knew he was coming. My sister and I ran to the door when we heard the truck come up the street. We waited until we heard it stop in front of our house, then the footsteps of a man walking to our door, pausing for a moment before he let the killer quietly slide in through the mail slot and land on the floor at our feet.

For a moment we both stared down at the white envelope, afraid to move. I was the brave one who picked it up, turned it over to see the creepy writing on the front. Printing so small you could hardly read it; printing that spelled out my father's name, Morrie Bernstein, and below that, our home, our address, 95 Lincoln Park, Elgin, Illinois. Printing that came to us from a prisoner's cell and with these letters our family was linked to the inside of the Illinois State Penitentiary.

I knew what was inside that envelope without

opening it. It had to be a secret code, a message that only my father understood. He told us it was a game, a very long game as the letters had been coming for almost a year.

Twelve years old, my sister, Marsha, was the good child who never broke the rules, while I was the difficult second child, two years younger and always eager to get around the rules. I would take the letter to our bedroom and convince my frightened sister our father had to be a spy who was getting messages from a captured secret agent, that each day when my father said he was going to work as an accountant at the Elgin Fruit and Produce Company, he was actually meeting undercover spies and planning to save the whole country from an atomic bomb. We knew that the Russians had these big mushroom bombs that they wanted to drop on us, because each week at school we had to practice how to protect ourselves: *Drop and cover!* The teacher would be in the middle of a lesson and suddenly yell *Drop and Cover*, and all the kids had to crawl under their desks with their hands over their heads. My father was going to protect us all and make sure that the bombs would never drop on our town.

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That's how I remember it, and there is no one left alive who can remember it with me. It's almost sixty years ago and yet I can still see my father's handsome young face blooming into a smile when he took me in his arms. The cemetery is quiet. The service isn't sched-

uled to begin for two hours. I walk alone. My father was the last of my family, living to 97 and now taking with him all our shared memories. Slowly friends begin to arrive and I'm surrounded by people whose lives he touched. But there is one old man who I don't recognize. He keeps his distance, talking to no one. There is something about him that is familiar, the way he rubs his chin with the back of this hand, the way he pushes back his gray hair.

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The truth behind the letters turned out to be more frightening than any of the fantasies my sister and I made up. We learned who they came from late one night when we heard our parents fighting. My father was a gentle man who rarely got angry even when provoked by my nervous and constantly vigilant mother. My parents saw the world in radically different ways. For him, life was rich with hope, humor and optimism. He wasn't just blindly and naively cheerful but deeply certain that the core of our family's world was made of solid enduring stuff.

For my mother there was always danger around every corner, and even if she couldn't actually see around that corner she could imagine at least five or six terrible events just waiting to happen there. She was determined to protect her daughters by instilling in them an irrational fear of the unknown so that they were always prepared for the worst possibilities.

Her child-rearing regimen worked much better on

Marsha than on me. If my mother refused to let us go ice skating on the pond in below zero weather because we were going to get frostbite or fall through a thin patch of ice, Marsha would obediently stay home while I would sneak out the back door with my ice skates tucked under my arms, often with my father seeing me and saying nothing to my mother. When I came home a few hours later, without frostbite, my mother would yell at my father for letting me go. He would affectionately put his arm around her shoulders trying in vain to convince her that she was not going to be able to protect us from everything.

But the night of the fight was different. We heard my father's voice rising from their bedroom. We crept out of our room to listen at their closed door.

"Miriam, stop this," he insisted. "I am not putting the family in danger by playing an innocent game of chess through the mail. The man is lonely. He needs a friend."

"He's a convicted murderer," my mother yelled. My sister and I clutched each other's hands pressing our ears closer to the door.

"Maybe," My father lowered his voice. "Please, let's talk about this quietly. You don't want the girls to hear you."

"What do you mean maybe?" she said. "He's in prison for life. I don't understand why you want to do this."

"It's a kindness. That's what the request in the newspaper called it: *Help rehabilitate a felon. Become a*

pen pal with a convicted man and bring a bit of the outside into his life."

"He doesn't deserve kindness. He killed a man in cold blood!"

"Everyone deserves kindness."

"Not everybody. You're too soft-hearted. Would you be kind to Hilter?"

"Maybe if people had been kinder to him as a boy, he wouldn't have become Hilter."

"You're not a realist," she said. "Play chess with your brother, teach the girls to play, why choose to play with a violent man who is going to spend the rest of his life in prison."

"I should go check on the girls," he said. "Make sure they're asleep."

"Quick," my sister grabbed my arm and we raced on tiptoes back to our bedroom. We made it under the covers just as my father opened the door. When he was sure that we were there asleep and hadn't overheard the argument, he bent over each of our twin beds, kissed us softly on the forehead and left.

Once he was gone, I jumped into Marsha's bed.

So now we knew what was in the letters. They weren't spy messages but games of chess my father was playing through the mail with a killer. The prison man wasn't part of a plan to save us but a real killer. Yes, he was locked up and couldn't show up at our house in person, but still he was getting into our lives, into my father's mind, and terrifying my always worried mother.

The next night I saw my father at his desk in the

den, still in his work clothes, a starched shirt, vest and navy blue tie. I didn't want to talk with him about the letters until he changed into home clothes. There was something stiff and uneasy about him that vanished when he relaxed into a soft flannel shirt and became my dad again. It was as if he took off the day that didn't fit him and put on the life that did. I waited for him to sit back in his chair, stretch his arms and give me his easy smile before I told him as innocently as I could, that I was curious about the letters and that I wanted to see them. He said they were nothing, just simple chess game moves.

"I would have told you long ago but the two of you were having such fun making up stories about them."

He pulled a few of the familiar white envelopes from his desk drawer and opened them for me. The first was a single page with three words and a number on it. *Queen to Rook 5*. The second had only one word: *Castle*.

"Is this all you write to him?" I stared at the nearly blank pages in disbelief. "Just a few words in each letter?"

"I always start each letter with a chess move," he explained. "Then I may ask him simple things?"

"Like what?" I demanded.

"You're always so full of questions."

"Is that a bad thing?" I asked.

"No, Honey, it's a good thing," he said. "It means you have a curious mind." He folded his hands patiently. "I might ask him what he has for his meals. If he is getting to exercise. If his clothes are warm enough."

"That's all! Why don't you ask him who he killed and why? Ask him if he is sorry? Ask him how he likes knowing he is going to be in jail forever?"

"It's best not to write about that," my father said putting the letters back in the drawer. "He made a mistake and he is paying for it. I just try to be his friend."

"Mistake! How is killing somebody a mistake! "My father seemed so simple to me at that moment. Then I had a scary thought. "Are you ever going to visit him?"

"No. You are starting to sound like your mom. There is nothing to worry about. Think of it as doing charity work like you do in the Girl Scouts to raise money for orphans. "

"The orphans didn't kill anyone."

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My father, Marsha and me

Beverly Olevin

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