

Oklahoma City

THE BABY WAS GONE.

Only a blanket and a pacifier remained in the crib. Jamie stood there, clutching her own baby to her chest, trying to make sense of what she was seeing, thoughts racing frantically through her mind. She was aware that she had only seconds to convince herself that what she was seeing was true and to act on that knowledge.

She reached down and pushed the blanket aside—just to make sure.

It was like the morning that she found her grandmother dead. Jamie had felt as though there must be some other explanation for her grandmother's lifeless body. Anything but death. Jamie had even tried to lift Granny's head and place a pill between her lips. Then to shake her awake. To make it not be so.

That was how she felt now. She wanted to do something that could reverse the reality of what she was seeing.

Sounds came through the open window—a distant siren, a train whistle, the slam of a door. Normal sounds that belied that reality.

If her neighbor's baby was truly gone, it would mean that once again her life had been irreversibly changed.

But was there some other explanation? Had Lynette come in the night to take her baby home? Jamie looked at the door—her apartment's *only* door. The security chain was still engaged.

Even though her neighbor's baby was only two months old and could not climb, could not walk, could not even crawl, Jamie—still holding Billy in her arms—dropped to her knees and, with a fervent, whispered prayer, looked under the baby bed.

She scrambled back to her feet and, laying her cheek against the top of Billy's head, took a deep breath and willed her pounding heart to slow

down. Perhaps there was a logical explanation. She was overlooking something. Sometimes her keys weren't in her purse, and she would look everywhere for them only to realize they had been in the purse all along.

She ran her hands over the baby bed and shook the blanket.

The bed was definitely empty.

She forced herself to look out the open window, half expecting to see a small broken body on the ground three floors below.

Nothing was lying there.

She looked up and down the alley. Everything seemed so normal. It was just an ordinary-but-somewhat-seedy neighborhood near downtown Oklahoma City where she had come to put hundreds of miles between her and a ranch in the Texas Panhandle. To start over.

Jamie thought of all the other nights when her Billy had been the baby sleeping in the bed near the open window. How could it have been done? She doubted if an ordinary ladder could reach the third-floor window. Had someone lowered himself from the roof? Or crawled along the ledge? But still disbelief clouded her senses. Perhaps she had only dreamed that Lynette dropped her baby by last night. Just as she sometimes dreamed that her grandmother was still alive.

But Lynette's polka-dotted diaper bag was still on the coffee table.

A sob escaped from Jamie's throat. She closed her eyes and begged God to protect Lynette's baby.

Billy was whimpering. She needed to change him. Needed to nurse him.

She pressed her lips to Billy's forehead. They were one creature, she and her baby. There was no line between where she ended and he began. Love for him coursed through her veins. She would do anything to keep him. She would rather die than lose him.

Whoever had taken Lynette's baby had made a terrible mistake. The baby that person meant to take was Billy.

"Oh, God, Lynette, I am so sorry," Jamie whispered, imagining the anguish that Lynette would go through. "So sorry," she said again.

She looked around the two-room apartment she had called home for more than a month now. If her neighbor's baby was truly gone, she and Billy were no longer safe here.

Maybe they had never been safe here. Maybe it had only been a matter of time until they were found.

She would have to leave. *Now*. Everything had changed. *Everything!*

Chapter One

JAMIE'S EARLIEST MEMORY was of flying, of looking out the window of her daddy's airplane and seeing the whole of Galveston Island, which from the ground seemed a world unto itself.

Her father was a flight instructor and sometimes took her and her mother on Sunday afternoon flights.

Jamie preferred flying through clear blue skies with only occasional puffs of pretty white clouds floating by. She didn't like being surrounded by clouds. She was afraid they would get lost in them and never find their way home.

Sometimes her daddy flew so low over the ocean Jamie thought they were going to crash into the waves, and her mother would squeal for him to stop. Jamie realized it was a game that her parents were playing.

Perhaps they had died playing that game.

It was her parents' tenth anniversary. They planned to fly to Cozumel, an island off the coast of Mexico, and spend a week in a big hotel. But first they flew north to leave Jamie with her grandmother. Granny met them at the Mesquite airpark. Jamie held Granny's hand while they watched the plane take off. Jamie waved until it was only a tiny speck in a blue, cloudless sky.

The plane never arrived in Cozumel. There was an investigation, and eventually her parents were declared dead.

Sometimes Jamie imagined that the airplane had had engine trouble and her daddy had been forced to land on some uncharted island like the castaways on *Gilligan's Island*, and someday they would be rescued and come back to her. Every time a small plane flew overhead on its way to the Mesquite airpark, Jamie wondered if it was her parents coming back to get her. Long after she could not imagine living anyplace other than her grandmother's small white house, she would dream of her mother

and father opening the front gate, coming up the walk, and knocking on the door.

In her parents' will, Jamie's half-sister Ginger had been named her guardian. Their mother's child from an earlier, unhappy marriage, Ginger was sixteen years older than Jamie, married, and not at all interested in raising her.

Ginger had never had warm, cozy feelings for her half-sister. She had wanted to be royally pissed when her mother married and they moved to Galveston. But thanks to her stepfather's generosity, Ginger was able to attend Southern Methodist University and pledge a sorority instead of living at home and attending a community college. Ginger was totally mortified when she learned that her mother was expecting a baby at age forty-three, but when the baby was born, she did a pretty good job pretending to be enchanted by her little sister. When Ginger met Mr. Right, her stepfather coughed up enough money for her to have a storybook wedding, but Ginger found it very difficult to live on her husband's salary as a stockbroker at Merrill Lynch. She had thought stockbrokers made a lot of money and felt cheated when she realized that was not so.

Except for a ten-thousand-dollar bequest to Ginger, six-year-old Jamie was the sole recipient of her father's estate, and it didn't take Ginger long to realize that being named her sister's guardian was an answer to her prayers. She sold her stepfather's interest in the flight school and his family home on Galveston Island, and—so that little Jamie could have a room of her own—bought a brand-new house with a swimming pool in north Dallas and promised herself that she would do right by the kid.

Ginger tried to love the little girl. Or at least like her. But she became pregnant with twins and, what with feeling so damned tired all the time and decorating her new home, she just didn't have the energy. Sometimes she forgot to pick Jamie up at school, and the school secretary would call to remind her, her voice icy with disapproval. One day Ginger got a note from the school nurse saying that Jamie's shoes were too small and as a result she was suffering from severely ingrown toenails and needed to be taken to a podiatrist.

Ginger decided the kid was bound to feel more at home with their grandmother Gladys and started leaving Jamie in Mesquite for longer and longer periods of time until Gladys finally hired an attorney. By the time Gladys had been granted permanent custody of Jamie, the money that was

supposed to pay for raising her was almost gone. The lawyer suggested that Gladys sue Ginger on Jamie's behalf. The court could force Ginger to sell her house and whatever else she had bought with the money.

"I can't do that," Gladys told the lawyer. "Ginger is my granddaughter, too."

Gladys was then well into her seventies. She didn't much believe in asking the Lord for favors but did suggest in her nightly prayer that it would sure be nice if she could live long enough to get the child raised.

Jamie understood that her sister had not wanted her and that her grandmother had decided to do what was best for her. It took her a while to realize that her grandmother also loved her. Granny didn't grab her in her arms and swing her around the way her father had done. And Granny didn't hug and kiss her all the time like her mother. Her Granny was simply there. Always calm. And firm. Granny didn't take any sass. And she had her rules. Muddy shoes came off at the door. The bathroom basin and tub were to be wiped clean after every use. Beds were to be made as soon as a body got out of them. The Lord was to be praised before every meal. And before the kitchen light was turned off at night, the counters and tabletop were to be washed with soapy water and the floor swept clean. At her sister's house in Dallas, Ginger had constantly been making up rules and then changing them. Granny's rules never changed. Jamie always knew what was expected of her, and there was comfort in that. And if she sat on the footstool in front of her grandmother's chair and laid her head against her grandmother's knee, Granny would stroke her hair.

Being raised by an elderly grandmother made Jamie different from the other kids. A few of her classmates also lived with their grandmothers, but those grandmothers weren't elderly. They didn't wear cotton dresses that had been washed so many times the printed flowers had almost faded away. They didn't wear their granddaughter's outgrown athletic shoes. They didn't clean houses to supplement their Social Security checks.

And there was the matter of Jamie's height. She was the tallest kid in her grade until some of the boys caught up with her in high school, and it didn't help a bit that her last name was Long. By the time she finished growing, she was five feet ten.

Jamie had always loved to run. Granny said she was as swift and graceful as a gazelle, but it was the grandson of their back-fence neighbors who encouraged Jamie to try out for the high school track team.

Joe Brammer lived in Houston but every summer came to spend a month with his grandparents. Joe was almost six years older than Jamie, and his grandparents would send him over to help with the heavy stuff, like pruning trees, digging out a stump, changing a tire, or hauling off a broken-down washing machine. Granny would always feed him for his trouble. He would tell her in a conspiratorial tone that *her* apple pie was better than his grandmother's. Sometimes Joe would play dominoes with Jamie and Granny on a Sunday afternoon. Other times Jamie would help him work on his Jeep, or sometimes it was her grandmother's car getting the oil changed or the spark plugs cleaned. And when it cooled down in the evening they would shoot baskets at the hoop mounted over his grandparents' garage door, or one of them might challenge the other to a foot race. He was better at shooting baskets than she was, but from age ten she could outrun him, and Joe would groan and moan and swear he would cut out her tongue if she ever mentioned it to anyone. Then after one particularly humbling defeat, he announced that she was going to try out for the high school track team, and if she didn't, he would personally drive up here from Houston and drag her down to the track. "You're a natural, Jamie," he said, punching her arm and mussing her hair.

Joe was right. Jamie had excellent times for both long and middle distances. And was competitive at the long jump.

High school was better than grade school. She felt at home with the other girls on the track team, some of whom were as tall as or taller than she was. They called one another on the telephone and went to the movies together. One girl, Charlene, even became her best friend, and they often slept over at each other's houses and both worked Saturdays at the VIP Car Wash.

Jamie never had a boyfriend, though. Never had a real date. Sometimes this or that boy would hang out around her locker between classes and act like maybe he wanted to say more than "Hi" or "See you in class," but she always pretended she didn't notice. The only boy she ever had romantic thoughts about was Joe Brammer, which was silly of her. She knew Joe's feelings for her were of the big-brother variety, but maybe when she was older . . .

By this time, however, Joe was in college and working summers as an oil-field roustabout. The only time he came to Mesquite was with his parents for Thanksgiving, Easter, and an occasional weekend. There were no

The Surrogate • 7

more foot races or shooting hoops in the driveway. But instead of thinking about him less, thoughts of Joe were always there at some level of Jamie's consciousness. In her mind she would playact entire conversations with him. When she closed her eyes at night, she imagined more than conversations.

Whenever he was in town Joe would come over to pay his respects to Jamie and her grandmother and admire Jamie's growing collection of track medals. He said he didn't feel quite so bad now that she had beat him whenever they raced to the highway and back.

Easter weekend during Jamie's junior year, Joe stopped by like always. He asked Jamie about school and track and inquired about Granny's health. And he told them about his college classes and how he couldn't decide whether he wanted to be a high school history teacher or go to law school. When Granny announced it was past her bedtime, Joe and Jamie went for a walk. It was a clear night, the air filled with the sounds of crickets and the air brakes on the big rigs over on Highway 352 as they slowed to make the Scyene Road exit.

"If you went to law school, would you stay in Austin or go out of state?" she asked Joe, thinking that if she got a track scholarship to UT and he was a law student there, they might see each other from time to time. Maybe he would stop thinking of her as a kid sister of sorts if she were a college student.

"I'm not sure," Joe answered. "The girl I'm going with is majoring in broadcast journalism. If she gets a job out of state, I might apply someplace else."

"Oh," was all Jamie could say. She felt as though all the air had gone out of her lungs. As though her bones had gone soft. When she stumbled, Joe grabbed her arm, but as soon as she got her balance he let go.

"Come on," he said. "I'd better take you home before your grandmother comes looking for you."

That night, Jamie sobbed into her pillow. What a silly girl she had been to hope that Joe Brammer might someday realize that deep down he had always loved her but had denied those feelings because she was too young. He was the only boy she had ever imagined kissing. The only boy she had imagined making love to.

Stupid. That's what she was. A stupid, silly girl.

Jamie was recruited by the track coaches at several state colleges, but

at the last meet of her senior season, she injured her knee going for a conference record in the long jump. At first, the operation to repair her torn ligaments seemed like a success, but her knee was never the same. She would be able to walk without a limp and even run—but not competitively.

Charlene's family moved to California after graduation. The two girls promised to stay in touch, but Jamie wondered if they would ever see each other again, if she would ever have another best friend.

Thanks to her good grades and her scores on college entrance exams, Jamie was granted a tuition-waiver scholarship at the University of Texas in Austin. Her grandmother sent a hundred dollars every month to help with her dorm bill, and Jamie worked twenty hours a week at a dry-cleaning establishment. She had little time for a social life but did have several friends—girls like herself who had to work and were not in a sorority.

During the second semester of her freshman year Joe Brammer started to stop by the dry cleaner's, and they would visit in between customers. He was thinking about applying for a fellowship that would allow him to study international law at Oxford during his last semester of law school. And he sometimes mentioned his girlfriend, but mostly they talked about their classes, music, current events, and what they wanted to do with their lives. Sometimes he came by just before her shift was over and walked her back to the campus.

That summer he didn't come to Mesquite at all.

Her grandmother was well past eighty by then and no longer strong enough to clean other people's houses. When Jamie left for her sophomore year at UT, her grandmother cried because she could no longer afford to send her any money. Jamie assured her that she could manage just fine, which she did by working longer hours and counting every penny.

She was thrilled when Joe dropped by the dry cleaner's her first week back, and she dared to hope that maybe he wasn't serious about the girl he was dating. But a couple of weeks later he came by to tell her that he was going to get married. When he left, Jamie went into the tiny bathroom and cried, running the water to muffle the sound of her sobs. She stayed in the bathroom so long that the manager knocked on the door and asked if she was all right.

Jamie tried to stop thinking about Joe, especially at night while she was

The Surrogate • 9

waiting for sleep. She knew now that he was never going to fall in love with her. That she was still just a kid to him. But she didn't have anyone else to take his role in her nighttime imaginings and wondered if she ever would.

Mid-November it became apparent that her grandmother was not well. Jamie finished out the semester then packed up and came home. When Granny protested, Jamie told her the decision was not negotiable.

It was strange to see her grandmother's house unkempt. The only food in the refrigerator was on dishes Jamie recognized as belonging to Joe's grandmother. When she returned the dishes, Mrs. Washburn hugged her and insisted on pouring her a cup of coffee. "I'm glad you're home," she said, patting Jamie's arm affectionately. "Your grandmother needs you."

Jamie spent several days cleaning the little house. In the process, she found a drawer full of unpaid bills and threats to discontinue service from the utility companies. She also discovered that her grandmother's property taxes had not been paid in years, the mortgage company had begun foreclosure proceedings, and Granny's bank account was overdrawn.

When she asked her grandmother about the bills, Granny said not to worry. "I'm expecting a check for thirty-eight thousand dollars any day now," she explained.

"Who's sending the check?" Jamie asked.

"I won it," Granny said with a proud smile. "I kept getting these letters promising me a prize if I made a contribution to the war on cancer, so I finally sent a donation. And a nice man called and said I had won all this money. All I had to do to secure my winnings was send a check for eight hundred and seventy-two dollars. My winnings should come any day now."

"I'm sure they will," Jamie said with a sinking heart.

"And in the meantime, there's some money in an oatmeal box on the top shelf of the pantry," Granny said.

When Jamie looked, there was no oatmeal box in the pantry or anyplace else in the kitchen. Jamie applied for a credit card and used cash advances to cover Granny's overdraft and pay the overdue bills. She used a cash advance on a second credit card to appease the mortgage company, which agreed to wait six months before foreclosing on the loan. She also got a job at a hardware store but had to quit when Granny could no longer get herself to the bathroom. Jamie told her grandmother that the prize

money had finally arrived and began charging groceries, gas, and medical expenses not covered by Medicare. She made monthly payments on the first two credit cards with cash advances from a third.

With her grandmother all but bedridden, Jamie encouraged her to fill her waking hours with reminiscing and listened while her grandmother dug up old memories—good and bad. Jamie realized how difficult her grandmother's life had been—being widowed as a young woman and raising her daughter on her own.

“The best of my life has been the last,” Granny told Jamie. “You have been my greatest joy and my crowning achievement.”

She died the next day.

After the men from the funeral home had taken Granny's body away, Jamie called Ginger, whom she hadn't seen in years. “I thought you'd want to know,” she told her sister.

After several seconds of silence, Ginger said, “I know you're going to miss her.”

That night Jamie dreamed that their parents arrived just in time to be with her and Ginger at the cemetery when they buried their grandmother next to her husband, who died so long ago that no one except Granny remembered him.

Ginger arrived the next morning and walked through the house. “Did she have a will?” she asked.

Jamie shook her head.

That afternoon, Ginger returned with a rented truck and two burly men. “Some of this old stuff might be worth something,” she said. “I talked to a Realtor about selling the place.”

When Jamie explained that the house belonged to the mortgage company, Ginger accused Jamie of stealing her share of the inheritance.

Jamie walked through the house gathering up the things she wanted to keep and carried them out to the old Chevy, which Granny had already put in her name. That night she slept on a mattress apparently deemed too old and lumpy to be of value.

Ginger didn't even stay for the funeral.

A surprising number of people did come, however, including Joe Brammer's grandparents. “Your grandmother was a fine woman and our dear friend,” Mr. Washburn said with a bear hug. Mrs. Washburn embraced Jamie and kissed her cheek. “We're going to miss her,” she said, “and you,

too.” Jamie knew that the Washburns had purchased a retirement home in Georgia and would soon be leaving Mesquite.

She stayed in town long enough to scrub the house from top to bottom and settle her grandmother’s affairs. Then she carried the last of her things and Granny’s houseplants out to the car and, taking one last look at the little white house that had been her home for more than a dozen years, drove away with tears streaming down her face.

She stopped at the cemetery on her way out of town.

As she stood there staring down at the patch of raw earth, a favorite memory of her grandmother came into her mind. They were doing the spring cleaning and had propped open the back screen door so that they could carry the mattresses and rugs out to the backyard for an airing. A young sparrow flew through the open door and went completely crazy when it couldn’t find a way out. Fluffy little feathers fluttered about like snow as it beat its wings first against the window over the sink and then the window by the table. Back and forth it went. Granny stood perfectly still in the middle of the kitchen talking in a low, soothing voice, telling the frantic little creature that it was a very beautiful bird and that she had always wished that she could be a bird for a day so she could fly high in the sky and better see what God hath wrought. Finally the exhausted creature lighted on top of the refrigerator, and Granny reached out to it. The bird perched on her finger and, still talking softly, she carried it to the door and watched it fly away.

What Jamie would miss the most was her grandmother’s calmness. It had soothed like a balm.

“I love you, Granny, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart,” she said.

She was alone in the world, deeply in debt, and two and a half years away from a college degree.

But she did have a plan.