

PROLOGUE

“Did you just call my son an asshole?”

Birdie Milton was fed up with these rednecks. She rose from her prime seat in the middle of the bleachers, ten rows up, and faced a woman who had just called her son, Freddie, that very thing. Birdie had short, blonde hair the color her hairstylist called Golden Sahara and was, by Buckhead standards, an unacceptable size fourteen, which made her bigger than the woman in every way. Bigger size. Bigger wedding ring. Bigger bank account.

Eleven-year-old Freddie Milton, wearing the teal and purple uniform of the home team Vikings, stood on second base, refusing to concede an inch of ground as the coach for the opposing Macon Mudcats, who bore more than a passing resemblance to a velociraptor, screamed bloody murder from his team’s dugout. Freddie had slid into second base, cleats first, and accidentally (maybe) had used his spiked shoes to move the second baseman out of the way. It had all gone down in a flash of flailing arms and legs and a cloud of dust. Blood was seeping from the puncture wounds Freddie left behind.

“He slid into my son on purpose,” the cursing woman said. “He should be thrown out of the game.”

“I don’t know how you conduct yourselves at baseball games in Macon,” Birdie told her, “but here in Atlanta we don’t call eleven-year-old boys assholes. You redneck piece of shit.”

The bleachers were filled with a mixture of Buckhead parents and the parents of the Mudcats, who had made the two-hour journey north to Chastain Park to take on the Vikings, a team filled with boys aged eleven or twelve, none of whom would ever be a professional baseball player. Many in the bleachers, though, seemed to think they were at the World Series, rather than a Little League game between preteens. That level of competitiveness, more so among the parents than their children, caused normally rational suburbanites to turn into screaming banshees.

Birdie was about to go on and say and do who knows what to the unfortunate woman from a place that unfortunately wasn't Buckhead, but stopped when she heard someone call her son's name.

"Freddie! You're out of the game. Come on in."

Birdie watched as Freddie kicked second base in frustration and glared at the bloodied Mudcats player. Freddie was short for eleven but also big for eleven. He led with his shoulders when he walked and looked more suited to football than baseball, but Birdie wouldn't let her sons play football. Not *her* boys. Football was too dangerous. The threat of concussions—of possible *brain* damage—was too great. Birdie was nothing if not a ferociously protective mother.

Birdie came down the bleachers toward the field in a huff, stepping over and sometimes *on* other parents. She wanted to stop herself, but she couldn't. She never could. Birdie felt like she was the voice of reason and the enforcer of rules and the only sensible person in almost any situation. Birdie didn't "do" polite. "Tact" was not a four-letter word in her arsenal. She sometimes went to sleep hating herself, but at least she *could* sleep at night. Unlike lesser women who cared what people thought of them.

Marcus Wiley, the Vikings assistant coach, a tall and muscular Black man who still looked the part of the revered football star he once was, stood impatiently near third base. Birdie thought she saw him roll his eyes at her. How dare he! Birdie wasn't a fan of Marcus, either as a football player or an assistant coach, and he

wasn't a fan of hers, either as a team mother or as a person. There was an unspoken agreement between the two of them to simply avoid one another, so Marcus waited this one out and let Birdie do her Birdie thing.

"Anderson Tupper!" she yelled as she reached the fence that separated (or maybe contained) the parents from the field. "Don't you dare bench my son!"

Anderson Tupper sat on a bucket of balls at the entrance to the Vikings' dugout. His tanned legs (even in spring) were stretched out before him and his Vikings baseball cap, with an embroidered approximation of the god Thor (whose younger brother Anderson could have easily passed for), was slightly askew. He eyed Birdie warily. He seemed to constantly be looking out for the mothers. He turned his attention back to the game and his team. That team of boys fidgeted on the bench awaiting their turn at bat and stifled laughs as Freddie marched off the field in a squall of anger and joined them, even as his mother screeched from the other side of the fence.

"You should sit back down, Birdie," Anderson told her.

"I signed him up for this league so he could *play*," she said. "It's not like he's benched forever. Just until we can have a talk about sportsmanship."

Sportsmanship? Birdie thought that was a ridiculous word. A loser word. She didn't want her son being taught that the real world operated under some kind of chivalric code where doing the right thing mattered. Because it didn't. The people that got ahead in life did so by crushing namby-pamby do-gooders who moaned about fairness—and *sportsmanship*. Birdie lived by a motto she had picked up from Douglas MacArthur (or maybe it was Jennifer Aniston): *Life's tough. Get a helmet.*

"My team," Anderson tossed out as he joined his players in the dugout. "Not yours."

Oh, how Anderson Tupper annoyed Birdie. He was so handsome. He was so rich. He was so charming. He just *was*. He didn't have to earn it. He didn't have to marry for it. All his many gifts

came out with him when he was born, as if God had packed them up himself in a little Louis Vuitton diaper bag and sent them along through the birth canal.

“I swear to God, Anderson Tupper,” Birdie spit out, “you’ll regret this!”

C H A P T E R

1

After the Murder

SHAY

It was poison. A fine powder the shade of yellow you might find on the walls of a baby's room or on a sympathy card left with flowers at a funeral. It looked harmless but was like a serial killer masquerading as the kindly next-door neighbor. Ted Bundy in a lemon sherbet windbreaker. It attacked your eyes and your airways, leaving you crying and choking for breath and wondering if taking your own life wasn't the more merciful way to go. Some said it was the heat in the South that caused people to act a little crazy. Shay couldn't prove it, but she was certain it was the *pollen*.

It seemed to Shay that spring brought out the worst in Atlantans. There was no escaping the pollen. It hung as a cloud over the city, covered cars until they too were yellow, and ran down the streets in rivers when it rained to form a paste along the grates of storm drains. It was in the air and in the people and Shay observed that in spring the citizens of Atlanta became somewhat unhinged. Maybe even murderous. Perhaps the pollen had gotten to Shay.

Maybe spring was the same as any other time of year. Maybe pollen wasn't the crazy-making villain she had always thought it to be. As she stood over the bloody body, however, Shay was more convinced than ever that her theory was correct.

"He's a good-looking guy," Shay said as she shined a flashlight across the body. She was, officially, senior homicide detective Lt. Resa LaShay Claypool, known to everyone but her mother as Shay. She looked down at a very dead white male. Despite his bashed-in skull, she could still see that he was handsome. Or had been. Shay had encountered enough dead bodies to see through blood and bruising and all forms of gruesomeness to the person beneath.

"I don't see it," said her partner, Dub Rattigan (he had always been and would always be just Dub). He was ten years older than Shay but was her subordinate. Junior detective to her senior. Sergeant to her lieutenant. Not that he seemed to mind.

"Don't be jealous, Dub. It's not his fault he's pretty."

"I mean, I literally don't see it. Not with all the blood."

The body of the handsome but dead male lay in a fetal position in the dirt. Shay and Dub kept a respectful distance to preserve the crime scene. They wore gloves and even had white sanitary booties over their shoes. A police photographer, also wearing gloves and booties, carefully stepped around the body. The flashes from his camera lit up the night in blinding bursts as he took pictures for the final pages of the photo album of a man's life. All their care to leave as little footprint as possible, however, probably wouldn't matter. The body was in the dugout of a Little League baseball field and who knows how many cleats had trod through the dirt that day.

"You should wear a mask," Shay told Dub. "Don't want you sneezing all over the crime scene."

"Have you heard me sneeze once today?" Dub asked. "Debbie got me some newfangled allergy medicine and it's actually working. It's natural. Made from roots."

"Roots of what?"

"No idea. I don't ask questions. I just do what the wife says."

“Murder weapon?” Shay asked.

“Nothing yet.”

“From the looks of it, it was something big.”

“Big and blunt,” Dub agreed. “He was definitely beaten to death.”

Shay walked to the entrance of the dugout and knelt down to get a different angle on the man’s body, the beam from her flashlight slowly scanning from his feet to his head. Every bit of him was covered in blood that had already dried on his body or was congealed in puddles around it. As the flashlight moved up his arms, the beam caught a glint from the watch on his wrist. It was gold, and Shay could just make out the diamonds on the face beneath the blood splattered crystal. If Shay had been looking for something to steal, that would have been the first thing she would have taken. Which led her to one obvious conclusion.

“It wasn’t a robbery,” she said. “Don’t see a wallet, but he’s still got his watch. That’s a Rolex. It costs more than your car.”

“Everything costs more than my car.”

Shay turned away from the gruesome scene but not because it disturbed her. She’d seen far worse. Hell, in South Atlanta she’d once come across a parked car with two suspects sitting inside. When she’d approached, she realized that the two men had been decapitated, their heads placed back on opposite torsos, burritos sticking out of their mouths, and Taco Bell bags carefully placed on their laps. But that was South Atlanta, with its gangs and drug deals gone bad. This was Buckhead. The Beverly Hills of Atlanta. Murders here tended to be a little more high class.

Shay and Dub left the dugout and walked toward home plate. They both wore fedoras, the signature of the Hat Squad of police detectives in Atlanta. Shay couldn’t remember a time in her life before she became a detective that she had ever worn a hat. Yet she wore this hat with pride and thought she looked good under its wide felt brim. It gave her authority. Other detectives and police officers worked around the field gathering bits and pieces of this and that and putting them in bags for cataloging. There wasn’t a

lot to gather, however, because the field was so pristine. It was part of a complex of other pristine fields at Chastain Youth Baseball. This was where the boys of Atlanta's most prosperous area used the best equipment money could buy to battle for small plastic participation trophies.

The dew in the perfectly manicured grass shimmered under the field lights as Dub pulled his jacket, a sale purchase from Burlington Coat Factory, a little tighter against the chill of the spring night. "Good Lord, they probably have baby goats cut this grass," he said. His Southern accent seemed to be getting thicker by the moment. "You should have seen the fields I played on when I was a kid. They didn't have to mow the grass because there wasn't any."

Shay had heard these types of stories from Dub hundreds of times in the three years they had been partners. She had grown up in Atlanta. *In* Atlanta. Not a suburb or in a one light, one policeman, one filling station town in South Georgia. Not like Dub, who was from Pitts, Georgia, which was south of, well, nowhere. They made for an odd pair. Shay was Black, while Dub was so white he didn't even have freckles. Shay was a city girl and Dub was a country boy. Shay was liberal and Dub was conservative. It didn't take Shay long to realize, though, that they had kindness and decency in common, and that's all that really mattered. They liked each other just fine.

It was the middle of the night, and they were both tired. This area wasn't their usual beat, but cutbacks and the luck of the draw had made this their case. Shay would have liked to have stayed home in bed. She wasn't a fan of the drive to North Atlanta or the area. It was only when she spent time among the mansions of Buckhead that Shay lost some of her abundant confidence. Even though she was a single mother who'd managed to send her son to college (the Ivy League, at that, and damn it was expensive, even with the scholarships), had bought her own home and paid it off, and rose through the ranks of the Atlanta Police Department to

become a senior detective, being in Buckhead made Shay feel like she had somehow failed in life.

The idyllic quiet of their murder investigation was spoiled by the appearance of a man in a baseball cap with CYB embroidered above its visor. He hovered off the first base line, nervously watching the many police officers trod across the field.

“Excuse me,” he called out to Shay and Dub, “but could y’all possibly not step on the grass?”

He actually said that.

“Sir,” Shay said in her best mom/detective tone, “did you not see the dead body in the dugout? Unless you’re here to make a confession, and we can wrap this up right now, we’ll be walking wherever we damn well please.”

This wasn’t the type of man who tolerated women speaking to him that way. Even though he was wearing a ball cap and a sweatshirt, Shay couldn’t miss the Gucci loafers below the hem of his professionally distressed jeans. He was used to being in charge and respected, if not for any other reason than his existence.

“I’m Dr. Lamar Burrows,” the man said. He looked uncomfortable as Dub wrote the name down in one of the small notebooks he always carried with him. “I’m on the board of CYB.”

“They have a board?” Shay said, sort of to Dub and sort of to the cosmos. It seemed so ludicrous. It was *Little League*.

“Were you the one who found the body, Mr. Burrows?” asked Dub.

“It’s *Doctor* Burrows.”

“Is that Burrows with a U or an O at the front?”

“Burrows with a U, obviously,” Lamar Burrows said condescendingly, as if Dub were a simpleton. “And no, I didn’t find him. The groundskeeper did.”

“We’re going to need to talk to him,” said Shay. She looked across the field. Signs for sponsors from Morgan Stanley to Delta Airlines to Coke hung along the fence. No Chico’s Bail Bonds here. She turned back to Burrows-with-a-U. She didn’t like people

who were rude. Especially if they were rude to Dub, who was the nicest man she knew. She decided from now on the Doctor would be known, in her mind at least, as Burrows-with-an-FU. “Did you know the victim?”

“Of course,” said Burrows. “It’s Anderson Tupper.”

“He’s a Tupper,” sighed Dub, shaking his head. He closed his notebook.

“Tupper?” Shay asked. “Like, *the* Toppers?” Shay didn’t need an answer. Of course, it was *the* Toppers. They were one of the richest families in Georgia—after Tyler Perry, the guys who started Home Depot and the people who sold the chicken sandwiches Dub loved so much. Shay knew that there would be no wrapping this up on this night. Even if the murderer ran out now, covered in blood and screaming “I did it!” there wasn’t going to be anything easy about this case. Shay rubbed her eyes. She was already exhausted. “It’s the pollen. Makes people crazy.”