

THE END OF HER

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Prologue

*January 10, 2009
Creemore, Colorado*

THE SNOW HAS fallen heavily, relentlessly, for two days now, and shows no sign of letting up. It's madness to go. But the ploughs are out, Lindsey reminds herself. She stares moodily out the window, feeling trapped and restless. Trapped by the mountains surrounding her in this small Colorado town thirty miles from downtown Denver. Trapped by the endless snow. Snow brings such silence. Sometimes the silence makes her want to scream.

Her husband enters the tiny, crowded living room behind her; the space is cheaply furnished, the teetering bookshelves held together with screws.

'All set?' Patrick asks as she turns and looks up at him, her hands resting on her huge, pregnant belly. They're still being careful with each other, after last night's argument.

She's glad to be getting out of here, where her sense of

isolation is so complete. Snow or not, they're going to visit her mother and sister in Grand Junction for a few days, where the weather is more moderate. Their bags are packed, and standing by the door. She longs to be back in the bosom of her family – she's hungry for the much-needed company and attention. She didn't know this would be so hard. She'll stop in familiar coffee shops, and meet up with the friends she'd left behind. They'll smile and exclaim over how big she is, and want to touch her stomach; they'll be excited about the impending baby. And Lindsey will feel better. Better about everything. And then she'll be able to face coming back.

Or maybe she will stay in Grand Junction.

'I'd better start shovelling the car out,' Patrick says, and puts on his boots and coat. He adds a hat and gloves, and says, 'I'll warm up the car for you.'

She nods and turns back to the window.

Chapter One

August 2018

Aylesford, New York

HANNA BRIGHT PUTS little Teddy in his baby swing on the front porch and sits down to read her novel. It's going to get hot later, but in the morning it's nice here on the porch, out of the sun. She notices two cars parked at the house across the street and a couple of doors down. The house is for sale; someone must be looking to buy.

She soon becomes engrossed in her novel, but looks up a little while later when she senses movement across the street. A heavy-set man in a suit whom Hanna recognizes as the real estate agent is in the driveway talking to a woman. Hanna watches them, idly wondering if she is a serious buyer. The house hasn't been on the market for long, and this is a desirable neighbourhood; she imagines it will sell fairly quickly. She hopes it goes to a young family – she wants lots of friends for Teddy, who's six months old. There's a pair of four-month-old

twins with a really nice mom – Stephanie – directly across the street whom Hanna's become friends with. This woman looks to be alone – no husband or kids in tow.

With a final handshake, the woman turns away from the agent and heads for her parked car. As she reaches the street, she looks over at Hanna on her porch and stops. Then, to Hanna's surprise, she crosses the street and walks towards her house. What does she want? Hanna wonders.

'Hi there,' the woman calls out in a friendly voice.

Hanna can see that she's probably in her early thirties and is certainly attractive. She has shoulder-length blonde hair, a good figure and enviable posture. After a quick glance to check that Teddy is content, Hanna stands up and walks down her porch steps. 'Hi, can I help you?' she asks politely.

'I was just looking at the house across the street,' the other woman says, making her way up the drive. Hanna walks over to meet her, shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand. 'Do you mind if I ask you a bit about the neighbourhood?' the woman asks.

So, she's a serious buyer then, Hanna thinks, a bit disappointed. 'Sure,' she says.

'My husband and I are interested in this area – is it a good place to raise children, do you think?' She nods towards the baby swing on the porch and smiles. 'I see you've got a baby.'

Hanna warms to her then and describes the neighbourhood with enthusiasm. Maybe the woman is already pregnant, but not showing yet.

At the end of their chat, the woman thanks her and walks back to her car. Hanna realizes she didn't get her name. Oh well. Plenty of time for that if she does buy the house.

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Something niggles at the back of her mind, but she doesn't know what. Teddy starts to cry then, and as she lifts the baby out of the swing, she realizes what it is. The woman hadn't been wearing a wedding ring. No matter – lots of people have families without getting married these days, although she'd mentioned a husband. But who looks at a house without her spouse?

Stephanie Kilgour has put the twins down in their cribs upstairs for their morning nap. Now she sits down on the living-room sofa for a moment and leans back and closes her eyes. She's so tired that she doesn't know how she actually manages to get up when the babies start crying for her at 6 a.m. Nothing – and no one – could have prepared her for this.

She relaxes for a moment, letting her exhausted body sink into the cushions, her head heavy against the pillows. She lets herself go slack. If she's not careful, she might fall asleep just sitting here. And that wouldn't be good – the twins only go down for about half an hour in the morning, and the difficulty of rousing herself after such a short time won't be worth it. She'll get her own rest when the twins have their longer nap in the afternoon.

Her baby girls, Emma and Jackie, are the best thing that ever happened to her. But she had no idea it would be this hard. Had no sense of the toll it would take on her body, and on her mind too. The effects of protracted sleeplessness are catching up with her. People who knew she was expecting twins – she hadn't made a secret of it – had joked with her about how much more difficult twins would be. She'd merely smiled, delighted with her pregnancy, and was even secretly

smug at how good she felt, how easily her body was handling the changes.

Stephanie had always been a little bit of a control freak, and she'd spent a lot of time on her birth plan, wanting everything to go just right. She wasn't so complacent that she thought she could do it without drugs, but she wanted to have a normal birth, even with twins.

Once they were in the labour suite, though, the plan soon went out the window. She'd ended up with two babies in distress and an emergency C-section. Instead of soothing music, low lighting and controlled breathing, it was all beeping machines, dropping heart rates, swarming medical staff, and being wheeled hurriedly into the operating room. She remembers her husband, Patrick, holding her hand, his face white with fear. What she remembers most, besides her panic as the babies were whisked away to intensive care before she could even hold them, was the convulsive shivering and nausea after the birth. Fortunately, both babies had been fine – healthy and a good weight.

It was hard not to feel like a failure in those early days, struggling with sleeplessness, the pain of the C-section recovery, and the frustration of breastfeeding two babies, seemingly all the time . . . Those first couple of weeks after the twins were born were the most difficult of Stephanie's life. The babies soon began nursing well, but she often thinks about how stressful the C-section had been – for everyone. *We don't always get to choose*, she reminds herself. The important thing is that she and the girls were healthy. These days, Stephanie is astonished at how naive she was before the birth. Control is an illusion.

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And then, the colic . . . the babies didn't sleep well from the outset, and then around the age of six weeks, it got worse. They cried and fussed and wouldn't go down to sleep. Her paediatrician, Dr Prashad, told her that it would probably ease at about twelve weeks. That was more than a month ago, and it hasn't got any better. Now Stephanie – and Patrick – seem to be operating on pure willpower. They haven't had a good night's sleep since the twins were born. The fussing starts in the early evening and lasts until about one or two in the morning. Then they're up again at six. *Brutal* is the only way to describe it.

Now, Stephanie's breathing slows and in mere moments, she's out cold.

Suddenly a piercing sound – a loud, insistent *beep, beep, beep* – wakes Stephanie with a start. She's disoriented, her thoughts muddled. It's the smoke alarm – there's smoke in the house – she can smell it. She lurches to her feet, eyes wide with fear. It's coming from the kitchen. Momentarily paralysed, she thinks of the twins upstairs, then she runs to the kitchen. There's a frying pan on the stove, and it has erupted into flames. For a moment she stands in the doorway, stupefied, because she can't remember putting anything on the stove. Quickly, she enters the kitchen and reaches frantically for the fire extinguisher in an upper cupboard near the stove. In her panic, she can't remember how to work it. She turns to face the fire and the flames are higher now, licking towards the ceiling, but the ceiling hasn't yet caught fire. She can hear the whooshing sound of the flames, and the heat is almost unbearable. Her heart is pounding frantically as she has a moment of indecision. Should she stay here, wasting precious

seconds trying to work the extinguisher, or run upstairs to get the babies? Would she even have enough time to get them out? Should she call 911 first? Then all at once she knows what to do – she wrenches open a bottom cupboard and grabs a metal lid, then slides it onto the frying pan. Deprived of oxygen, the fire is smothered and quickly goes out. She grabs an oven mitt and reaches over and turns off the burner.

Stephanie sags with relief. The room smells of smoke. Her eyes are stinging and tearing up, and she leans back against the counter, shaking now that the danger is past. The alarm is still shrieking, but it's not the one in the kitchen that's going off, she realizes – it's the alarm upstairs. She turns on the fan over the stove, opens the window above the kitchen sink, and runs upstairs. She has to grab the footstool out of the bedroom to reach the screeching smoke detector in the hall. She finally disables it with shaking hands. In the sudden silence, she can hear the babies wailing, startled awake by the alarm.

She hurries into the nursery, whispering shhh, shhhh . . . She picks each baby up, one at a time, soothing them, kissing their soft cheeks. They won't go back to sleep now; they're too riled up. She carries Jackie and then Emma downstairs and places them both in the playpen in the living room with some of their favourite toys, and returns to the kitchen.

The air is clear but it still reeks of smoke. She stares at the frying pan sitting on the burner as if she's still frightened of it. She grabs the oven mitt and lifts the lid. It looks like there was just oil in the pan. Was she going to fry something? She can't remember. How could she have put a pan on the stove and forgotten about it and let herself fall asleep? She thinks with horror about how quickly the fire might have spread.

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Still shaken, she returns to the living room and sits on the rug with her back against the sofa, cuddling both babies to her chest. She kisses the tops of their soft heads and strokes their cheeks, holding back tears. 'I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry . . .' she whispers.

She must remember to get Patrick to look at the smoke detector in the kitchen when he gets home tonight.