

Someone is watching . . .

FATAL A Novel  
ILLUSIONS

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## PROLOGUE

AS DUSK SETTLED OVER the suburban Cincinnati neighborhood, the sodium-vapor lights along the quiet street blinked and came to life on cue. They chased the shadows from the grade school parking lot, now littered with dried leaves that scraped across the pavement and swirled in their seasonal dance of joy.

Across the way, a man in a jet-black jogging suit eased behind a tree and checked his watch as the chilly breeze tousled his hair. He breathed deeply, noting the intoxicating aroma of burning leaves, and impatiently studied the faces of the pedestrians now strolling toward the school auditorium. Anxious children tugged at reluctant parents, their excitement barely contained.

“Yes, yes,” he overheard a woman tell a child. “We’ll get there in plenty of time. No need to rush.”

He smiled. He had been that overzealous child once, but that was a long time ago. He’d grown up, things had changed, and not every change had been welcome.

His smile faded as he continued to search for a certain bespectacled face. He’d been watching her for weeks and knew everything about her: when she got up in the morning, when she went to bed, where she went each day, how she spent her time. He even knew she was failing English for the second time, even after her teacher had given her a two-week extension on her term paper. Going through her trash, he’d discovered her addiction to Snickers bars, her affection for Ruffles potato chips and cream soda, and her preference for Pantene shampoo, which added luster to the blonde hair she wore long and wavy.

A familiar red nylon jacket caught his eye, and he sucked in his breath. Concealing himself farther behind the tree, he waited for her to pass.

*Hmm.* She was so close. He could have reached out, could have touched her hair. But he steadied his breathing and let the moment pass, deciding that reason must win the battle with emotion. There were simply too many people around who might see him and remember his face. He watched as she strolled into the school with her two charges in tow, carefree and unsuspecting.

Just the way he wanted her.

He took another deep breath, surprised by how calm he felt tonight. He knew what he needed to do and realized he had the resolve to execute his plan. Now all he needed was the opportunity, but waiting had never been easy for him. He could hear his mother's chiding words strumming across the strings of his memory.

*You're so impatient, Donny. So restless. Don't you know that good things come to those who wait?*

Time to get inside.



Someone was watching her. For weeks, she'd felt unseen eyes following her every move. Evaluating. Judging. But when she would whirl around, no one was ever there—just brittle leaves scudding across the empty sidewalks.

“C'mon, you two. Hurry up.”

Clutching their hands with icy fingers, Erin Walker yanked Daphne and Thomas along to match her stride. It was bad enough that she was stuck taking care of these first-grade brats on a Friday night. Worse, the evening's entertainment promised to be a childish, elementary school musical, and she had better things to do with her time.

She'd been planning to give Sheryl a cut and dye job tonight. Her hairdressing service brought in more money than babysitting, but her mom had said she owed the Spensers a favor.

*Yeah, whatever.*

Erin wished for her father right now. Divorced from her mom and

recently remarried, he had moved three states away, leaving them with the mortgage and a barely enough paycheck from her mom's job as a nighttime gas station attendant. Her mom had said he was a no-good lowlife, that they were better off without him, but Erin wasn't so sure. She had fond memories of her dad taking her ice-skating, just the two of them. He had shown her the spins he'd mastered as a young man, when he had almost qualified for the Olympics.

Almost. *Dreams are never easy*, he'd told her. *You have to work hard and never, ever give up.*

One more year and she would graduate from high school. Maybe then she could free herself from her mother's stranglehold and open the beautician's shop she'd always wanted.

The lights of Bridgetown Elementary glimmered against the darkening sky, the crisp wind swirling the leaves at her feet. She wished she'd worn her jean jacket instead of the thin, red windbreaker. She pushed her wire rim glasses up on her nose and glanced at her watch, realizing that in her reverie she'd slowed her stride.

"C'mon, we're going to be late if you two don't hurry," she said.

"Slow down!" Daphne cried. "We can't keep up."

Erin peered down into Daphne's frustrated hazel eyes. "Look, I'll let you wear my watch if you'll get a move on."

Daphne squealed. "Cool!"

Though they were five minutes late, the program hadn't yet started. But Erin realized that they should have come much earlier if they'd wanted to get a good seat. The place was packed, and she didn't see an open row anywhere.

Biting her lip, she spied a friend coming down the aisle toward her. Laurie was a stagehand—and, as it happened, she was also the solution to their problem. She had been saving seats for her mother and sisters, but they'd all been waylaid by food poisoning or something, and wouldn't be coming.

*Three seats. Right in front. Perfect.*

Erin couldn't help smiling smugly as Laurie escorted them to the front row like celebrities at the Academy Awards, minus the red carpet preshow, of course. She felt the indignant glares drilling into her back from those who had arrived a half hour early to get their seats. She

felt a rush of pleasure at the realization that she was the cause of their indignation.

*Let them sulk. Sometimes good things happen when you least expect it.*

Her mind replayed a similar thrill she'd felt just a month ago, when she'd been summoned to give testimony in a big court case downtown.



She'd done up her hair special, dry-cleaned her navy twin set, and worn her new high-heeled shoes, which made her short, lithe figure seem several inches taller. Approaching the stand, she had, for once in her life, felt important; felt as if every eye in the room was glued to her, mesmerized by this long-haired, blonde goddess with the porcelain skin and sapphire blue eyes. She hadn't realized until later how important her testimony had been.

"And you *saw* the defendants enter Margaret Stowe's house?" Stan Loomis, the prosecuting attorney, had asked.

"That's right."

"And you're *sure* it was Walter and Virginia Owens. You're *positive*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Remember, Miss Walker, you are under oath. You *saw* their faces?"

She had bitten her lip as she tried to remember.

She had just finished house-sitting for Mrs. Stowe, as another way to make some extra money. The old lady was loaded. She had said good night to Mrs. Stowe and had walked off, feeling giddy at the sizable check. Almost to her car, she'd dropped her keys and bent to pick them up. Hearing voices, she'd glanced back and had seen two people walking up the sidewalk to Mrs. Stowe's front door.

A man and a woman, wearing long, dark overcoats. They had looked wealthy. The man had placed his black-gloved hand at the middle of the woman's back.

"You don't think she'll mind?" the woman had asked, a musical quality to her husky voice. "It's late."

"You're right. It *is* late. Too late." The man's voice had sounded rough, like a smoker's. "She can't turn us away now."

Standing beside her car, Erin had watched as the man knocked.

When the door opened, a band of light had slashed across their faces for an instant before they disappeared inside.

Staring unflinchingly at Stan Loomis, she had said, “Yes, it was them. I’m sure of it.” She’d pushed away the fact that the encounter at Mrs. Stowe’s house had occurred the week before she’d gotten her new glasses.

“For the benefit of the jury, would you please point out who you saw?”

Her hand had trembled as she pointed to the pale-faced Owenses, who sulked beside their defense attorney. They didn’t flinch. They didn’t move. But their eyes—they hated her. They wanted her dead. Ever since, those eyes had stared back at her in her dreams.

Those dark, hateful eyes.



The sound of a grade school chorus singing an upbeat song drew her attention back to the stage. She stifled a yawn and glanced at her watch, only to realize that Daphne was still wearing it. Well, no big deal. She’d get it back later. The musical version of *Winnie the Pooh* was okay, she supposed. She reminded herself that she’d worked more demanding babysitting jobs for even less than the paltry, sub-minimum wage she was being paid.

The musical was drawing to a close. In another five minutes, the show would be over, and she’d take the kids home. Maybe there’d even be time for Sheryl’s cut and dye job.

A female voice sliced into her thoughts. Amid the waves of applause, the director was acknowledging the stage crew, who bowed awkwardly in their matching black jeans and T-shirts. Erin’s gaze locked onto one of the crew members, who appeared to be staring at her. A look of recognition glinted in his black eyes before Erin glanced away.

*Do I know him?* He didn’t look familiar. Unsettled, she rushed Daphne and Thomas home as soon as the show was over.



Walking home from the Spensers alone, Erin kept to the edge of the roadway, away from the sidewalk and out from beneath the shadow of the trees, as her mother always insisted. She scuttled between the dim pools of light cast by the streetlights, which seemed to do a better job of lighting the tops of the posts than illuminating the street below; she walked briskly, though she was really in no hurry to reach her quiet, lonely house. Her mother would be working at the gas station, and Erin would have the rest of the evening to watch HBO, to see if Sheryl wanted to squeeze in that haircut, and maybe to take a long, hot bath.

A familiar prickly feeling crawled up the back of her neck. Someone was watching her again. She whirled around, but no one was there.

Exhaling a relieved sigh, she resumed her journey. A fresh blast of frigid wind cut through her thin jacket and set the leaves to dancing at her feet. Thoroughly chilled, she hugged herself as she walked along the shadowy street.

She heard the car before she saw it—a distinctive chirping noise above the sound of the engine as it pulled alongside.

“Hey, it’s cold out there. Want a ride home?” the driver called to her through the open passenger-side window.

Erin glanced in his direction, but couldn’t see his face. “No, thanks. I’m fine.” She kept walking.

“It’s me. From the musical.”

She stopped and looked closer, recognizing the guy from the stage crew. He was the one who’d been staring at her. She’d felt uncomfortable then, but didn’t feel uneasy now. He was attractive and friendly enough, but still she was cautious. “I don’t think I know you.”

“Well, maybe we could talk, get to know each other a little bit. I’m not so bad, if you give me a chance.”

Her hands automatically moved to smooth back her hair. He had to be at least ten years older. “I don’t know . . .”

“You look like you’re freezing. At least let me give you a ride home. I don’t bite. Honest.” He opened the passenger-side door and swung it toward her.

Stepping closer, Erin peered in and studied his face in the dome light. He had a nice smile and white, even teeth. His black, curly hair



was kind of cute, too. She wondered if his curls were natural. “Well, it is pretty cold out here . . .”



Daphne Spenser tugged at her mom’s arm. “Erin let me borrow her watch, but I forgot to give it back.” She held up the too-large watch for her mom to see.

Washing dishes at the sink, Diane Spenser wagged her head. “How many times have I told you to return things you borrow? Hurry. Erin just left. Maybe you can still catch her.”

Out the front door and pulling her jacket on, Daphne scampered down the steps to the sidewalk and peered down the road. Halfway down the block, Erin was standing beside a brown car and talking to someone through the open window.

“Erin!” Daphne ran toward her. “Erin, wait!” But the wind was howling, and Erin couldn’t hear her. Daphne kept running, hoping Erin would see her.

She saw the passenger-side door open, and Erin stepped closer to the car. Just then, a hand shot out from inside the car and closed around Erin’s arm. She screamed and tried to pull away.

Daphne’s heart slammed into her throat. She froze.

A man was pulling Erin into the car in spite of her screams. Daphne saw his dark hair, but couldn’t see his face.

The car squealed away. The passenger door slammed shut as the car sped around the corner and headed out of sight.

Daphne’s heart pounded in her ears.

She wouldn’t see Erin again until the funeral.



Part 1

WHISPER OF AN  
ACCUSATION

*When lovely woman stoops to folly,  
And finds too late that men betray,  
What charm can soothe her  
melancholy?  
What art can wash her tears away?*

—Oliver Goldsmith, “Woman”



## CHAPTER 1

### Four years later

ON THE MORNING WHEN everything in her secure, even-keeled life was about to change, Gillian Thayer picked up her Osmiroid fountain pen, leaned over her desk, and pressed the nib to a sheet of angled Strathmore document paper. With the first stroke and the accompanying bleed of Pelikan 4001 blue, something magical happened. Words became art, stimulated the eye, and made a memorable quote even more memorable.

The phone rang. Carefully placing her pen on a sheet of tissue to avoid dripping onto her project, she grabbed the receiver. “Thayer Calligraphy.”

“Hey, Gillian. Got another question for you.”

“Oh, hi, Christine.” Gillian bit her lip in disappointment; she’d been hoping for more work, not a call from Christine Reynolds, manager of the frame shop where she did most of her business. Still, a call from Christine was always refreshing.

“Sorry to bug you. My son, Ruben, is doing a report on last words of famous people. I told him you’d know who these people are, but he doesn’t believe me. Can you help me prove him wrong?”

Gillian laughed. “Sounds intriguing. Okay, I’ll give it a shot.”

“Here’s the first one. ‘Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees.’”

“Stonewall Jackson.”

“‘The fog is rising.’”

“Emily Dickinson.”

“Here’s the last one: ‘Lord, help my poor soul.’”

“Poe,” Gillian said. “Definitely Poe.”

“Poe?”

“Edgar Allan Poe. You know, that horror fiction writer who was popular in the early 1800s. ‘Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore!”’”

“Oh, yeah. *That* guy.”

“And if anybody meant those words, it had to be him. From what I understand, he had one miserable life and died young under mysterious circumstances.”

Christine chuckled. “Incredible. You really know your stuff, don’t you?”

“People don’t call me ‘The Quote Lady’ for nothing. I guess you can’t be in my line of work and not become a walking encyclopedia of poems and famous quotations.”

“I guess so. Thanks a bunch. Oh, hey, your framed John 3:16 is almost done. We had a few problems with the matting, but we got it fixed. Everything’s okay now.”

“Glad to hear it. When can I expect it?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. I’ll have Jeremy drop it by.”

“Sounds good.”

“Hey, thanks again, and have a super day. And, Gillian, promise me you won’t stay cooped up indoors all day, okay? It looks like it’s going to be a perfect October day. Get out. Feel the sunshine. Promise me.”

“Promise.”

“Well, I’ve bugged you long enough. Talk to you later. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Gillian gazed out the window at her sunny garden and longed to feel the cool grass under her feet. She remembered a quote by Pearl Buck: “Order is the shape upon which beauty depends.” In other words, her art wouldn’t be its best until she’d spent some time ordering her world, and order meant sticking to her schedule. She eyed her flower garden again and shook her head.

*Later. I’ve got work to do.*

She turned back to Isaiah 41:10, her favorite Bible verse. She was painstakingly transcribing it from the traditional King James Version for one of her newly commissioned projects.

She heard a knock at the door but didn't look up, refusing to lose her focus. Crystal, her sixteen-year-old daughter, knew she hated to be interrupted when she was in the middle of a project. But she also knew that Gillian hated it when she left for the day without saying good-bye.

Crystal crossed the studio, waited until Gillian had finished putting the descender on a small letter *g*, and bent to kiss her mother's cheek.

It used to be that Gillian would be up at the crack of dawn, busy with her work long before Crystal left for school. But lately, she'd succumbed to a more leisurely pace and a later start. After all, it wasn't that she had so many projects to do that she had to work from dawn to dusk like a mad fiend under the pressure of deadlines. Certainly not. But her hands were most sure of themselves, more steady, in the morning; and steady hands made what she did possible. Sometimes, she imagined that she'd lost her hands in a car accident, or that they'd been crushed somehow beyond repair. The thought always made her shudder.

"I have choir practice this afternoon," Crystal said. "Just wanted to remind you."

"As if I needed reminding." Setting her pen aside, Gillian flashed Crystal a smile mingled with mock frustration. "How could I possibly forget? You haven't stopped talking about it."

"Being in state honors choir is, like, a big deal, Mom."

"I know it is, and I'm proud of you."

Gillian studied her daughter, who had been taking voice lessons since she was seven and had a voice to prove it. Crystal had long, blonde hair and the most beautiful blue eyes Gillian had ever seen—both traits handed down from her father. *But her artistic side comes from me*, Gillian reminded herself with some pride.

Gillian had inherited her own talent from her mother, Rose, who had been painting book cover art for Cherish Press, a successful Christian publisher near Cleveland, for more than thirty years. "Real art," her mother called it, though Gillian wouldn't necessarily call prairie romance covers "real art." But in all fairness, her mother's artistry *was* amazing, and it often made Gillian feel jealous when she

saw her mom's most recent offering. During those moments, Gillian found herself questioning her own work. Was calligraphy *real* art? She'd tried painting when she was younger, starting with landscapes, but her paintings had never rung true. For whatever reason—providence, she guessed—calligraphy had emerged as her area of true skill.

At night, Crystal had been designing Web sites—"a sensitive blend of art and electronics," in Gillian's words—for several clients. The demand for her work had been escalating over the past few months, but Crystal would not give up choir to meet the demand.

"So you'll pick me up from practice?" Crystal asked.

"I'll be there. Four o'clock, right?"

"Right. Is Dad gone already? I didn't hear him leave this morning."

"Yep. He's got an important meeting at nine. A church discipline situation that could turn ugly. Pray for him."

Before beginning her day's projects, Gillian had joined Marc for a quick breakfast of hard-boiled eggs, fruit, and bagels. They had talked about their plans for the fall, about Crystal's upcoming weekend at a youth retreat, and about a possible weekend getaway to Door County, a favorite tourist spot northeast of Green Bay, Wisconsin, while she was gone. Gillian had warmed to the possibility, but Marc had seemed reluctant, pressured by the responsibilities he would be leaving behind.

Being one of six pastors at one of the largest Bible-believing churches in the Chicagoland area had heaped more stress and commitments on Marc than Gillian cared to consider. Almost every evening seemed jam-packed with something: visitation, the Bible institute, prayer meetings, the prison ministry. The list never ended, and neither did her frustration of late.

Crystal's eyes clouded with concern. "He'll be home tonight, won't he?"

Gillian glanced at the wall calendar. "Nope, it's Monday. He's got prison ministry tonight, remember? He'll grab a quick bite to eat and be out the door again."

Crystal sighed. "Mom, he's never home anymore. When do I ever get to see him?"

Gillian locked her heart and hid the key, knowing that if she agreed



with her daughter and started talking, Crystal would hear things no daughter ought to hear from her own mother. Gillian ignored Crystal's question.

From the driveway came the sound of a car's horn.

"Lauren's here," Gillian said. "You better go. You're going to be late."

Crystal kissed her mom again and paused to peer into her eyes. Gillian could tell she was probing, wondering if she was okay, uneasy to leave her alone. Last night after church, while Marc had an emergency counseling session, she and Crystal had watched a made-for-TV drama about parents whose son died in a horrific car accident. During a commercial break, Gillian had fled to the bathroom and pressed her face into a towel to muffle her sobs.

"Get going, sweetie," Gillian said. "You're going to be late."

Gillian could tell that Crystal wanted to stay home and comfort her and try to help her with something she could never hope to understand. The role reversal was uncanny. Gillian was now the weepy child in need of a parent's strong arms and tender words.

Crystal lingered.

"Crystal, I'll be fine. Now go."

Reluctantly, she moved toward the door and glanced back. "Okay, Mom, I'm leaving. But give me a call if you need to talk. Promise?"

Gillian nodded, though she had no intention of weighing her daughter down with her burdens. She blew a kiss, and Crystal was gone, the front door closing behind her with a gentle click. Then came silence—always silence, Gillian's constant enemy. As if on cue, dark thoughts assailed her.

She turned on the CD player, and relaxing piano music created a tranquil ambiance. The music took the edge off her loneliness, yet she longed for someone to be around—a physical presence. Pressing her lips together, her gaze straying out the window in a moment's hesitation, she reached for the right desk drawer and slid it open. Concealed under a pile of parchment lay a thin, silky sheet of paper.

The image on the paper resembled a photo negative: confusing blotches of white appeared spray-painted against a black background, bordered by white block lettering—her name and a date and

time—along with other combinations of letters and numbers that might as well have been Chinese. Inside the border, small white ridges and lines circled and met, outlining what the untrained eye might have assumed were the rugged contours of valleys and mountains.

In the center of this assumed landscape, her eyes rested on what looked to be a strand of pearls. A perfect baby's spine.

The dryer buzzer made Gillian jump. Wiping her eyes, she glanced at the clock, dismayed by how much time had passed. She had too much to do to be getting sidetracked.

Getting up, she headed to the mudroom, mechanically taking the clothes out of the dryer and piling them in a basket. Beside the dryer hung two of Marc's suits, which she intended to take to the dry cleaner later that morning if she could still find the time.

A couple of years ago, Marc's olive suit, his favorite, had been destroyed when he'd left a pen in one of its pockets. Since then, she'd become religious about checking his pockets. Now, as she ran her fingers down into the inside pocket of his navy, double-breasted jacket, she felt something smooth against her fingers.

"I'm glad I checked," she muttered to herself as she pulled out a small square of what appeared to be purple stationery, neatly folded into fourths. A feminine fragrance drifted up to her nose, and a cold streak ran down her neck.

Sometimes, when she was feeling romantic, she'd write a Shakespearean sonnet on a scrap of parchment and leave it in Marc's sock drawer. Or she'd fancy up a quote that she knew would make him smile. Dr. Seuss or *Calvin and Hobbes*. But this note was nothing she'd written.

She felt the blood drain from her face as she began to read. The letter slipped from her fingers and fluttered to the floor like a wounded bird, and she leaned against the dryer for support.

It was a love letter.

To her husband.

From another woman.