

# KILLING JOHNNY MIRACLE

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Nobody ever said it was going to be anything better  
than a round of poker on the raft of Medusa.

It's not who wins the game that counts.  
Nobody wins. It's who gets out least lost.

From *Memo*, by Todd Hearon

PART ONE  
MARY'S WORLD FALLS APART

# CHAPTER 1

Mary Miracle would always recall with clarity the moment she decided to kill her husband. It wasn't a decision she'd come to suddenly. She had loved him at one point, with all her heart. But over the course of their marriage, there'd been an accumulation of things he'd done that—little by little, like a blowtorch burning paint off steel—scorched away chunks of her love.

Usually, once love is gone, only indifference remains. In which case, the logical thing for Mary to do would have been to get a divorce, not kill him. But in Mary's case, there was one final thing Johnny did to her that obliterated not just the love, but even indifference. And from the charred remains of everything she had once felt for him grew a revulsion so deep that she refused to live in a world where he existed.

After Mary decided that Johnny had to die, she spent the rest of the week working out the best way to do it, the 'best' way meaning how to kill him in the manner that was least likely to end with her in prison or—as they lived in Texas—on death row.

*As his wife, I'll be the prime suspect. The fact that we're in the middle of a divorce makes that even worse. Lord knows, I've got plenty of motives.*

*It needs to look like an accident. Poison? A hit and run? Maybe a burglary gone wrong?*

*And I'm gonna need an iron-clad alibi.*

It took Mary a few days to figure out the accident part. The more difficult piece was the alibi. She came up with lots of ideas. But in the end, she concluded that to pull off a foolproof alibi she needed help: an accomplice. There was only one person in the world she could trust with something like this. Abby Winehouse. They'd grown up together, shared secrets. They knew each other like sisters.

Abby also had the skills to help Mary put the finishing touches on her plan. The only downside was that she'd probably try to talk her out of killing him; Mary was almost sure of that.

She arranged to meet Abby at her place that Friday for some wine and cheese. The house was just west of downtown Austin and had been in Abby's family since the late 1800s. The two friends sat, as usual, on the wooden back deck in lawn chairs overlooking the small yard. Its perimeter was marked by a hurricane fence. The lawn was thick Saint Augustine grass. There

was a small rock garden in one corner, in the center of which sat a broken bird bath; the bath part was dry and dusty. A couple of beat-up cornhole boards leaned against the fence by the gate to the alley. It was just past seven. A cool fall evening.

Abby was sharing some of the highlights of her week. She was on a bit of a rant. “And so, I told him, ‘Don’t be mansplainin’ to me about what a rollin’ stop is. You may have a badge, but I was runnin’ stop signs while you were still on training wheels!’”

Mary nodded and smiled as her friend spoke, but she wasn’t listening. She was rhythmically clinking her fingertip against the stem of her wineglass to disguise the slight tremor in her hands. Nerves. She had rehearsed what she wanted to say. And how to say it. Still, her neck felt tight. Could Abby tell that she was distracted? Abby was never one to pry. She had always been the type to chat, entertain, all while waiting for Mary to open up.

“So fiiiiinally,” Abby dragged out the word, “he agreed to let me off with a warnin’.” She shook her head. “But I had’ta get all pissed off *and* tell him I’m a lawyer to get ‘im to back down.” She scoffed. “Imagine how they treat regular folk . . .” She stopped to pour herself some more rosé.

Mary decided to capitalize on the lull. The sound of cars rushing down Mopac highway nearby provided white noise that she felt protected their conversation from prying ears. But she reached out and turned the music on the Bluetooth speaker up a bit, just to be safe. A song by The Dixie Chicks was playing, the one about Earl. It was a song she knew well, but she was so focused on what she wanted to say that the irony was lost on her.

“I need to tell you something, Abby,” she said. “Ask a favor, really . . .”

Abby finished refilling her glass. She turned to look at her friend, and her face fell. “Oh, shit! What’s wrong? No. Don’t you cry, girl,” she reacted instinctively, then backtracked. “Or go on and let it all out if ya need to . . .”

Mary hadn’t realized her eyes were watering. Tears were not on her agenda. She inhaled, seeking to extract confidence from the air around her. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“What is it, Mare?”

“I’m gonna need your help with something,” Mary said. The tension in her neck eased slightly as she spoke.

Abby cocked an eyebrow, and Mary watched her eyes dart back and forth as if scanning through a spectrum of possibilities. Despite all her rehearsing, Mary couldn’t help beating

around the bush just a little. “It’s a big one,” she added, her eyes turning hard and her chin tilting up slightly.

The air around the two women suddenly felt almost electric. Mary saw that her friend felt it too; the hair on Abby’s arms stood on end.

She leaned towards Mary, placing a hand on her knee. “You know you can count on me, hon.” She unconsciously lowered her voice to a whisper. “What can I do?”

“I . . . It’s about . . . him.”

Abby inhaled deeply and sat up straighter. Her lips pursed, then she took a swallow from her wineglass. “Well, what’s he gone and done now?” Abby’s head tilted; her mouth set in a hard line. “It’s high time you divorced that sumbitch. I know it’s been a mess. But of course, you can count on me—”

“Oh, no. It’s not about the divorce.” She sat back, more confident now that she had gotten the topic on the table. “I mean, thank God, I found out *because* of the divorce. But . . .”

Mary had read somewhere that when the police deliver news of a family member's death, they use simple, direct language to avoid confusion. In the shock of the moment, brutal clarity works best. Mary had decided to follow that approach. That’s what she had rehearsed.

She took a sip of wine, her gaze locked on Abby's. She breathed in, then exhaled slowly and, for the first time, said out loud what she’d been thinking, planning, what she knew she had to do.

“I’m going to kill Johnny.”

Her tone made it clear that this was not a figure of speech.

Abby sat for a good while studying her friend. She was searching, hoping for some indication that she was misreading the moment—that Mary wasn’t actually declaring her intent to commit murder.

When it became clear that Mary had nothing further to add, Abby started to speak several times. Mary watched as her mouth would form the tip of a word, before aborting the effort as new scenarios percolated out of her keen mind. Finally, Mary saw that look in her friend’s eyes; her best friend was still there, but the lawyer in her was sharing control. Abby clasped her hands together, resting them softly on her knee, then spoke the best open-ended reply of them all.

“Why?”