

CHAPTER ONE

Something is wrong with this picture.

The winds on November 18 are unusually strong for this time of year, even by Midwestern standards, carrying mist and some stray leaves in the night air. It doesn't make my journey up the three acres of the Reinardts' backyard any easier. The ground is hard but still damp from today's rain. My feet keep slipping on the blanket of wet leaves. I silently curse the Midwestern weather, the Indian summer that provides us these leaves that should have disappeared weeks ago, the abrupt plummet of the temperature this week. I feel the near-freezing mist on my cheeks, which are about the only parts of my body exposed to the elements. But even as I trudge up the hill, focused on the ground—both to avoid the wind and to watch my step—I sense that something is out of place. The typical leap of my heart when I make it into the clearing, the dreamy sensation as I approach the house—none of this fills me now. Something is different.

I read just the wool scarf, wrapped tightly around my face and irritating my skin to no end. Back before I crossed the stream, I was forced to tie it in a knot behind my head, else it would fly off. Every few steps now, I stop to pull it back over my nose.

I press on, with my head down and eyes open in slants; no angle is safe from the relentless, swirling wind. My hands have curled into fists to keep warm, leaving the finger holes of my gloves empty.

I make it up the hill to within about thirty yards of the old Victorian house. It's been, what, sixteen years since high school, and it feels more like thirty to my legs. I catch my breath next to my favorite oak tree, whose naked branches wave mercilessly from side to side in this wind.

The estate of Dr. Derrick Reinardt and his wife, Rachel, rests triumphantly on top of a small hill in the suburb of Highland Woods. Your basic spread in this north-shore bedroom community: sprawling acreage in the back with no front yard to speak of, a fairly unassuming exterior masking the ornate decor within. This is the upper-class side of the suburb—not mega-rich family money but working-class wealth, CEOs, doctors, personal-injury lawyers, a former governor—and the houses in this neighborhood remind me of tiny fiefdoms, wide plots bordered by trees and shrubbery that serve more to ensure privacy than to impress. This is not a bad thing, mind you; there is no way that a neighbor could see me back here.

The Reinardts have a long, wooden back patio with a surprisingly simple array of wood furniture and a gas barbecue grill that is covered this time of the year with a thick gray

tarp. The den is in the back of the house by the patio, separated by a large sliding glass door with a silk curtain that—

The curtain is open.

Wait. Today's Thursday, right? Yeah, of course it is. Am I late? Could she be done already?

I furiously pull back my coat sleeve to look at my watch, which is no small chore wearing these gloves. No. No. I can't be late.

No. The fluorescent numbers read 9:34. As usual, I'm way early. Maybe she hasn't set up yet. But—that doesn't make sense, either. She usually has everything ready well before she starts. She knows I get here early, likes the fact that I'm waiting with anticipation. No, the curtain should definitely be closed.

I stand around for a couple of minutes, looking over the house, seeing nothing, no sign of Rachel. Tonight the sky offers no light; the warm-weather insects do not provide their creaks and calls. The fury of the wind mutes all sound, leaving me to a silent film with not much for video, either.

Maybe she just got a late start, is all. Maybe she'll come down soon. I yank my scarf down just in time to sneeze into my gloves. Then I sneeze again. I wipe my hands on the tree.

"This is ridiculous," I say to no one, though this is really not the most appropriate word to describe me at this moment, a grown man sneaking around outside a married woman's house. Pathetic. Depraved. Perverted. All of the above?

I consider leaving. It can't be more than twenty degrees out here, well below zero with the wind chill. God, the wind is whipping up something awful.

"Story of my life," I mumble, again to an audience of no one. All dressed up and nowhere to go.

My mind drifts from my aborted fantasy show to work tomorrow. I have to get in early anyway, get ready for the presentation. It's probably just as well. Time to turn back, no more jollies, adult responsibility time. But still, my feet remain planted. I think of Rachel's words, almost two weeks ago to the day. I had mentioned her husband in an offhanded way, an innocuous comment, I don't even recall what. Her outburst of tears, the contortion of her face, her eyes squeezed shut.

"Tell me, Rachel," I said.

She shook her head. "No," she whispered.

I sat up on an elbow on the bed, moved the wisps of bangs from her forehead. "Tell me, sweetie. Tell me what's going on."

Her sobbing subsided momentarily. She swallowed hard. "If he ever knew I told someone"

"Oh, honey. He'll never know. You think I'm gonna tell him?" I actually laughed as I said that. Then I took her hand in mine. "Told someone about what?"

The lights are on upstairs. I look up at the windows. No silhouettes. No sign of life.

"Sometimes," she started. "Sometimes he—" Her eyes closed, her mouth turned in a frown.

"Rach, sweetie, it's me. Tell me about it."

She let out a sigh. She had settled on it now. She would tell me. Her eyes opened into mine.

I look back down into the den, the only room I can see into. Nothing. Nada. The staircase that leads to the bottom floor winds around at the last two stairs and ends at the cream tiled hallway, which leads past the living room into the den. From my view, I can see those last two stairs, the hallway, and the den. On the right side of the den is a white, deliciously soft couch. At the back end of the den, opposite the sliding glass door, is the bar, lined with bottles of liquor, oak cabinets underneath.

I do another once-over around the house. Not a creature is stirring.

"It's only sometimes," she said, apologizing for her husband. "Only when he drinks."

"Okay," I said quietly, "it's only sometimes." I brought a hand to her face, then thought the gesture inappropriate. She needed space, time.

She sighed again, her body letting out a tremble.

"He hits me, Marty," she whispered. "My husband beats me."

Still nothing upstairs. It's 9:37. My anxieties getting the better of me, images running wild in my mind, but the truth is, no one's home. She's probably at dinner with him or something. Regardless, the regularly scheduled programming will not be seen tonight, and all I'm gonna have to show for it is hypothermia and a bruised ego. Time to cut my

losses. I look back down the hill at the woods that form the name of our town, Highland Woods. The entire suburb has built up around this mini-forest, which has made my path to and from the Reinardts' house these many days a conveniently clandestine one. Over the stream and through the woods. To grandmother's house we go. I swear, that stupid song comes into my head every time I make this trip.

I looked over my beautiful Rachel, her neck, her shoulders, her face.

She sensed what I was doing. "No," she said flatly. Her face pale, void of any expression, she lifted herself from the bed and turned, adjusting herself so she sat with her back to me.

Before she had settled I saw them. I brought a trembling hand to her back but didn't make contact. Three, four, five lacerations, long spindly scars forming a gruesome road map down the center of her back. I remembered then her wincing while we had made love earlier, as I sank my fingers into her back.

Guilt was the first thing that I felt. How had I not noticed these before? How long had this gone on, and I hadn't noticed?

I brought my arms around her, pulling her backward against my chest, my face buried in her neck.

"He uses his belt," she said with no inflection. "But never my face. He's too smart for that. He even keeps it below the neckline. Scars you can never see."

I look back at the den again. I stuff my hands into my jacket pockets and stomp my feet in a feeble attempt to keep warm. I fix on the staircase in the hallway, my eyes tearing from the wind.

I jump at the sight of her, my one and only, my beautiful Rachel, the jet-black hair to her shoulders, the shapely outline, even from a distance the shiny amber eyes. My hand leaves my pocket just in time to grab the tree to keep my balance. She must have been in the living room, not upstairs. Or did I miss her coming down the stairs?

I can't make out her features very well; I'm too far away to see the expression on her face. She's wearing a whitish blouse and blue slacks, not her ordinary attire for the occasion—she usually opts for a negligee, sometimes surprises me with an outfit like a schoolgirl skirt and knee-high socks. But tonight, as she walks along the tiled hallway in a semicrouch, almost tiptoeing yet moving with some urgency, Rachel is anything but provocative, her whole body wearing an obvious pain, maybe fear.

Scars you can never see.

She reaches the den, still crouching sheepishly, one hand tucked under her shirt. She walks to the bar. Her back is to me as she reaches the counter, a deep mahogany brown. She keeps looking up at the ceiling, probably listening for her husband upstairs? At the bar, she raises a trembling hand to the ice bucket. She removes a couple of cubes but knocks the tumbler sideways, the ice spilling onto the bar and floor.

Her head turns upward again.

It's only when he drinks.

She sets the glass upright, stuffs some more ice into it, and reaches for a bottle of liquor. She fills the glass and tries to gather the spilled ice. But her hand is shaking so hard that she can barely put the cubes back into the container.

The other hand remains tucked under her shirt.

She looks up again, but this time not straight at the ceiling. This time, she looks more toward the staircase in the hallway. Her hands are still now.

A clumsy, uncertain foot stomps onto that last stair, then into the hallway. Dr. Reinardt is wearing an oxford shirt, haphazardly tucked into his pants, with the sleeves rolled up. His movements are slow and awkward. He stops at one point in the hallway and reaches out to the wall to steady himself.

The doctor can't see Rachel yet; she is still by the bar, against the front wall of the den. But now Rachel has placed the drink on the bar; she is reaching behind the bottles of booze that line the back of the countertop. She pulls the bottles back and reaches out with her other hand. I catch a glimpse of shiny steel as she raises the object over and behind the bottles.

I shift and feel the wood from the Reinardts' deck. I'm only about twenty feet from the glass door now. The deck is raised three steps off the grass, leaving me the perfect amount of space to crouch down from their view. I reach up to the deck for balance and realize that my hands, like Rachel's, are trembling.

The outside porch light is off, so they can't see me unless they're looking. And as Dr. Reinardt enters the den, he is not looking out the glass door.

He stops and just stares at Rachel. She reaches for the glass on the bar, but the doctor, without moving, says something to her that makes her put her hands at her side. He says nothing more, just glares at her.

Rachel fidgets. She brushes back a strand of hair from her face, then puts her hands at her side again. She's talking to him, her head moving compliantly, but he doesn't respond. Finally, she picks up the glass and offers it to her husband. When he doesn't take it, she sets it down on the bar near him. The doctor lashes out with his right hand, knocking the glass and its golden contents to the carpet. Rachel instinctively steps back, says something in apology, then crouches down to retrieve the glass and ice. She is facing me now. For the first time, I see her face. I can make out cuts and bruises on her cheeks.

Scars you *can* see.

Rachel stands now, turning away from me and toward her husband. Her hands raise in compromise; she's trying to calm him.

The doctor staggers toward his wife, who holds her ground. They are face-to-face now. As slow as he's moving, his right hand rises in a flash, fist half closed. Rachel's head whips to the right, her hair and arms flying wildly, her knees buckling as she falls backward to the carpet. She lands awkwardly on an elbow, then rolls over so she's facing the carpet. The doctor nods approvingly, that's-what-ya-get, as Rachel brings a hand to the developing bruise below her eye.

Rachel slowly makes it to her feet again, her hand returning to her cheek, her entire body trembling.

"I know how it'll end," she told me only a few days ago. "He told me how."

Dr. Reinardt approaches her. He grabs her by both arms, shaking her. Rachel breaks a hand free and swings it lifelessly toward his face.

I am on the deck now, crouched down like a catcher, as I watch this silent horror movie, no sound but the thump-thump, thump of my pulse. The only thing separating me from the sliding glass door is the wooden bench and the picnic table.

"Tell me how, Rach."

Dr. Reinardt reasserts his grip on Rachel. He pulls down on her, forcing her to the carpet in a vise grip. Once on the floor, he tears at her blouse.

"He's going to rape me first. He said he'll rape me then kill me."

And then, as I grip the wooden bench and slowly rise, it is suddenly clear to me. And something like calm sweeps over me, a certain focus through the panic. Because now I know how this story will end.

Copyright