

Prologue

DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT



IF YOU HAVEN'T LIVED IT,
IT WON'T COME OUT OF YOUR HORN.

Charlie Parker

WHEN BURTON AND I FIRST GOT MARRIED, I didn't understand the "death do us part" part. I didn't foresee all the head colds and the whiskers in the sink and the slammed doors that added up to a marriage. I didn't calculate the checks we hoped wouldn't bounce or the times I wished my husband would read a book when he just wanted me to watch TV with him. But over the years, the "death do us part" sank in, and I began to believe we were partners for life. We survived the germs and the hurt feelings, and we paid the bills and stayed together through several friends' divorces. We raised two loving and talented sons, built a real estate company, bought nicer homes, went on dates by ourselves. We hugged and laughed a lot. Some friends turned to us for advice, called us the perfect couple. I knocked on my head when anyone talked that way.

ONE BLUE SKY SUMMER DAY twenty-nine years into our marriage, Burton and I took a break from the office to visit our construction site. We could finally afford to build the house I had dreamed about. We had lived in Huntington Woods for twenty-six years and raised our sons there. Our house had hosted Thanksgiving dinners, my mother's sixtieth birthday, my mother-in-law's seventieth, my grandmother's Shiva. The tiny backyard had graduated from a swing set on patchy grass to a stylish deck and bluestone pavers. The large front yard no longer filled in as the local football field. It was a good house. A solid house. But not the house of my dreams.

Having been a design editor writing about other people's beautiful homes for twenty-five years, I was happy to create one of my own. I had worked with an architect and a designer, spent almost twelve months on the plans. Now those plans had turned into concrete and wood and every visit brought new excitement. The house, with a three-car attached garage, was rising at the top of a steep ravine in Franklin, north of Detroit. Its plywood exterior would receive rough cedar siding. Inside, we would have a first floor master suite, a Jacuzzi tub, and two wood-burning fireplaces.

With large rolling yards and acres of hardwood trees, our future neighborhood felt farther out in the country than a ten-minute drive from our office. An old-fashioned cider mill came alive every fall. There was a gift shop in an old barn, a small post office where the clerk knew your name, and a gas station at which neighbors maintained house charge accounts. A sign said Franklin Village: The Town That Time Forgot.

As we drove that afternoon, impatiens and petunias beamed pink and purple welcome to low-rise office buildings and strip centers along Northwestern Highway. We passed the bakery where I stopped to buy apple pie for my invalid mother, the party store that smelled of cigarettes but where I could buy skim milk at the last minute, the photo store that developed my scouting slides.

We rode in Burton's Cadillac STS. Burton loved cars and owned only those that were locally made. Our company leased office space

to General Motors; we drove GM cars. Burton bought a new Cadillac almost every year. Most were black. This one was gunmetal gray.

I chattered about our new house. About how I had designed a wall in the foyer wide enough to show off the antique red lacquered bombé chest I had inherited from my grandmother. About how pleased Burton would be to have an office with cabinets to store the mounds of paper that now collected in our kitchen. "Just give me someplace comfortable to sit," he said.

Burton's mobile phone rang. Usually he answered on the hands-free microphone. This time he lifted the black receiver from its plastic cradle.

"Hello."

One of the selling points of a Cadillac is its quiet V-8 engine. The engine emits a soft purr, a purr that would not muffle, for instance, the sound of a loud voice through a telephone receiver. Sitting beside my husband in our quiet luxury car, I heard such a voice. It rang out "Hiiiiiiiiiii," extending a simple two-letter word by at least seventeen extra vowels and sliding up and down the better part of an octave. It was a woman's voice.

The blood in my veins turned to sleet.

Burton answered in a businesslike manner. "No." "Yes." "Talk to you later."

I strained every aural fiber and nerve ending to pick up more from the other end, but couldn't hear another word. When Burton hung up, I turned to look at him. His face was suntanned. His color hadn't changed, but then it never did. He stared at the road.

In a casual tone of voice, a tone I'd use to ask what he'd like for dinner: "Who was that?"

Still looking at the road: "Jerry. He was calling on business."

The sleet in my veins turned to ice. For the first time in almost thirty years of marriage, I knew my husband was lying.

AS THE MIDDLE CHILD between two sisters, Burton had always been comfortable around women. He would talk about our West

Highland Terrier Maggie or someone's kid's role in *Brigadoon* as readily as about the latest Red Wings game or the price of IBM stock. When I spotted him conversing with an attractive woman at a party, I'd tell myself to relax. I was attractive, too. I was glad my husband had depth.

I hoped Burton's sound character would ensure his fidelity. If not his complete fidelity, at least the appearance of it. Appearances mattered more to me then. I knew Burton enjoyed *Playboy* magazine and had slept with dozens of women before we met. As much as he loved me, in some private cranny of my mind I figured he might be tempted to stray on occasion. It was a simple equation: he was a guy; guys liked sex; three decades added up to a long time with one woman. Without planning or looking for it, Burton might succumb to a one-night stand on a business trip. But if he did, as long as it lasted only one night, as long as I didn't find out, it wouldn't have to change his love for me. He valued his family. He wouldn't jeopardize our relationship.

I should have suspected I was pushing my luck when I took my new job, but I didn't want to think about it. With our children grown and out of the house, just as Burton started talking about taking more time off, I had become a regional editor for *Better Homes and Gardens* and some sister publications. For the past three years, I had sought out, visited, and produced articles on great Michigan homes. I loved meeting passionate homeowners, getting to know editors, winning national recognition for local design talent, finding my features on newsstands in Aspen or Santa Barbara. It felt good to know I could make enough money to support myself if I had to. I had backed Burton's efforts to build his career. Now he could back mine. It was only fair.

BURTON TURNED THE STEERING WHEEL, cruising onto Inkster Road.

"I heard a woman's voice," I said. I imitated the tone: "Hiiiiiiiiiii."

Burton drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "If you say so."

"Who was she?" Some hostile force twisted my stomach.

"Don't worry about it."

"A strange woman carries on like she's your long lost best friend. You tell me it's a man on a business call. And I shouldn't worry?" My voice rose to such a high pitch, I almost didn't recognize it as mine.

Burton's eyes did not veer from the road. "There is an explanation."

"What would that be?"

"I can't go into it."

"Why not?" My heart pummeled my ribs.

"I just can't."

I stared out the car window, not seeing a tree or a branch or a leaf.

"You don't want to know," he said.

I mentally replayed the voice. The connection between my ear and my brain had severed. If I knew the caller, I couldn't identify her.

We drove on in silence. We parked the car on the dirt in front of our future dream house in silence. We walked through the side door in silence. Two carpenters measured something in the kitchen. "How's it going?" I asked in what I hoped passed for a normal tone. If they had told me we had foundation problems and the house was about to slide into the ravine, I would have said, "That's nice."

Burton and I wandered around in silence. We checked out the living room. New wood trusses defined the shape of the fourteen-foot-high tray ceiling. The original trusses had come in short a few weeks before, requiring an emergency meeting with the builder, the truss company salesman, the architect, and me. At the time, the problem seemed so urgent.

We walked out to the framed-in porch that cantilevered over the ravine. The river that snaked through the woods below was almost totally hidden by leaves. Burton and I first saw this property one and one-half years before, in January. Trees stood tall, slim and

naked, like thousands of Giacometti sculptures. I had envisioned the porch we could build here, enfolded by treetops, a dramatic setting for entertaining. I wasn't thinking about cocktails now. Like a burglar alarm blaring in the middle of the night, Burton's cell phone had sounded a warning. Could that call mean we might never live here together?

"Alright," Burton said. "The woman on the phone is having an affair with a buddy of mine. His wife doesn't know. I'm a go-between." His eyes remained focused on the woods.

"You're too smart to put yourself in such a position."

"I was stupid to get involved. But that's the fact," he insisted. "Look at that squirrel."

End of conversation.

As I sat in bed that night, my muscles twitched, my feet flicked back and forth. I traipsed downstairs to our library, pulled crystal glasses out of the built-in bar, stuck them into segmented cardboard boxes. From upstairs came the muffled sound of TV channels switching.

THE NEXT DAY I SAT IN MY OFFICE, down the hall from Burton's, attempting to concentrate on a photo order. I tried to focus on what props I would need to liven up a dining room shot. My telephone rang.

"I want to talk to you," Burton said.

As I walked down the hall, my knees trembled. I felt as though I were on the way to the doctor to learn the results of a biopsy.

"Close the door," Burton said. There was a grim set to his jaw.

Burton sat behind his ebony-stained oak desk, an oval wood slab topping two round pedestals. I had selected this piece for him when we moved to this space, thinking it reflected his management style, relaxed yet authoritative. Pens protruded from a black leather canister. A black leather box contained correspondence. Windows wrapped around two walls of his office. Beneath one of them, several framed photos topped a black wood credenza. Burton stood beside Michigan Senator Carl Levin. Beside Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer.

On a golf course with Wayne County Executive Ed McNamara. There were framed family photos as well and sweet birthday notes from our boys.

I sat in a chair in front of Burton's desk, the same chair where his secretary, Denise, sat to take dictation. A muscle twitched in my left knee.

"I know you've been worried about that phone call," Burton said. "I'm going to tell you who it was."

I gripped the arms of the chair.

"Last week I drove out to South Lyon. I wanted to check into boarding one of my horses so I'd have someplace nearby to ride. I ran into Jody Sommers. She lives in a farmhouse in the area. She showed me around, and I spent the afternoon with her. We had lunch together; that was all. I figured you wouldn't like it, so I didn't tell you. But there's nothing to worry about. I'm not even attracted to her."

He was right about one thing: I didn't like it.

"Why did she call you?"

"She's thinking about going into the real estate business. She wanted my opinion."

Burton's explanation felt like the truth. Jody Sommers was a beautiful woman we had both known casually for several years. She had been married at least three times. She had wavy auburn hair and eyes the color of translucent green seaweed. I remembered Burton's once commenting on them. Several years ago, Jody had moved out to South Lyon, a rural area where many residents kept horses, about an hour's drive from our office in Southfield.

"I'm glad you told me the truth," I said, although the truth did not relieve the pressure in my gut. "You're right. I don't like it. Jody's an attractive woman. She's looking for a husband. You'd be her fantasy—a cowboy entrepreneur. If I were you, I wouldn't want to tempt fate."

"Neither would I," he said. "Forget about it."

I stood up and walked out of his office. But I didn't forget about it.

