

PROLOGUE

Angela stands in the arched doorway looking toward the darkened street, an undulating veil of fog lightly obscures her view. With arms crossed, she holds tightly to her elbows, subconsciously consoling herself as she sways side to side. A gentle breeze catches the hem of her robe causing it to dance around her ankles as if impish fairies were swinging on the delicate fabric. If there were a chill in the air, she wouldn't notice. She couldn't possibly feel any colder inside, or any more alone.

Not knowing what else to do, Angela rises at the same time each day and waits at the top landing of the main entry. She tries to recall when common sense had abandoned her. When did she decide to put on this show, with repetitive behavior that does little more than deprive her of sleep? She can't remember a time when she wasn't trying to impress someone. Or a time when she wasn't constantly feeding unquenchable egos. She'd become just as dependent on them, her self-worth resting on their approval, an unspoken reciprocal agreement.

Surveying her neighborhood, she considers the sinewy upright posts illuminating stately homes. The haloed glow of decorative lampposts and dusk-to-dawn ambient lighting punctuate the inert darkness. If she stares at them long enough, the posts seem to morph into an army of angels, sentinels guarding the streets. She sniffs at the thought, finding the symbolism absurd. After all, there's nothing angelic about this place.

By design, life in Bryn Mawr is symmetrical and orderly, and the cul-de-sac manors are no exception. The homes stand proportionately together yet separated by just enough distance to be private. They resemble a legion of teenage girls showing off their lissome figures while whispering unpardonably juicy gossip.

Like their occupants, the homes are mischievous and flirtatious, desperate to maintain their youthful glow while trying to outclass one another. These towering bastions with immovable brick and stone arches, aristocratic Roman columns, and sculpted statues make Angela think of decorative marble chess sets; weighted pieces evenly spaced on a carved wooden board, stoically watching over neatly manicured grounds.

How many people played chess these days, she did not know. Perhaps many chess sets served only as untouchable, static displays, giving the impression of heightened intellect or refined amusement. Long ago, Angela's grandfather had tried to teach her to play chess, but she found the game excruciatingly slow. For her grandfather's sake, she played as well as she could while her mind danced, preoccupied with more interesting subjects.

Desperate to find something to fill her time, her eyes settle on the curves of her driveway. She studies the periphery where concrete edges meet thick turf as it twists down the knoll to the looming gate below. At the end of each winding drive are massive iron gates with monogrammed insets, aesthetically appealing but also well-built. These steely defenders open wide for their occupants and then electronically grind to a close, indicating that the owners are unapproachable. They serve their purpose well, making one pause before entering. No solicitor would put forth the effort. No one would drop by to say *Hello* or enter a neighbor's private domain without an engraved invitation. An imaginary hand prohibits entrance—Halt! Who goes there?

Outwardly, the homes are well-appointed, projecting an air of blithe contentedness. Inside, lies another story entirely. The prophetic swansong of common decency has taken flight; bumptious decoys of one-upmanship have replaced a warm regard for others.

These mighty fortresses shelter the affluent, segregating isolationists from the outside world. Sentenced to a life of solitary refinement, residents lock themselves behind electronic gates and reinforced doors interspersed with codes, alarms, and cameras. Those who call this neighborhood home are suspicious of strangers and go to great lengths to keep people away. They remain guarded, distancing themselves from other neighbors as well, as if something would be taken from them if they dared open up to anyone. The dour expressions and distrustful scowls make Angela think of wealthy old pinchpennies who constantly inspect the contents of their pocketbook just to make sure no one is stealing from them.

She has driven past neighborhoods where people gather on sidewalks, driveways, or lawns to chat, and wonders what it might be like to live in a place where people have a sense of community. People who genuinely show care and concern for one another. If someone stumbles and falls, you pick them up. If they go on vacation, you water their plants, feed their pets, and keep a watchful eye on their house. If they're ill, you bring them meals, mow their lawn, or hold their hand. Angela has never seen this type of kindness here and concludes that she never will.

The citizens of Bryn Mawr have an obvious love/hate relationship with one another. They're antisocial socialites, reserved and withdrawn unless attending functions closely scrutinized by the public eye. While home, the iron curtain goes up and animosity comes out. Conversely, these same people mingle with one another at the country club, daggers placed in a velvet-lined box and locked away during a collaborative truce. Showy pearlescent smiles appear, brought out for special occasions and laissez-faire evenings filled with harmonious hobnobbing. Afterward, the hypocrites disperse, returning to their unaltered exiled state—a textbook example of unhealthy interpersonal behavior.

Angelarosa Katerina Magdalena Morgan was born into wealth, though her family was never pretentious like this congregation of the idle rich. Many of them hold high positions in the white-collar world or manage their fortunes through family foundations. When she was younger, she loathed this type and all they stood for. The generations of trust fund babies who will never know how to do a damn thing for themselves.

Her husband, Robert, was the one who insisted that they live here, inserting themselves into high society. Angela made every effort to be accepted, sacrificing her beliefs to please those around her. At Robert's urging, she shortened her name. She forfeited her family legacy as well, using only her married name to accommodate the abstruse in this homogenous region, those who refused to even try pronouncing her given name.

Not long ago, Angela's social calendar overflowed with events. She was invited to the finest parties, where the Who's Who of Bryn Mawr took center stage. She complained that she never had that alone time needed to relax and recuperate. Now she has nothing but time. Empty days with time to wonder what life would have been like had she never met Robert, had she never moved to Bryn Mawr. What would be different had she not been transplanted to a residential compound that lacks humanity?

Angela never understood how people here functioned as a cohesive unit; the mysterious rubric that others seemed to know, but she did not. She could not interpret the language of this secret society with their unspoken gestures of raised brows, censorious stares, and derisive smirks. Armed with the knowledge that she was only accepted because she came from old money, Angela decided her life would be less difficult if she were received as a member of the café

society, than not. After all, she's seen how they tear outsiders apart, and given the choice, she preferred being predator rather than prey.

So Angela changed her name, her appearance, and her personality to please her husband and suit others. She became a product of her environment and adopted their ostentatious ways. A conceited convert, she was now one of them. But they could make her life a living hell if they ever found out her secret, and she's doing her best to ensure that doesn't happen.

Angela's home was her one true sanctuary. A dependable calm swept over her whenever she entered its intricately scrolled iron gates. She took pride in her home and entertained often. After all, this was the gathering place, the setting of many benefits and private parties, always humming with activity. But that was before her life had taken such a dramatic turn.

Instead of pride, what she now feels is resentment, jealousy, and distrust—for one particular woman. An intensifying anger festers inside of her, squeezing tightly with its poisonous grip. Sharon Bartelson had been her best friend and closest confidante until Angela ran out of money. Friendships take years to build and very little effort to destroy, especially when the relationship rests entirely on a caste system. No longer on equal footing, Angela has been bumped down several rungs into a subservient position and there's nothing that can change this.

As much as she tries, she can't remember being truly happy, or a time when she wasn't performing some ridiculous enactment of her former life. It's as if she's a small animal, trapped in a cage with no escape, running back and forth, back and forth, until the mind gives way to insanity and the body dissolves into itself.

Angela thinks about this every morning as she sits in the dark and waits. It's one of many niggling thoughts that when combined with other worries, picks away at her brain, keeping her awake. After sufficiently replaying the what-ifs and regrets that come with sleep deprivation, she shakes off the sadness and rises to her feet. Then she steps onto the flagstone portico, where she apprehensively glances left, then right, searching for any movement in the immediate vicinity.

It's time.

Tiptoeing to the end of the driveway on slippered feet, she makes her deposit and returns to her post, sitting down heavily on the stone entry steps. Were there others in her neighborhood that would be up pacing the floors at this hour? Besides sharing a zip code, did anyone here share the same worries as she? Or are they all obliviously content, with full bellies and full bank accounts, only suffering from incurable apathy? This gives her something else to contemplate while she waits with her knees bent to her chest to stave off the foreboding feeling that has taken up residence in her gut.

Startled by automatic sprinklers as they pop up in unison throughout the subdivision, Angela ascertains that her neighbors must use the same company to turn the water on in the spring and winterize the system in the fall. They must have their irrigation systems synchronized to come on at the same time, which she finds both humorous and disturbing. Hers is the only one that does not activate, the lawn turned to an ugly carpet of brown. Perennials and shrubs slump wilting, defeated. They beg for water, but she cannot help them, because she cannot even help herself.

She's received stacks of letters steeped in legal jargon, reminding her that she must keep her property in acceptable condition—or else! Now, she's a fugitive, an enemy of the people because she can't afford to water her yard. Lulled by the pulsating hiss of sprinklers, she hears the susurrant throbbing of water as it slaps against a tree. In the distance, parched plants and delicate

annuals breathe a sigh of relief, bolstering them as the days begin to warm and summer approaches.

Angela uncurls her hands from around her knees and looks around. Reliably, her neighbors begin stirring, soft lights giving off honeyed glows from a bedroom or bathroom window. Lights randomly pop on, then off, as people move inaudibly through their homes.

Sitting in the pre-dawn darkness each day, she has unintentionally learned the routines of her immediate neighbors. She likes this part of the morning best, as it makes her feel not so alone; imagining them as they wake, stretching, readying for whatever plans they may have. Angela likes to believe that all people are innocent when they first wake up, not yet having committed the sins of the day. It's hard to dislike even the vilest individual in the early morning, a new day unfolding, ripe with possibility, and a promise that anything can happen. A choice can be made to be good—or not.

As they slowly come to life, she imagines her slumberous neighbors instinctively shuffling to the kitchen or en suite kitchenette where a steaming hot cup of coffee awaits. The ultimate reward just for getting out of bed. She has a built-in coffee bar in the master suite, long deserted and empty of its full-bodied morning tinctures. She tries not to think too much about this, because she would give anything for a cup of coffee and wishes she could catch the scent of whatever may be brewing in neighboring homes. The visceral aroma of a hot caffeinated beverage just might give her reason to live.

There are lights and movement across the street, refocusing her attention from her growling stomach. Dr. Rayhill Burton departs each morning at exactly five-thirty, bound for a renowned medical research center where he's the department chair of gene therapy research. Affectionately known as Dr. B, he coexists with his intolerable wife, Nikki, in a stone castle complete with turrets, secret passageways, and a small kitchen better suited for an Airstream trailer than a grand estate. Built by Dr. Burton and his first wife, Clarice, their atypical castle home is an anomalous curiosity.

As strange as his home may be, Dr. Burton has always been cordial to Angela. His wife, on the other hand, is another sort and forbids her husband to mingle with anyone outside her urbane circle of friends. In her glory days, Nikki was a supermodel and centerfold. Now, she lives vicariously through others, surrounding herself with young beauties. The aging fashion guru with her own clothing line and emaciated adolescent groupies rarely leaves her home.

Angela has always wondered how these two polar opposites merged as a couple. She settles on one scenario and giggles at the image of a brain standing at the altar, marrying a colossal set of knockers. She shakes her head as she tries to remove the strange image brought forth by her overactive imagination. Thankfully, she need only wait several minutes as her focus turns to another neighborhood oddity.

Darcy Danforth, overzealous skeletal jogger, and ill-reputed scandalmonger, rounds the corner, barely covered in spandex and sweatbands—no matter the temperature. Besides outdistancing other runners, she excels in conversational endurance. Her ability to extract the minutest detail from neighbors is notorious. Angela crouches lower in her position to avoid detection, watching as Darcy moves smoothly along her preplanned course. She runs past, smiling and waving into the air, no doubt involuntary motions from her pageant days.

Redford Nester is up and about as well, though it's hard to imagine how. A single medical malpractice lawyer with a penchant for prostitutes, gambling, and uncharacteristically, a morning routine of filling half a dozen bird feeders. Red's nocturnal lifestyle also contributes to a heightened sense of night vision, allowing him clear navigation through darkened grounds. While continuing his pre-dawn tasks, he pauses, cocking his head up and around, a wolf catching the scent of his prey. Somehow, he always knows she's there. He stares in Angela's direction as she sits in the shadows, pending cue for her daily performance.

Daybreak comes with glorious sunrise vistas and a six-a.m. promise that newspapers will be accurately thrown to the edge of each winding driveway, silently awaiting retrieval for a cursory morning read. Many have made the switch to the e-edition, but Angela had opted for both. Even though she no longer knows what's going on in the world, she likes the unaltered routine of retrieving the paper. This gives her a brief measure of stability while sending a beacon of false assurance that nothing has changed.

She waits and watches. When she sees a set of headlights slicing through the darkness and hears the smack of folded newsprint hitting driveways, she knows it's time. Tightening the belt of her silken robe, she straightens herself and gracefully meanders down the walkway to claim the morning paper with her head held high, as she's done each morning for the past twenty years. She reverses her steps and with a relieved breath of exhalation, places the paper just inside the front door next to the bulky Saturday edition, still tightly encased in its colorless plastic wrapper.

For months, she's perfected her routine of depositing the Monday through Saturday Wall Street Journal at the end of her driveway each morning at four a.m. Several hours from first light, yet still early enough to avoid running into her immediate neighbors, or her delivery person, who she'd only seen driving past in profile. She convinced herself that her daily routine would continue. Nothing would look out of place, no one would ask questions. But the life she'd known is over. Now all that's left is a rapidly dissipating air of superiority as she sits alone in the dark, clinging to deceit.