

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Four Wives

Wendy Walker

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## **About the Book**

Welcome to Hunting Ridge, home to outrageous wealth and four desperate wives . . .

Meet: Gayle Beck, the matriarch of Hunting Ridge society, who struggles to reconcile her picture-perfect life with a numbing sense of unfulfilment; Love Welsh, adoring mother, who battles with memories of a childhood lived in the shadow of a genius father; Marie Passeti, over-stretched divorce lawyer and mother, who has lost her passion for life and for her husband; and Janie Kirk, yummy mummy, whose quest for acceptance knows no bounds.

In a world where happiness comes second to appearances, their domestic discontent spirals into an irreversible course of risk-taking, secrecy and self-destruction. For these four wives perfection is just a façade and behind closed doors infidelity, self-doubt and deceit run rife.

## **About the Author**

Wendy Walker is a former commercial litigator and investment banker who now works at home raising her three sons and writing (most of which is done between the school runs in the back of her minivan, where she has blankets, a coffee reheating device and laptop batteries to keep her going!). As a young girl, Wendy trained for competitive figure skating at facilities in Colorado and New York. She now serves on the board of Figure Skating in Harlem, an organization committed to the development of underprivileged girls which she helped found in 1997. She lives in Connecticut, USA, and is currently writing her second novel (still in the back of her minivan). For more information visit Wendy's website:

[www.wendywalkerbooks.com](http://www.wendywalkerbooks.com)

# FOUR WIVES

Wendy Walker



arrow books

*For Andrew, Ben, and Christopher*



## ONE

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### JANIE

HER HEART WAS POUNDING as she sat in the car. Before her was the house, a giant white colonial with black shutters, a quaint portico, and the three-car garage set off to the side where she now found herself, wondering. *What have I done?*

She took a breath to stave off the panic that was beginning to seep inside her. She needed to be careful. She reached for the garage remote, then thought better of it. The chain runner would cut through the still night air like a buzz saw. She killed the headlights, then the ignition. Her hand slipped inside the door latch, pulling it slowly until it clicked. She pushed open the door and swung her feet outside the car. She removed her shoes, her favorite strapped heels, and hung them on her fingers. She draped her purse around her shoulder, then, as softly as she'd opened it, closed the door with her hip. The soft silk of her skirt was deliciously sensuous as it brushed against her bare leg, testing her will to stay focused. To forget.

The sound of the neighbors' sprinkler coming to life startled her as she began to make her way around the back of the house. Her feet stepped like a cat's paws on the asphalt, and for a moment she was frozen in place, listening to the initial burst of water followed by a rhythmic pulsating—the *pinging* of water drops as they hit a small section of a flagstone terrace on their way around. Placing the sounds, she pictured the neighbors' yard, the two acres of flat green

grass, the free-form pool, the stone wall that divided their property from her own. Then her yard and back door, up the stairs to the children in their rooms, the husband in her bed. The reasons she was creeping about under the midnight sky.

Taking another breath, she carried on, around the outside of the garage to the patio—through the maze of wrought-iron furniture, kick balls, plastic toys, and gas grill, and finally to the sliding glass door that opened into the kitchen. It was unlocked, and she pushed it slowly, then looked inside, making out the shapes of things in the dark room—the oval table that was still piled with remnants from the dinner, a bottle of ketchup, *The New York Times*, a plastic sippy cup. It was the heart of their lives, this kitchen. She could see the babies, four of them in eight years, sitting in the high chair that now resided in the basement with the rest of the childhood monuments. She could see them running around the island as she chased behind them, their shrieks of laughter filling the room as they avoided capture. She could feel in her bones the toll from the daily struggles—getting them to eat, umpiring fights, and saving them from spilling over as they climbed upon their chairs like unruly savages at dinnertime. This was the place where they played, talked, cried, and fought with each other. And though she felt drawn to it like a time traveler returning home from a long journey, she remained frozen at its threshold, not yet able to enter.

It was not a terrible life. Janie Kirk was a suburban housewife, the steadfast bottom of an inverse pyramid upon which the demands of her family balanced. It was a life founded at its core in her love for the children who lay sleeping inside. From there it grew heavy with the weight of their needs, and those of her husband, which she had carried on her shoulders for so many years. School, soccer, ballet, swimming. Doctors, dentists, speech therapists. Food on the table every day. Laundry, yard work, pets. Birthday

parties. Dieting. Sex. It was an odd existence when she stopped to consider it, but so completely common that she rarely did, and it occurred to her that it would be close to perfect if she hadn't contracted the unfortunate disease of discontentment.

She was standing now between two worlds, her eyes taking in her life, her mind reliving the feel of his hands on her body not an hour before—his face replete with desire as he approached her. In that desire, she had seen the teenager in the back of his father's Cadillac, the young man whose heart she'd so foolishly broken in high school, then the college lover who'd broken hers. He had been, in that moment, every first kiss, every curious glance from across a room. All the things she'd left behind so many years ago.

She recalled the firm hand gripping the back of her head and pulling her to him, the other hand reaching for her back. The hold was strong, powerful, and she'd given into it without the slightest hesitation, without a second thought. Then came the kiss, and with it a warm burning under her skin. She'd opened her eyes and pressed her mouth harder against his, no longer someone's wife, someone's mother. Just a woman. And he was nothing to her but a man she desired. He had tried to speak, *You're so beautiful* . . . But she'd pressed her mouth harder against his and waited for the sound of his voice to disappear from her mind, along with everything else she knew about him. The shape of his face, the color of his eyes, his house and family. All of it had vanished. There had been no place for talk, no need for reassurances or stating one's intentions. The confines of their social structure that kept the wheels turning in this privileged existence had been suspended, and for the first time in her life she had not cared what her lover thought—if he was comparing her to past lovers, assessing her performance, her body—whether he would call her, see her

again, marry her and buy a house, have children and live happily ever after until they were both dead in the ground.

She closed her eyes now, wanting to remember for one moment more the feel of his weight over her, her legs wrapped around him, pulling him closer—her mouth on his, nearly consuming him in a frantic embrace. And yet her life was waiting, pulling her back in.

She opened her eyes and took a breath. How could she have imagined that this would be possible, that she could walk through that door and up the stairs, kiss her children, then crawl beside her sleeping husband? She had wanted this night for a long time, and the thought of this night had somehow managed to coexist with her inside those walls. Now that she had given life to her thoughts, now that she had given in to what was, at best, a purely selfish act of weakness and depravity, she felt alive. Her body, her senses, her mind. Everything was awake again. It was a feeling of intoxication, and though she was nearly sick from it, she knew she would have to have more. There would be war between what awaited her and this narcotic flowing through her blood, and there would be no chance of reconciling the opposing needs that would now demand attention within this house.

*What have I done?* she thought again, knowing she had cast them all on a different course—an uncertain course. With a quiet resolve, she stepped inside.

## TWO

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## LOVE

THROUGH THE OPEN BEDROOM door, Love heard the baby crying. She fumbled for her glasses on the night table and checked the time. For the shortest of moments she hoped for four o'clock, though the fog inside her head was thicker than a 4 A.M. wake-up. It felt more like three, definitely not five. At five o'clock she could actually hold a thought together. She would not hope for five, only to be disappointed. But *two*? The red numbers did not lie: 2:15 glared at her from the small black box. It was no better than the night before, and an hour worse than the one before that. It was regression, and in the face of sleep deprivation that was now chronic, she could feel the frustration taking over her entire being. This child was *never* going to sleep through the night.

She untangled herself from the appendages of her sleeping husband, pushing off the limbs that felt like dead weights around her. She pulled the covers back and walked around the bed. The room was a small converted study, and even their double mattress frame had trouble staying out of the way when she made these walks in the darkness. She turned sideways at the foot of the bed, her back pressed to the wall. As she shuffled through the confined space, she wondered how the man had slept through it. First, it had been three-year-old Jessica. At midnight, she'd wet through her pull-up. The bed, the child—all of it needed to be changed. Now, the baby was having a turn.

The crying stopped for a moment. Baby Will was listening for her footsteps. Not hearing them, he turned it up a notch. Love continued her shuffle to the door, studying the figure under the covers, the rise and fall of the large lump in the bed. He really was dead asleep. *Confounding*, she thought. It was simply the nature of his world, she supposed, a world apart from hers—work, eat, sleep. It was a world where someone *else* woke up in the middle of the night, where someone *else* remembered when to feed them, what to pack for school, to watch them in the tub so they didn't drown. These things were decidedly on her, and lately she felt wholly incapable of tending to them.

In the hallway, the dim glow from the nightlight cast shadows on the wall, images she knew well after six years of answering the calls of her children. The huge black stripes from the stair rail cast to her left, and the outline of her own round, pudgy shape always keeping one step ahead of her as she walked to the nursery. Time might as well be standing still. Will was seven months old now. The grace period was over for the baby weight, but there it remained. Twenty pounds of flesh that hadn't budged. It was unforgivable. Not just because it was a testament to her weakness for bakery items. Or evidence of their relative poverty in a town where every self-respecting housewife had a nanny and personal trainer. She was the doctor's wife—people understood that she didn't have access to the things that help afforded, what with managed care and all. Not that being a doctor didn't carry the respect it always had. Doctors, lawyers—the years of training required to earn a professional degree still impressed people. There just wasn't any money in it, at least not the kind needed to keep up in this town. Hunting Ridge was driven by careers in Manhattan's financial institutions. Tens of millions in accumulated wealth was commonplace, so much so that its relative enormity was no longer recognized. Just over a

million dollars had bought Love and Dr. Harrison a house and a ticket into the superb school system. But it hadn't been enough to buy a room for each child, or sufficient floor space to accommodate even a queen-sized bed. Crammed into their tiny house with two kids bunked in the old master bedroom and one in a modest nursery, looking after three children and eating bagels and donuts and leftover mac-and-cheese because she was too tired to inspire even a trace of will power—it was no wonder the doctor's wife couldn't get the fat off her ass.

Still, for Love it ran deeper. She wasn't just an overweight housewife living in the "poor" part of town. If she were just that, it might be bearable. If she had not fallen so far from what she had once been, there would not be this bone-deep humiliation. Rather, there might be acceptance, contentment that all was as it should be. *Yes, she might be thinking, this is how I always thought I would turn out.* But that was not the case. She was miles from where the old Love Welsh had been, and the distance grew with every day she remained on this trajectory of marriage and motherhood. Miles from the career she had imagined for herself as a child. Miles from the excitement and fulfillment she had expected would fill her day-to-day life. It was more than two decades gone, the possibility of that existence, but it still lingered inside her. Tormenting her at moments like these.

Of course, she had still grown up, and into quite an attractive woman. She was tall like her father, with the long, wavy auburn hair of her mother. Her hips had curves that were accentuated by long legs, and her face had beautiful structure. All of this was still with her now—the basic scaffolding that made the person. But to Love, who saw none of these virtues in herself, it was simple. She had been a golden girl. Now she was a pudgy shadow on the wall.

She opened the door to the nursery, then quickly got out of its way so she could close it again and contain the noise. She looked into the crib. Baby Will was flailing—arms and legs reaching for the sky as if they could somehow grasp an invisible rope to facilitate an escape. His cries were loud and now interspersed with gasps of breath. *Gasp . . . cry. . . gasp. . . cry.* It was desperate. And it got Love every time.

She reached down and lifted him out of the crib, eliciting a vice grip of little arms around her. He nuzzled his face deep into her neck, and she whispered in his ear and kissed his cheek. *Mommy's here.*

With a slimy wetness now reaching from her face to her shoulder, Love sat down in the rocker and held him tight until his sobs turned to deep sighs. *What took you so long?* they seemed to say, and the guilt found its place inside her. She knew what she was supposed to do now. Put him back in the crib. Leave the room. Let him cry for ten minutes. *Repeat torture of child until child cries himself to sleep.* And though it wasn't in her to do it, she knew from the pounding in her head that it was either Baby Will or her. And it made her thoughts drift toward things existential, questions about the Divine Creator, mastermind of the universe, who had placed a mother's needs against those of her child. But these were thoughts for another time. At the moment, she had a choice to make. Someone was going to have to suffer.

After a short while, the infant loosened his arms from his mother's neck, then reached with his whole body for her chest. His hands patted her breasts and he started the sobbing again. She thought about the rules. *Whatever you do, don't feed him.* She pulled him close to her and rubbed his back. "Shhhhhh," she whispered. He was barely out of the womb. Ripped from his safe haven where he hadn't wanted for a damned thing. Now everything he wanted she was supposed to withhold. *Don't rock him. Don't nurse him*



*at night. Don't give in.* Why had raising children become about denying them the very things they craved?

*To hell with it.* She lifted her shirt and put Baby Will on her breast. His body melted like a chocolate bar in the sun, molding around her until every part of him was touching her. One arm wrapped around her back and the other reached out for her face, resting on her cheek. Through the fog in her head and the bewildered resentment at the mysterious force that created humanity, Love couldn't hold back a smile as she watched her baby's eyes roll back in his head before closing. He was nothing short of blissful, doing what he did best—sucking on his mother, filling his tummy. He was satisfied. And she was a complete failure.

Settling into the state of defeat—a familiar place now—Love kissed Baby Will's hand, then rested it on her chest. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, but the adrenaline had begun to flow and now had her heart racing. Rocking back and forth with the baby in her arms, she could feel the love here, the truest kind, the kind that forces its way inside the most stubborn soul and takes root. And it filled up every space inside of her, except the one that could not be penetrated.

It always came in these moments of peace, when the house was quiet and she was alone in the conscious world. At night, that was when it came—the disoriented, *where the hell am I?* feeling that somehow managed to coexist within her, right next to the fierce devotion she held for her children. The baby in her arms, the two curled up next door—Jessica with her stuffed pig and Henry with his Lego directions under the pillow. It felt inhuman to not be content. But there it was just the same. The haunting force of her other life.

On most nights she didn't fight it, letting her mind go as it so liked to do—wandering beyond the façade of certainty she maintained in the daylight. Back in time it would carry

her, changing things that could not be changed. Sitting in the darkness, her wits not fully alert, she could think of how her career ended without feeling the monstrous shame that generally kept her away from the subject. She could picture her life laid out as a storyboard. One after another, years were erased and rewritten with stories of unprecedented achievement and the humble admiration of her famous father, *the Great Alexander Rice*. It was a fantasy thought cocktail—a weaving together of truth and untruth—that on most nights settled her nerves.

But not tonight. The regrets of the past, along with the fragments of hope that she might someday reclaim her destiny, could no longer be indulged. Instead, tonight, her body was trapped in a kind of shock. She thought about the letter tucked away in a kitchen drawer, buried within a pile of papers no one ever bothered to sort out. She could see her father's handwriting on the page, and through some kind of visceral subconscious connection, she could smell his cologne from nearly twenty-two years ago—the last time she'd seen him. Was he really going to do this to her? Would he expose her after all these years? Her secret, the one she kept hidden beneath this life, had become over the years a muddy river of memories and emotion that now flooded her body. She pictured her friends, what their faces would look like when they learned the truth about her. She imagined the agony it would inflict upon her husband, having thought all this time that he had seen her darkest corners and swept them clean. And she wondered how long it would take to reach her children.

With her sweet baby now fast asleep in her arms and her heart pounding within the walls of her chest, she could feel the fear inside her, searching for a place to take hold. From the moment she'd opened that letter, it had been growing like a fungus, corrupting her body, her mind. And she could not help but wonder if it was her own desire, her midnight

fantasies of being more than what she had become, that had brought this about. She was her father's child, no matter how much time was now between them. That his letter had arrived just as her desires had begun to resurface seemed more than coincidental. Yet it could not be more than that. For all his vast talents, Alexander Rice was not psychic. His letter was about nothing but himself, his world and his desires. Still, it was within this letter, and all that it held, that Love was beginning to sense her own undoing.

## THREE

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### GAYLE

GAYLE HAYWOOD BECK HEARD the soft click of the brass door latch. Light from the hall sifted into the bedroom as the door swung open, then disappeared again. Across the floorboards, she heard him walk slowly past the bed, through the sitting area into his dressing room. Another door closed, then the light from the dressing room appeared from under the door.

Lying still, Gayle strained her eyes to read the clock. It was well past two. Surely he would be tired. Through the closed door, she could hear him remove his clothing—the clicking of the belt latch, the shoes dropping to the floor, one and then the next. His starched shirt was unbuttoned, pulled from his body and tossed on top of his shoes, where it would be left for the maid to sort out in the morning. Then it was quiet. Lying in bed, waiting, Gayle could hear her heart pounding in her ears. Still, she closed her eyes and began to breathe deeply, feigning the breath of sleep.

He went next to the bathroom. First to brush his teeth, then into the shower. But only for a moment. The room fell dark again. She heard the floorboards give way to steps as he approached their bed, then the pull of the covers as he crawled in on the other side. She could smell him now, the crisp lavender soap on his skin, his wet hair, mint toothpaste. She heard him sigh and roll over, settling into

the bed to sleep, and it sparked a wave of relief that was nearly euphoric.

How quickly these moments came and went now, how easily her emotions were pushed and pulled by even the smallest event. First, there'd been the anticipation. *Is he coming home tonight?* It was so much easier when she knew from the start, when he gave her some kind of schedule. She could gauge her mood, her tolerance for her husband that night, and make the decision which pill to take, and how many.

She thought about the pills now, sorted carefully in small brown prescription bottles in the bottom drawer of her vanity. Dr. Theodore Lerner—known affectionately as Dr. Ted to Gayle and the rest of the Haywood clan—had written out the instructions with great care and precision. Two blue Zoloft with breakfast. One white Xanax at lunchtime to prevent the afternoon anxiety. Then, if needed, Ambien just before bedtime. The regimen had started as just that—a strict menu of mood-altering drugs. Of course, over the years, Gayle had taken to some experimentation to see how much relief she could actually squeeze out of these resources, and she had become quite skilled as her own personal pharmacist. She took the Zoloft, a popular antidepressant, as written. Its effects were subtle and constant, making it useless for any immediate purposes. The Xanax was another story. There were some afternoons when two or three made their way out of the bottle, and others when she skipped it altogether. In the early evenings she could multiply their effectiveness with a glass of wine or a nice martini. She was careful not to overdo—rehab would not be good for someone as visible as Gayle Haywood Beck. She knew what she needed, when she needed it. Two Xanax and a drink usually made it possible to be Troy's wife, and this was why it was so crucial to know her husband's schedule.

Tonight had been left open. Troy had been invited to a late afternoon golf outing at the club, followed by a cigar dinner. Those always went late, and Gayle counted on this. But for some infuriating reason, he wouldn't give her an answer as to whether or not he would attend.

"Does it really matter?" he'd asked after her third call to the office.

She'd made the excuse that she needed to let their cook know about dinner. "If you go out, I may have Paul make me a sandwich."

He'd held out until nearly four o'clock, calling on his cell as he made his way back from the city. He was going to play after all, and stay for the dinner. It seemed like months ago, the blissful relief that had come at four o'clock. She'd skipped the Xanax and enjoyed just one glass of wine after her son went to sleep. Now it was the middle of the night, the drugs were out of reach, and Troy was home in their bed.

The scent of his favorite soap—his signature in Gayle's mind—filled her nostrils as she inhaled, provoking a memory that struck like a fist to her gut. It was a memory of another time, the first time she'd smelled that smell, a time when she'd found it enticing, even comforting. That this same scent now made her recoil with fear was the very dilemma that formed the base of her illness.

The sessions with Dr. Ted had helped her understand this—the acute frailty of her demeanor—the underlying condition that her mother had always reminded her of. This was life. Marriage was tough. Ups and downs. Good and bad. Troy had his *issues*. What man wouldn't be affected by a wealthy wife? The evidence was all around her, at the book groups and luncheons, the charity functions and bake sales—what woman was consistently happy in her marriage? They told her to take the pills and forgive herself

for needing them to live a normal life. She had the first part down.

Troy Beck rolled over again, then cleared his throat. Across the mattress, his wife lay perfectly still, fighting to hold back the tears that might give her away. She calmed herself, breathing slowly, though her body was rigid, her every muscle tense as she prayed for him to fall asleep.

## FOUR

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### MARIE

IN THE HOUSE NEXT door to Love Welsh, Bill Harrison, and their unruly clan, Marie Paseti stared at her husband. In the darkness of their bedroom, she could make out little more than a silhouette of his face, but it was enough. The evidence was adequately apparent. *For the plaintiff*, she thought, her head now propped up in the palm of her hand as she leaned over him for a closer look. *Receding hairline, chubby cheeks, beer on the breath*. Evidence of the downslide, the effects of their suburban existence. Work, beer, TV, golf, not necessarily in that order. Anthony Paseti hadn't been to a gym in three years. Beneath the covers, she watched the rise and fall of the round ball now known as her husband's stomach. *Exhibit four*. It was confounding, really. Men were fit in this town. After all, this wasn't some middle-of-nowhere American suburb. It was Hunting Ridge, for Christ's sake. There were certain standards to maintain, beauty being near the top of the list. Just beneath wealth, but slightly above college ranking, breeding, and social connections.

OK. It was time for the defense to make its argument. *Exhibit one—still smart, very smart*. Marie watched his eyes flutter beneath their lids. *Where have you gone?* It had been a very long time since she'd seen exhibit one. They'd been here just under seven years, and in that time Anthony had gone from CNN to the Golf Channel, from *The Economist* to



*Golf Digest*. From pondering the universe to air swings. Was it a disease? If it was a disease, maybe the twenty pounds were a good sign, a deviation from the norm that perhaps indicated some resistance to the illness that seemed to permeate the inhabitants of this quaint little village. Maybe it was Anthony Pasetti's quiet *F-U* to the suburbs. But if he wanted to send a message of defiance, could he not have chosen one more beneficial to her? Like giving up his golf game and staying home with the kids on the weekends? Or emptying the dishwasher once in a while? No self-respecting Hunting Ridge man emptied the dishwasher. That would be a good one. Maybe he'd chosen the beer gut to drive her farther to the other side of their bed.

*Go to sleep!* These midnight wakings were doing her in. She'd pass out from exhaustion just after ten. But then the panic would strike, making her pop up, open-eyed, staring at the figure lying beside her, desperate to understand what was going so wrong. Still, as much as she resented the disruption, it was in these moments, and only in these moments, that she could get some of it back—the feeling that she actually knew this man.

It was the goddamn suburbs. That was it. Life had been sailing along just fine in the city. A fierce litigator, Marie had been on the fast track in a New York law firm before having her first daughter, Suzanne. She'd had every intention of going back after her maternity leave, but the pull of her child had been too strong, and that had been that. The first mistake. For all her intelligence and two Harvard degrees, Marie had been easily seduced by suburban lore. She'd quit her job, moved the family to Hunting Ridge where the air was clean and there was grass outside their door—grass that was now littered with black spots that some fungal epidemic had claimed. Olivia came next, and after her birth Marie resigned herself to joining the ranks of her peers. For two years—time that seemed to stand still—she had

endured the endless talk of toys and teething and pediatricians. She went to the playgroups, met at the park, sang “Old MacDonald” sixty million times at mommy-and-me music class. It was mind-numbing, anxiety-producing. Crazy-making. And, in hindsight, it was inevitable that she would begin “dabbling” again in the law. By the middle of her third year as a stay-at-home mommy, she had signed a lease for office space in town.

On some days, it actually made her crazy life in Hunting Ridge tolerable. Up at six, get the girls ready for school—breakfast, lunchboxes, homework, notes for field trips and play dates. Shower and dress, organize the papers she’d brought home and worked on late into the night. Then clean up after her husband who, after staying out late at the club, would sleepwalk through the morning, leaving out the cereal boxes and milk, throwing his dirty shirts on the floor near, but God forbid inside, the laundry room. Then to the office, sorting through her work, making out the assignments for her small staff—the two associates whose part-time schedules looked like a small jigsaw puzzle. There wasn’t much that got pitched her way that she couldn’t hit out of the park. Marie Paseti was the very embodiment of efficiency.

That it had begun to belittle her husband, to shine an even brighter light on his domestic failings of late, was a consequence that could not be helped. Anthony Paseti was perfectly capable of dressing his children and putting away his cereal boxes. He’d done it for years, supporting her career, sharing the responsibilities at home. Then, one small task at a time, he had removed himself from the invisible chore chart Marie kept in her head. And one task at a time, Marie had picked up the slack. It wasn’t the only change that had taken place right under her nose. Not long ago, her husband had been fully present in their lives, doting on the girls every weekend, finding creative ways to please his wife

—the occasional breakfast in bed, spontaneous dinner plans in the city. And when their second child had put a damper on their sex life, the reserved corporate attorney had surprised her with a series of Internet orders—small packages that arrived in the mail, discreetly wrapped in plain brown paper. *Hardware for the hard up*, he'd joked. And although most of it wound up in the bottom of Marie's underwear drawer, it had returned a sense of mischief to their lives, a flavor that had since been diluted by Hunting Ridge vanilla.

Years had passed since she'd received a plain brown package. Now, all that came in the mail were bills and golf magazines. And while it amused her on some level that her husband had become so fond of sticks and balls, it wasn't exactly her idea of foreplay. Still, despite his downslide, Anthony Passeti was a brilliant man, and on the days she didn't hate him, Marie could still see traces of the man she loved so deeply.

She slid closer beside him and curled up next to the rising gut. She was an infrequent visitor to his side of the bed, and she remembered now how much warmer it was than her side where her slight body barely made an indentation. Carefully, she pulled her pillow next to his and dropped her head upon it, closing her eyes. It was important that he not wake. She was angry at him again, a far too ordinary state of affairs in their house, and snuggling would definitely be a sign of contrition. She heard him snore twice, then shift to the left. *Good*. He was out, which meant she would still have deniability in the morning. *Sorry, must have rolled over in the night*. She let out a deep breath and felt sleep return as she lay beside her long-lost husband.

## FIVE

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### DREAMS

DREAMS TORMENTED JANIE THROUGHOUT the night. *Waking to find two men in her bed, struggling for an explanation. Running after a stack of papers that had been blown from her hands. The feel of his rough beard on her inner thigh.*

She slept in short segments, dreaming then waking, dreaming again. Each dream brought a new dose of panic or relief, tossing her back and forth like a rag doll. The sun peeking through the bedroom curtains should have been welcome, but she knew from the sickness in her stomach that the anxiety would only intensify as she moved through her day.

Daniel was still asleep next to her when she heard a noise from down the hall. The youngest of the four Kirk children was beginning to stir. Not ready to face what she might be feeling, or not feeling, she jumped from the bed without looking at her husband. In the bathroom, she checked for evidence. Clothes were in the hamper, a place with which Daniel would not concern himself. The contents of her purse were put away—compact, lipstick, comb, breath mints—the purse was back on the rack in her closet. She retraced her steps as she quickly brushed her teeth and pulled back her hair. The novel from the book-club meeting she'd ducked out of was on the kitchen counter. The remote for the garage door was in the basket by the kitchen door where such things were kept. Forgetting it there would be her

reason for not pulling in the car. What else? There was nothing else, except the contents of her mind, which she knew from experience would not be detected by anyone living in this house.

She looked in the mirror, checking her neck, her breastbone. There was no trace of his lips there. Dressed in clingy cotton pj's, no makeup on her face, hair uncombed, she would easily pass as the *mommy* and the *honey* they expected each morning—the embodiment of suburban perfection. Long hair, perfectly highlighted in shades of blond. Sculpted legs, firm ass, flattened stomach, new construction breasts—perky size Cs. And a face that was both provocative and subtle. Despite her forty-two years and four pregnancies, she looked damned close to herself twenty years ago. In fact, if she didn't occasionally dress them up and parade them through town, there would be no visible evidence of the four children that she'd borne. And that was how Daniel liked things—just as they had always been.

It was ironic, really, that the things she'd done to herself to please her husband had opened the door to her infidelity. She was reality on hold—no saggy tits from years of breastfeeding, no loose, floppy skin that had been stretched to oblivion again and again. What man wouldn't want the very things he'd once had but could never have again? It was all possible now with the surgical erasing of time. Janie had no illusions as to why she'd found herself the object of pursuit.

She thought about it now, how all of this had transpired in a few short weeks. First, the typical Hunting Ridge cocktail party. Elaborate catered nibbles passed around by waiters, all dressed in white. Tendered bars set up in every room. Rented policemen parking the cars and ignoring the smell of alcohol on the guests when they returned to drive home. She'd gone to the small bar in the back of the kitchen to

find a decent bottle of wine. These were friends, and she felt at home in spite of the formality surrounding her. The good stuff would be in the wine fridge, which had been her destination. But the short walk in search of a drink would only be the beginning.

“Check the bottom rack.”

The man’s voice was familiar, and she’d thought nothing of it as she turned from the fridge with a smile. She’d known him for years.

“I had my eye on a Kistler Chardonnay,” she’d said.

“Let’s break out the red.”

Stepping around her, he’d allowed his body to come closer to hers than it should have. And as they knelt next to one another to examine the bottles on the last three racks, she’d felt the jolt of a subtle, and surprising, seduction. The second step on her path to betrayal.

“Here we go,” he’d said, pulling a pinot noir from its slot. They moved back to the kitchen. He opened the bottle, poured two glasses, then handed one to her. His hand brushed against hers, and she smiled in a way that, upon reflection, was reflexively sultry. After years of nothing but benign interaction with members of the opposite sex—a suburban mandate—it had taken very little to sense the flirtation, and her body had responded as though it had been secretly training for this very moment. This was surely not the first time they had been alone in a room, but this time had been entirely different.

Whatever it was they had begun had paused there as they returned to the party, and most of her was grateful when she’d found herself safely tucked away in her bed later that night, next to Daniel, having done nothing, really, but smiled. She could see now how that smile had been the third step. Still, in spite of where that smile had led her, she would never let go of the life she had built, the security for