

Prologue

Present day, 2012

It's the first spray of my husband's blood hitting the television screen that will haunt me in the weeks to come – a perfect diagonal splash, each droplet descending like a vivid red tear.

That, and the sound of his skull cracking as the blows from the golf club rain down.

There's something so utterly shocking about that noise. I'd never heard it before and yet, the moment I did, I knew instinctively what it was. The crunching sound of a fractured head is strangely and horrifically unmistakable.

A few minutes earlier, the two of us had been watching a crime thriller on that television, now criss-crossed with blood. We were sitting separately in our armchairs – expensive black leather recliners. A particularly scary scene was playing out on the wide LCD screen. The killer in the show was on to his third victim and as he hunted her in deserted, creepy woodland I placed my hands over my eyes, unable to watch the inevitable. Harry laughed at me for being so girly.

That was when the stranger walked into the centre of our living room.

We hadn't even heard him enter the house.

A golf club dangled loosely from his right hand, but he didn't seem threatening, if you ignored the unexpectedness of the situation. A pair of jeans, a T-shirt. It was like he'd just strolled in off the golf course that sat to the rear of our property.

Harry turned to me, completely bewildered. Then my husband stood up, his body faster than his brain, a mammal reacting to this peculiar invasion of our space. His mouth was just opening to form the first indignant question when the man swung the golf club at him.

Harry buckled, momentarily winded. He was stunned but his eyes met mine and I saw him make a quick calculation. My husband has always been great like that. Throw him into any awkward situation and he'll negotiate himself out of it in minutes. Charm the birds out of the trees, my mother always says. Although, this time, it didn't look like words were going to work.

Harry is a strong, athletic man. He works out several times a week and one of those sessions is with a boxing coach. He's had a lot of stress in the last few years and there's nothing like laying into a punchbag to let off steam.

So when he pivoted to deliver a right hook to the man standing so nonchalantly in front of us, I thought, *This is it.*

Except it wasn't.

The man hit Harry again while my husband's fist was mid-air.

And again and again, and he's still hitting him.

Harry didn't stand a chance.

My husband is on the floor now, his attacker visibly sweating

THE CONFESSION

and grunting from his exertions as he brings the golf club down repeatedly. His knuckles are white on the iron, his arm muscles tense. Every time the weapon lands it makes a stomach-churning thumping sound, and each blow draws fresh blood, cartilage, saliva, teeth. There's vomit spewing out of Harry's mouth and a damp patch has spread down the leg of his beige trousers.

I'm still in my chair, watching all this.

I don't speak.

I don't run for my phone.

I don't launch myself at the stranger.

What I really want to do as all this is happening is cover my eyes. I want to block out the sight of the horror, just as I did with the thriller on TV.

At last the beating stops. The man releases his grip on the golf club and surveys the damage.

Harry is unrecognizable. There's blood everywhere. This is what they mean when they use the expression 'beaten to a pulp'. This . . . mess. A barely human form. Here lies the man I've known nearly all my adult life. A man who has held my hand, kissed my lips, lain beside me, been inside me – I know every inch of his body and recognize not a bit of it right now.

Then the intruder bends down to Harry's ear and whispers something, quietly, softly, like a lover's sweet nothing.

What? What did he say?

The man stands up and studies me. He has dark eyes – black, in fact. Black hair too. Not dark brown – coal-like. Thick eyebrows. Full, red lips. Younger than me but not by much, maybe ten years or so. He is good-looking. Even covered in my husband's blood.

I know what he is.

A reckoning.

We aren't perfect, Harry and I. All of us have our secrets, don't we? The little petty lies. The bigger sins.

But what has Harry done to provoke this?

My eyes are drawn back to his body, and I whimper. I've imagined Harry dead many times but not this . . . I never thought it would be like this.

Then the man turns on his heel and walks out of the living room door. Just like that, he's gone.

I dimly register the front door opening and slamming shut.

I'm alone, bar the bloodied and battered form on the floor inches from my feet.

That's when I finally do something, when my body throws itself into action.

I wet myself.