

CHAPTER 1

Signs

It was one of those unbearably hot days in August when even the walls seeped sweat, the time of year when most Chicagoans yearned for cooler weather, only to complain about that, too, come December. Twenty-one-year-old Marie Marchetti suffered from a cruel summer cold with sinuses so congested they felt like they would detonate with each sneeze. She was at work planning the upcoming Labor Day clothing displays in the Marshall Field's flagship Loop store when her cold peaked. By ten o'clock in the morning, she was too incapacitated to concentrate on what she was doing and told her boss, Catherine Olsen, she needed to go home and to bed.

Marie dragged herself to the parking garage across the street and got in her 1938 Ford Coupe. It was in good condition for an eight-year-old car, thanks to her husband Richard, a man with a keen appreciation for automobiles. She started the engine, took in a shallow breath, and closed her eyes for a few seconds while she mustered up the energy to put the car in gear.

She mindlessly listened to the news. Earthquake leaves 20,000 people homeless in the Dominican Republic. President Truman establishes the Atomic Energy Commission. Writer H. G. Wells dies. The depressing reports made her head pound harder, so she turned the radio off. All she could think about was going to bed.

It was a six-mile drive up Lake Shore Drive to her Lakeview neighborhood home. Rows of grey and brownstone buildings lined the drive on her left. People owned these apartments—rich people who weren't much affected by the downturned economics following World War II. On the right, the gentle waves of Lake Michigan rose and fell along the shoreline while Canadian geese practiced their V-formations over the water, a surprisingly early drill for this time of year.

The two-story brick home on Byron suited newlyweds Marie and Richard. Purchased six months earlier, just a few weeks before their wedding, it was an older home with high ceilings, hardwood floors, and natural oak woodwork. Richard, a medical equipment salesman, used one of the three bedrooms for his home office.

Marie parked her car in the garage, fumbled for her keys, and unlocked the side door of their home. Once inside, she threw on a soft, floor-length chenille robe, swallowed two aspirin, and curled up on the living room sofa under a blanket. Flushed and shivering from the effects of the fever, she lay there with half-shut eyes waiting for the pain in her face to subside. When it did, she fell asleep.

It took her several seconds after waking up in a barely conscious state to realize someone was ringing the doorbell. She pulled herself off the sofa, straightened her robe, and ran her fingers through her tussled hair before opening the front

door.

“Where’s Richard?” the man in the shiny grey suit asked abruptly, his black hair slicked back tight against his large head under a too-small felt hat. No introduction. No small talk—just that one brief and unmannerly question.

Marie brushed away a strand of hair dangling on her cheek, stared at the stranger for a moment, and thought about whether to shut the door in the man’s boorish face. “He’s at work,” she told him without expression. Deciding to ignore his bad manners, she asked, “Is there a message I can give him?”

The man looked her up and down and, with all the warmth of a snake, said in a thick voice, “Jus’ tell ’em Vincent was here. He’ll know what it’s about.” He tipped his hat, showing off his diamond pinkie ring, turned away from her, and with a quick and jerky gait walked toward his double- parked black Cadillac. Still feeling the effect of his greasy glare, Marie watched him drive away while wondering what *that* was all about.

This wasn’t the only recent conundrum involving her husband that bothered her. Lately, there had been several late-night phone calls that Richard obviously didn’t want her to hear. His opaque explanations about the calls were always the same—they were work-related, and he didn’t want to bore her with such stuff. Eager to build a life with the man she so dearly loved, Marie desperately wanted to believe him.

When Richard came home that evening, she relayed the message from Vincent. “Who is he, hon?” she casually asked. “I don’t remember you ever mentioning a Vincent before.”

“Uh...I used to work with him,” he mumbled as he turned away from her. “I haven’t seen him in years. Hey, can I get you anything, sweetheart? Aspirin? How about a cup of tea?”

“Well, how will you know how to contact him? He didn’t leave a phone...”

Richard interrupted her midsentence and shot her an all-too-familiar look. “I’m not *going* to contact him, Marie. So let’s drop it...okay?” And with that, he disappeared into the kitchen. Marie had learned to accept the sudden shift in her husband’s demeanor when he didn’t want to continue a discussion.

She didn’t mention Vincent again for the rest of the evening, even though she was more than a little curious about what the man wanted with her husband. She figured the more she knew about Richard’s work, the better she would know him, and the fact that Richard didn’t see it that way bothered her. But what was beginning to bother her even more was that masking the truth appeared to come as natural for Richard as delivering the truth did for her.

She went to bed early and was almost asleep when she heard Richard’s voice. Curious, she got up and walked to the hallway expecting to hear him on his office phone. But the sound of his voice grew fainter the closer she got to his office. Puzzled, she retreated to the bedroom. She looked out the window, and from her second-story vantage point she could see

him talking over the fence with Russian-born Ivan Botkin from next door. They talked freely back and forth for a few minutes, smiled at each other, and then shook hands.

They had met the Botkins the previous month. Marie and Richard had been sitting on their back porch enjoying an early evening breeze and a glass of wine when the couple walked over, each with a drink in their hand. They introduced themselves. Five-foot-eight Ivan, a burly man with a facial expression as heavy as the heat and hair everywhere but on his head, appeared to be somewhere in his forties. His thick accent and broken English made it hard to understand him. Blond-haired blue-eyed Nanette was younger, taller, and thinner...much younger, taller, and thinner.

With Nannette acting as Ivan's quasi interpreter, they learned he was an importer of Russian furniture, artwork, and assorted trinkets. When Marie asked Nanette what she did, she responded in a sing-songy voice, "Oh, I don't work. I'm just a housewife, here to make Ivan happy!"

Marie smiled as she recalled that evening, especially after the Botkins left. Richard was in a playful mood, and they made love on the living room sofa that night. He was a good and considerate lover, always heightening her arousal with his keen awareness of her physical needs. She loved the way he took control, almost every move aimed toward satisfying her. And that wasn't his only attribute. He took good care of Marie...from the very beginning.

Richard interrupted her walk down memory lane. "Feeling better?" he asked as he crawled into bed beside her. He gently stroked the length of her back. That was usually enough to get her aroused, but not tonight the way she felt.

"A liddle."

He caressed her hair and kissed her on the cheek. Marie looked into his eyes and wondered whether to ask him what he and Ivan had talked about over the fence. But she was too weak to confront him.

"It's going to kill me not to make love to you tonight," he whispered. Except for when he was on the road on business, they hadn't gone a day without sex since they married.

"I'll feel bedder soon. Don't worry."

"And don't you worry."

"About what?" she asked, half asleep.

"About Vincent."

"I'm dot worried about him." The more she talked, the more congested she got.

"You look worried."

"I'm dot worried. I'm jus' sick."

Shortly after Marie fell asleep that night, she was awakened by the sound of Richard's voice in the next room. She strained

her ears to hear what he was saying. “Not tonight.” He paused. “I’ll contact [inaudible] tomorrow and see what I can do.” Another pause. “That’s not up for discussion. And don’t...you know.”

The next morning, Marie didn’t feel much better. She called in sick, and after hanging up the phone, went back to bed. The sound of a door slamming woke her. She glanced at the clock. It was ten thirty.

“Richard?” she called out in a hoarse voice.

“Yeah?”

“Why are you still here?”

He entered their bedroom. “I thought I’d work from home today...in case you needed anything.”

“Are you sure? I’ll be fine.”

He bent down to kiss her forehead. “I’m sure. I have plenty of work I can do from home today.”

“Okay, but if you need to leave, don’t worry about me.”

“Do you need anything before I go back to my office?”

“I thought I heard a door slam a few minutes ago.”

“Sorry. I went out for the paper and must have closed the front door a little hard. I’ll try to be quieter, sweetheart.”

Marie was seconds away from falling back asleep. “Okay.”

When Marie awoke two hours later, Richard was standing with his back to her looking out the window. “Hey,” she whispered.

“Hey, yourself.” He sat on the edge of the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Give me a minute. I don’t know yet.” She reached out for his hand, which he kissed. “Better now.”

“Feel like lunch? I can open a can of chicken soup.”

“Sounds good. My stomach is growling. Give me a few minutes to splash some water on my face and comb my hair...or something.”

Before going downstairs, Marie stopped in Richard’s office, which was at the front of the house, and turned off the lamp on his desk. Movement outside caught her attention, and when she looked out the window she saw Richard picking up the paper from the sidewalk and scurrying back into the house. *I thought he said he had gotten the paper earlier. Maybe I misunderstood him.* She blew her nose, popped two more aspirin, and then proceeded to the kitchen to meet him.