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REASON TO KILL

REASON TO KILL

*This is for any and all who have loved and failed or failed to love. To those we never saw and should have and to those we saw and never could have. May you know the difference and correct it before it's too late.*

CHAPTER 1

November, 1992

Holly's house was the fourth on the right.

From high in the air, City Line Avenue looked like a central hub of activity, not like a patchwork quilt as one might expect to see in a rural setting. City Line Avenue was a central hub, complete with traffic, offices, old apartment buildings of brick and cement, high rises built in the fifties and sixties. Upon a closer, lower look, details would evidence themselves, separate important details from mundane. Trees and traffic lights, buses and a pedestrian now and then.

Montgomery Avenue threaded through City Line Avenue. Some six or seven miles away to the east, its proximity to Center City

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Philadelphia would make pertinent the suburban nature of Bala Cynwyd. Not sprawl and not city; homes, strip centers, department stores, book stores, coffee shops, restaurants, supermarkets, gas stations and schools. This was where the people lived. They were doctors, teachers, and parents, children of attorneys, insurance sales managers, students, singles, and grandparents. They represented that patchwork quilt but not of landscape; rather of demographics; mixed ethnicity, an homogenous conglomeration of community. Further out City Avenue toward Bryn Mawr was where the true nature of affluent suburbia was. Montgomery Avenue stood gateway whereupon the crossing of city lines made all the difference in the world.

From the air, a few hundred feet at most, homes that spread across rolling acres in sloping harmony with the landscape could be seen through foliage that was dense in the summer and autumn, allowed privacy. Now, in late November, even the most hidden and secluded homes were revealed through scant greenery.

Some streets had no pavement. Gently sloping lawns and bordering shrubbery decades in the growing that served as other cities used walls of stone or fences. All green and golden in late Autumn. Busy activity bustling into the city, to schools, to jobs, to work. Horns, lights, cars, people crossing streets, school buses holding up traffic to pick up children on corners. Coats, hats, backpacks, and gloves held onto coats with cuff clips. No leaves on the trees, all gone since two weeks earlier.

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The streets would soon be quiet until late afternoon when it would start all over again in the opposite direction.

Holly's house was the fourth on the right.

The street was small, off City Line Avenue and then off Montgomery Avenue. Then onto Green Briar, an even smaller street in a quiet suburb, then onto Hunter Green Lane. Bustle lost in less than a quarter mile, swallowed by bricks and stone, double paned windows and shutters. Quiet wound through the neighborhood that led to other, smaller lanes that led to homes more secluded. Long driveways, stone steps. Planter boxes of Mums and Boxwood.

The street alternated Maples and Oaks in straight rows, one in front of every home.

Holly Towler's house was the fourth on the right, on the third block of her street from the almost larger road, which crossed Montgomery Avenue. In turn, that crossed City Line Avenue in the Bala Cynwyd section of Philadelphia.

Two window boxes with aged flowers almost spent were on the ledge of each front window. A heart wreath on the front door was recently laced with the fragrance of cinnamon. On the porch, the furniture cushions remained in place. They wouldn't be taken off until next weekend. It had gone unnoticed that it really needed to be done. It should have been done by Halloween but last year it was so warm that Holly sat on the porch with no coat at all and watched the kids come around. Her husband Peter wore short sleeves when he took their own little ghouls from house to house.

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This year it had been bitter cold but still the cushions remained, just in case. Sometimes you just couldn't tell about the weather around there. The real cold wouldn't set in for another week or so. A last reprieve, that was this week, a last stand and a weak one at that.

Inside, the home was quiet this morning except for the ticking of the clock over the mantle in the den and the click, click, clicking of the computer keyboard that Holly worked over.

The foyer, living room, dining room, kitchen, and den were all dark. Holly worked on the computer in her office in space that once was a breakfast room off to the left of the kitchen.

The office faced the back of the house so that when the children came home from school she could watch them play in the fenced in yard while writing her articles. On sunnier days, sunlight streamed through the back window of the office and made the room bright and airy. Today however, Holly needed the lights on.

This was the first article that made it to publication for Holly, for which she had worked for many years. In the corner filing cabinet, she had many articles and stories that never went any further than filling drawer space. Those were the false starts. There were plenty of those. Each a good little soldier, ready to give it another go at a moment's notice.

Be that as it may, determined she remained, stood fast. She kept at it. She tried to write every day for at least three or

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four hours. Now, finally, she tripped on the right subject, the right timing, the right market and a style worthy of publication. Finally. After all those years, one of her proposals was accepted.

Holly and Peter celebrated that night. They opened a bottle of champagne and toasted to Holly. And to Parents Magazine.

Holly looked up from her computer, having written seven pages already today. She watched two twitterpated squirrels chase each other up the side of a huge oak on the back lawn. She rubbed her eyes, could visualize her children running, laughing, playing in the leaves, throwing them at each other; laughing, falling, rolling, their faces red from the cold. They were not playing this morning. The yard was deserted, the children were at school.

She looked at the clock on the desk. Lunchtime. Her mind was duplicitous. She wrote while her left mind thought about the phone call that had nagged at her since Monday. Ignore it, it will go away. It did not. It tugged. She tried. She failed. Finally, no concentration anywhere on the horizon, she stopped.

The walls were paneled. Photographs on every surface and a sofa at the far end. A bookcase behind her, dark red walls, *Corinthian Red*. The large window in front of her desk had double sided curtains in a red, hunter and navy check. In summer, she turned them and they were a dusty rose with tiny blue flowers. By the end of September, she turned them back. The valance hung low and helped to cut the chill. Today, it was chilly; the curtains

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only open far enough to see out back.

Holly slapped the keyboard and stood. She walked into the kitchen, one room and an entirely different mood away, and put up another cup of coffee, her second today. Holly hugged herself to rid the chill that she felt creep up her spine and down her arms. Her nose was cold.

She leafed through papers on the counter as the coffee brewed, smelled good of rich morning coffee. The normal junk mail had been tossed onto the pile of papers and now Holly went through them.

Under them were the lists of names of her classmates from Franklin High School, class of '74. Holly had promised to help contact some of the people on the lists to confirm addresses, phone numbers, and the whereabouts of many of those who were as yet still unaccounted.

She called the numbers that were easily obtainable from the Philadelphia phone book, and from two neighboring counties; Montgomery and Bucks. None returned her phone call yet but Holly was not discouraged. It was still early. She spoke with a dozen people since Monday, most of whom were surprised and delighted with her call.

The one phone call that stuck out in her mind was the one that had been bothering her all day. She reflected on it again.

She stirred her coffee and sipped it. Phone rang. It was Lisa Pearson, who recruited her to the task of finding and

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confirming the current reunion list. Holly was in mid conversation. "I found Marty Dormer," she was telling Lisa. "And you won't believe this but Randall told me that Johnny Balmert is living in Alaska with two women and four huskies!"

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," Lisa grunted. "He didn't seem like the type to go in for big city hospitals and patients with Beemers. What about Sean Turco? Did you find him yet?"

"Not exactly but I was told that he's an attorney in Colorado. I also found Connie Griffith and Doreen Morrissey. I didn't have time to finish the rest of the second page, but I have a lot of phone numbers. I spoke with Elliot Stappler again. That was a very interesting conversation."

"Why?"

"He knew where half a dozen guys live. He keeps in touch with them all and they still live near here and get together once in a while. I have three more addresses for you."

Holly debated whether or not she should tell Lisa about the conversations that she'd had with Elliot Stappler. At the last second, she dropped it. She didn't really know Lisa well enough. She let it go.

The doorbell rang.

"Listen, will you be home later?"

"After four, why?"

"There's someone at my door. I'll call you back to give you the new addresses that I do have, okay?"

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"Sure. Thanks."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Holly hung up the phone and calmed the barking dog as she walked to the front of the house. "Hush now, silly."

The shaggy dog, Stella, wagged her tail and rubbed against Holly's jeans.

Holly looked out of the window next to the front door but saw nothing.

"Hm. That's odd."

She looked in both directions, up and down the street. She opened the door. No one. She looked down and noticed an envelope on her doormat.

"Hm, there you go, Stella," Holly said to the dog, who had come to stand next to Holly. She picked up the envelope and looked at the front of it.

"Holly", was all that was written on the front of the envelope in a black flair tip marker.

Holly took the envelope and closed the door while she studied the handwriting. She turned back to the house and leaned on the door, looking at the envelope.

She did not notice a grey car parked at the corner or the man that sat inside it, watching her.

Holly returned to the office, sat at the desk, sipped her coffee and opened the envelope with a brass letter opener. She

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read.

*"Holly,  
I've been thinking about  
you all night. After we spoke  
yesterday, I thought about you all  
day. I used to think about you all  
the time when we were at Franklin  
but I never did anything about it  
then. I didn't want to make the  
same mistake twice.*

*I know that it's not  
appropriate to pursue any kind of  
contact with you but if you ever  
need someone, you know where to  
reach me. You have my number. You  
can use it whenever you want.*

*Elliot"*

Holly read the note four times. Her mouth was open, her hand covered it. She rushed to the front door and looked out of the curtain again. Stella ran after her, her tail wagging feverishly. She did not see the same grey car drive past her house a minute earlier.

Holly went into the office again, finished her coffee and reread the note three more times. She smiled.

She went to the bookshelves and removed her high school yearbook. She turned the pages, looked at the S's. Schwartz, Simons (that was she), Stankowski, Stappler. Elliot Stappler.

Holly thought he was cute. She turned to the pages which held the pictures of the school's athletic teams. Some of them were team photos but the best ones were the action shots; the athletes caught off guard, freezing a moment in time.

She scanned them until she found one of Elliot. He was at a

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practice for the tennis team, his arm raised, ready to strike. His face had an intense expression of concentration. His long dark brown hair was blown from the wind and he looked so serious and handsome.

*Funny, I never noticed how cute he was, never thought about how handsome he might someday become. I never paid attention. I was too consumed with Dumbo to see anyone else, she thought with contempt.*

Holly leafed through that yearbook for a full half hour but avoided the page with "Dumbo", before she realized that her deadline was approaching with the speed of light.

"Yikes! Enough of this!" She closed the book, replaced it, and then removed it again. She then took the note, read it once more and shook her head.

"Oh well, Mr. Stappler, if you were here today, I'm sorry I missed you. I would have liked to know what you look like now. Not that it matters." She thought about her husband, Peter. She loved him very much.

Still, she recalled the phone calls between herself and Elliot. The first occurred day before last.

"Hello, I'd like to speak with Elliot Stappler, please."

"Who's calling, please?"

"Holly Simons Towler, from Franklin High class of '74."

"Oh, okay, hold on, I'll get him."

"Thank you."

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There was a pause.

"Holly Simons! Is that you?"

Holly laughed. "Yes, it is. How are you? I wasn't sure that you would remember who I was."

"Not remember you! How could I ever forget you, Holly? I'm fine and how are you? God, it's been years! What a nice surprise!"

"I'm fine, just fine. It hasn't been that long, just a decade or so."

They laughed. Holly plunged ahead in her already memorized speech.

"I'm calling because I'm helping to locate people for our twentieth reunion and I wanted to confirm your address. I hope its okay that I called you at work. Someone at your home number gave me this number to reach you." She cursed herself for rambling on so.

"No, it's fine! That must have been my housekeeper. I, well," Elliot hesitated and then continued, "My wife and I are getting divorced so I, uh, don't get home much."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said. She drummed her fingers on the kitchen counter, cursed her perfunctory response.

"Thanks. I don't have another address yet. I stay at work a lot."

"Oh. I am sorry. Is there another address where you want your invitation sent to?" Her pencil was poised.

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"What address do you have?"

"1487 Radcliffe Court Way."

"That's it. No, you can send it there. I'll still get it. You know, I've thought about you a lot of times. You were in my fantasies more than a few times, you know."

Her pencil dropped. "What! I don't believe I'm hearing this! Elliot Stappler, why didn't you ever say anything about it then?"

"Ah, what can I say? I guess I was young and stupid. Are you married?"

"Yes, I am." She picked the pencil up again.

"Is he good to you?"

Holly's mouth dropped open and she looked at the receiver in her hands as if it were some strange foreign object.

"We have our moments but yes he is. We've been married for a long time."

"Are you good to him?"

"When he's good to me. Of course that's most of the time so we're doing all right." She felt heat rush to her cheeks.

"Well, that's good. You're a good woman, Holly, you always were."

"Now how could you know that, Elliot Stappler?" She tapped the pencil onto the counter in a drone of ta-ta-ta-ta-tap.

"I just do. I have always felt that about you. Do you have children?"

"Yes, I have three kids, two girls and a boy, a dog, a

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gerbil, and a goldfish."

"That's good. I have two kids, eight and ten, two boys."

"My son would love to have a brother but I told him to forget it. Elliot, let me ask you, do you keep in touch with anyone? There are a lot of people that we have no addresses for." She ignored his frontal assault, rambled. She was aware that she rambled, plowed ahead nonstop. *Great, Holly, can't take a compliment, can you?*

"Yes, there's Fred Sheftler, Gregg Boylston, Dan Garrette, Mark Meissner, Bernie Foster, Steve Monroe, Gary Hellier, all those guys. We used to play football once in a while."

"Wow, I haven't heard those names in years! How are they?" She scribbled names on a tablet and left room for addresses.

"Great. Gregg has five kids! Danny just got married two years ago, Steve just moved back to town after twelve years. I don't know. They're all fine. Are any of them on your list as missing?"

"I don't know. I don't have the complete list here but I took their names down. If they are on the list, is it all right with you if I call you back to get their addresses or phone numbers?"

"Absolutely. In fact, I would like that. I remember you very well, Holly. I remember when our team would play, you were always there, cheering us on, with . . . what's-his-name. I'm glad you called. It's the highlight of my day."

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"That's really nice of you. I've talked to a lot of people this week and it's so much fun getting back in touch with everyone. Yeah, I was with what's-his-name a lot. Too much. Oh well, all's well that ends well." Her pencil slid across the paper in elaborate scrolls and doodles. Rambling again. She clamped her mouth shut.

"You didn't marry *him*, did you? God, I'm sorry. Did you marry him?"

Holly laughed. "No, that's fine. I didn't marry him. My husband's name is Peter Towler. I didn't use just my married name because I knew that you wouldn't know who it was."

"I knew the first two names, all right, so that's fine."

"I'll let you go. I'm sure you must be very busy."

"No, it's okay. I needed a break anyway. Call me back if you need those addresses. It was real good to talk to you. By the way, when is the reunion?"

"It will be the Saturday of Thanksgiving weekend in '94, just under two years. They haven't picked the place yet but it will probably be in Center City somewhere."

"Of course. That's not too far off, is it? Time passes very quickly, doesn't it?"

"Yes, these days it does. Thank you for your help and it was nice to talk to you."

"Okay then."

"Bye Elliot."

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"Bye, take care."

Holly giggled when she hung up. He might not have been so flirtatious if he saw how much she had changed in eighteen years. Had she changed that much? She walked into the powder room and flipped up the light switch, looked at herself in the mirror. She looked at the eyes. They were the same eyes. Darkest dark brown but she knew that she could still devour with her eyes. She could never hide from her eyes. She never could and probably never would be able to.

She had been told by Peter that he married her because of her eyes. He would have been able to tell if she didn't love him anymore, he told her. And her eyes had the depth of feeling unlike anyone else's eyes that he had ever met. He swore that she had cast a spell on him and now he was hers forever. Because of her eyes.

She looked at the face. There were the beginnings of lines under the eyes that had not been there before. Her lips were still naturally dark red. Her hair was still brown, still without grey. Her neck had no lines yet. She was pleased with how she was aging; slowly.

All in all, Holly felt that she could go to the reunion knowing that she looked better than many. Some of the women that she had seen from her class looked more like forty-six than thirty-six. Holly's age was always guessed at thirty-two or three and that was good.

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She looked down. Three kids and thirty pounds more than she weighed in high school was what she saw. She heard Shawn, her son, prattle off an imaginary laugh out back in the yard. She smiled. She rubbed her belly, which was no longer completely flat. *I worked hard for this belly.* She could always tell when a woman had never borne a child. Their bellies were totally flat if they were thin. Holly did not envy them.

She inspected her shape. That's okay. I can still knock them dead if I want to. She thought about her red sequin halter dress. I should lose ten pounds anyway.

Later that same day, she confirmed that three of the names on Elliot's list were without addresses. She would have to call Elliot back. Mixed feelings! On the one hand she did not want him to think anything of it. On the other hand she liked being flirted with! It was new, different, and honestly a bit exciting. She has been married for over ten years. A long time. She still loved her husband and he still loved her, but flirting, she thought, was something that was unfortunately too soon lost between lovers.

Yesterday she thought she would call tomorrow. Now as she replaced the yearbook gently back in its place but couldn't help thinking about it several times throughout the day. When Peter came home last night, Holly told him about the conversation. He raised his eyebrows. She didn't want him to think that she had any secrets from him, so she continued, once again rambled on,

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plowed ahead.

She said, "See? I guess this old girl still has it, huh?"  
She raised her chin.

Peter took her into his arms and leaned over her to kiss her. Before he did, he paused. She looked into his eyes, expectantly waited to be kissed. He looked into her eyes and said, "You always did have it, don't you know that?"

"No, I do not. Tell me now, you mean old man. Tell me that you love me and that I still have it."

He showed her with his kiss.

They stood in the kitchen. From the dinner table across the room, the three children watched what they considered a disgusting display of affection.

Carly, the oldest at nine, said, "Ooh, look at Mommy and Daddy! They're kissing."

Shawn, who was six, crinkled his nose. "Yuck, that's gross, Dad. You should know better than that!" He went back to dunking his mashed potatoes into the gravy boat. The fork lost half its load.

Erin, the youngest at four, clapped and yelled, "More, Mommy, more!" She did this with a mouth full so that it sounded like, "Mah, Mahmee, mah!"

Peter and Holly ended their kiss with a look of longing, a silent promise. They looked at the children then to each other and laughed. It would have to wait.

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Holly studied Peter's handsome face, his deep-set eyes, the astonishing length of his dark eyelashes, a touch of grey at his temples. He was six feet tall, taller than her five-five height. They fit together perfectly. He didn't have a paunch; he didn't have a neck or jowls that sagged. He was still dashing. He still had the most curious waves in his light brown hair, the way they melded one layer into the next so perfectly.

She was still attracted to him. What they had still worked. She was very pleased with them as a couple and with herself in particular, pleased as punch. She was blessed and knew it.

They sat down at the table to have dinner and the name Elliot Stappler was instantly forgotten, not to be mentioned again.

The following morning, Tuesday, was bitter cold, too cold for the end of November. It was ten-thirty. Holly was on the phone again. As she waited for Elliot Stappler to come to the phone, she thought back to last night.

After the kids had gone to sleep at nine, she shared a drink with Peter. They went to bed early. They didn't go to sleep until eleven forty-five. Holly smiled, confirmed that they still had it after all.

"Holly?"

"Yes. Hi, Elliot. I'm sorry to bother you but I do need a

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few addresses. I need Danny and Gary's, and one other. Oh, wait a minute, I can't find the paper. Oh yeah, Mark Meissner. Do you happen to have them?"

"Well, I just happen to, yes." His voice was neither business like nor pleasant. It was jubilant. "I brought my phone book with me today in case you called back. In fact I was hoping that you would."

"Really?"

"Of course I'm sure you figured that as soon as I could, I dug out the old yearbook, dusted it off and went through it. There weren't enough pictures of you in it. But I remember that you had the most incredible eyes."

"You embarrass me. I went through it, too. Do you still play tennis?"

"You shouldn't feel embarrassed, Holly. If you are, then maybe you don't hear it enough."

At Holly's silence, he went on. "No, I don't do tennis anymore, just ball with the boys sometimes. I'm too old for contact sports."

"Oh nonsense. I don't believe that for a second. Thirty-six isn't too old for anything. Yet."

They pictured each other as they were in the pictures.

"Well, here you go. Ready?"

"Yes, I have paper and pencil in hand. Shoot."

"Okay. Let's see. Dan. 2154 Conwell Lane. Cherry Hill,

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08010. Gary is at the Hopkinson House, number 804. The zip is 19107. Steve just moved. He's at 8327 Lyndsey Drive, Radnor. I don't have the zip."

"That's okay, I'll get that. That's not too far from me."

"Where are you at?" he asked.

"In Penn Valley," she said.

"Nice area."

"We like it here," Holly said.

"I'm glad you called. I was thinking about you. Your husband is a very lucky man. Does he tell you that? Does he know it?"

Holly's mouth opened and the sound of an astonished grunt escaped her. "I think he does. I'm very lucky, too. Thank you."

"If there's any others that you need, you can call Barry Wendell. He keeps in touch with a lot of people, too. Do you want his number?"

"Sure. That's great."

"555-9483."

"Okay. Thanks, Elliot. I hope to see you there."

"Don't be a stranger, Holly. Bye."

"Bye."

They hung up. Holly sat for a moment with the phone in her hands. *A lucky man. Peter is a lucky man. I am, too.* She smiled as she hung up. *Funny. I can't remember if we were in the same homeroom. We must have been.*

Now, the next day, Holly came out of her remembrances of

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yesterday, turned from the bookcase and sat down again to finish the article that she had promised would be ready by Friday. She was so distracted! This happened to her sometimes, sometimes when something was afoot. Sometimes she considered her life such a bore, so much of her time taken up with driving carpools and making cookies or costumes. Was this all there was? Was this all she could hope for? As happy as she was with Peter and her chosen, yes—she had to remind herself that it was indeed chosen, life, was the fleeting attention of a stranger, really, all it took to make her day? Her week, hell her month? "Ah the heck with it," she said and shook her head, dismissed it.

Today was Wednesday.

She had until Friday. At four-thirty, she called Lisa Pearson again. She gave Lisa the new addresses. They gossiped for ten minutes while the kids played Nintendo in the den.

The dog was next to Holly on the kitchen floor, asleep. Stella never left her side. They were best friends.

Holly hung up the phone and made dinner. She separated part of it for Peter, who wouldn't get home from work until seven or so. She covered his plate and placed it in the refrigerator.

That night, after everyone was asleep, she worked in the office at the computer until twelve forty-five. She wrote, revised, edited and wrote again. She reworked the format, wrote, edited, and finally finished it.

Bleary eyed, she crawled into her bed and snuggled close to

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her sleeping husband. He turned to her and put his arm around her. They fell asleep like two spoons, smiles on sleepy faces.

Thursday, after the kids went to school, Holly read the article again. She made some other minor changes and finally at one-twenty decided that it was finished.

She went to the pharmacy two blocks away, made three copies of it and then went to the post office to send it overnight mail. She looked at the receipt. *Now I'm an author.* She couldn't stop smiling and smiling. Just smiling and smiling.

She placed the receipt into her wallet and walked out into chilly air as flurries landed on her hair and shoulders. She did not see a grey car parked at the corner or the man inside, watching her. He sighed.

She got into her dark blue Honda and went home. She called her sister, her mother, and her best friend, Mindy. She left messages on all three machines.

Then she went to pick up the kids at school. Tonight was Carly's dance lesson and Shawn's gymnastics class. Dinner would be pizza.

She picked up a bottle of champagne. The article would appear in the third issue, February. They would celebrate on Saturday night with their best friends, Mindy and Bryan. Mindy was Stacy's best friend from Franklin High and Bryan was Mindy's high school sweetheart. Maybe they would go to the Four Seasons or Le Bec Fin. Nah, not yet, she recanted. I'll save that for

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when it's in print.

When Holly drove her kids to their lessons and when Holly went to pick up the champagne and the pizza, she did not notice that the grey car followed her. Nor did she see the man in the car who watched her go in and out of stores, in and out of schools.

Holly's article was in Parent's magazine three months later. Holly and Peter celebrated and bought as many copies as they could find to hand out to friends and relatives. They had been given several copies from Parents' Magazine. Holly framed the cover.

She proudly hung it in her office, in a place of honor among her diplomas.

The magazine received several letters commenting that her article had helped to make sense of a touchy subject for many people. They were grateful for her insight and guidance. The editor invited Holly to submit other ideas.

She sat at her computer and typed out a list of at least eight to ten ideas that she immediately thought were timely and interesting. Now the only question was which one to do first?

She laughed at herself like a child on Christmas morning. She had many ideas, so many stories! They all wanted to come out. Her dream was a novel. Her dream was to write the next *Gone With the Wind*. Of course, she knew that was tantamount to climbing Mt. Everest or discovering the cure for cancer. She still thought

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that with the right spark, the right catalyst, it could be done.

She brought herself back down to earth. One step at a time, she thought.

She did not know that almost every day there was a car parked outside with a man inside who watched her and her every move. He knew her schedule, where she went, what she did, and with whom she did it.