

Prologue

S tillness settled on the neighborhood and the pink sheen of the early-spring sun faded into violet twilight and the wheel rubber crunched the chunky, walnut-sized gravel. The car slowly swiveled rightward into the school parking lot until it stopped in front of a green chain-link fence surrounding six forest-green tennis courts, their white lines now barely perceptible in the dying light. The car was the only one in the lot. Its engine grumbled like a large feline. The headlights switched off but the car continued to grumble.

The few tennis players from early in the day had canned their yellow balls, shoulder-holstered their rackets, and trickled homeward. Silence now replaced the earlier frenzy of hand-clapping, shouts, cheers, moans, and staccato announcements from the vicinity of the large six-lane running track and expansive athletic fields at the other, distant end of the school. Also now silent were the periodic and slightly ominous snaps of the starting guns, which had punctuated the leafy neighborhood like giant wet towels slapped against metal.

The car engine now became quiet, too.

In front of the car...beyond the tennis courts...beyond intervening Dahlia Lane...about a dozen forehand shots away...was Morning Glory Lane. The car was angled so a perpendicular line drawn from its front bumper would connect to a modest brick ranch house on Morning Glory. This particular house was in keeping with most other homes in the neighborhood of Turnham Green, one of a dozen upper-middle-class neighborhoods on the south side of the small city of Springbrook: three and four-bedroom homes on quarter-acre, manicured lots.

The address of the house on Morning Glory that the car now faced was one-fifty-seven. Had not several houses and a line of silver maple and red oak trees obscured things, the man in the car would have seen fleeting movements behind the lit kitchen window of 157 Morning Glory. With binoculars, he would have been able to make out the facial features of Donald and Irene Moore. They had just finished their evening meal and were cleaning up.

Police would later surmise they had eaten steak and corn-on-the-cob for dinner.

The door of the car opened and the man stepped onto the gravel. He pushed the door softly until it clicked shut, as if trying to harmonize with the crackles of the crickets in the trees facing him. He rested his right hand on the hooded frame of the side mirror. In his left hand he gripped the handle of a small black briefcase. His fingers opened and closed around the black plastic handle—like a donor in a blood bank might fist, then relax, in order to increase circulation. He tilted his head upward to penetrate the distance with his eyes. As he did so his eyes narrowed and his mouth opened slightly. The corners then curled into what might be called a grin.

It was a short walk from the tennis courts to 157 Morning Glory. There was only one route to take without crossing private property: exit the gravel lot, turn left on Forsythia Street, pass Dahlia on the left, then left on Morning Glory. Pass one house on the right, then...

The man walked. When he reached Morning Glory, before turning left, he saw the bright white glow of headlights about one-hundred yards ahead, at the end of Dahlia, a street that dead-ended at a small copse of woods. The glow then flicked off and the veil of darkness returned. The man sucked in a deep draught of air.

“Kind of you,” he whispered throatily.

He turned left onto Morning Glory, a straight lane entirely dark but for the yellow glow of several houselights and lights from street lamps that hung over the curbs like

carved, grotesque gargoyles. His eyes fixed on the second home on the right. As he walked, his head adjusted only slightly. As if his head turned on a swivel that had been dialed in to that one house. The only house that mattered. As if he had singular and pressing business there. Although he had remained in the shadows during his brief walk, sufficiently distant from the street lamps, his caution had been unnecessary, since he had seen no one. The only sounds that evening hour were two agitated dogs from the far end of the street, and the rat-a-tat of china from the first house on Morning Glory. He heard no sounds from that second house. The Moore home.

He paused at the end of a short, straight driveway that sliced through a dark-green lawn. Through the small kitchen window left of the front door, positioned just beneath a ruffled valance curtain with tassels that looked like splintered teardrops, he saw the head of a middle-aged woman. The head was tilted downward. It had compact, black hair. As it was now dark and the house's front light had not been switched on, the eyes would not be able to see him approaching.

He walked slowly but deliberately down the drive, wet from a sudden, late-afternoon shower, toward a curved walkway. He turned right at the walkway, glanced briefly at a round cluster of pachysandra ground cover, passed directly in front of the kitchen window while observing the still-lowered head, and stepped onto a small front porch that held several tastefully arranged pieces of redwood-stained furniture. He stood still in the shadows while facing the front door. Once more, he inhaled deeply. He breathed in the comforting aroma of fresh wood mulch and chopped fescue.

Hanging on a hook on the door was a small wooden sign. In pink and green pastel letters, surrounded by the tiny petals of cheerful flowers, read:

Spring into Spring!

The man—his lips clamped shut—cocked his head toward the street, just once. He started to lift his arm, then thought differently and took a step backward. He craned his neck to see if the head on the opposite side of the kitchen window was still lowered. It was. It was a head that, within a very short time, would look very different.

Content with the scene and with the purpose for which he had come, the man stepped forward and lifted his hand toward the front door of 157 Morning Glory.

