

HEARTSICK

Chapter 1

Archie doesn't know for sure that it's her until that moment. There is a dull bloom of warmth in his spine, his vision blurs, and then he knows that Gretchen Lowell is the killer. He realizes that he has been drugged, but it is too late. He fumbles for his gun, but he is ham fisted and can only lift it awkwardly from his belt clip and hold it out as if it were a gift to her. She takes it and smiles, kissing him gently on the forehead. Then she reaches into his coat and takes the cell phone, turning it off and slipping it into her purse. He is almost paralyzed now, slumped in the leather chair in her home office. But his mind is a prison of clarity. She kneels down next to him, the way one might a child, and puts her lips so close to his that they are almost kissing. His pulse throbs in his throat. He can't swallow. She smells like lilacs.

"It's time to go, darling," she whispers. She stands then, and he is lifted from behind, elbows under his armpits. A man in front of him, red-faced and heavy, takes his legs, and he is carried into the garage and laid in the back of the green Voyager — the vehicle Archie and his task force have spent months looking for — and she crawls in on top of him. He realizes then that there is someone else in the van, that she wasn't the one behind him, but he doesn't have time to process this because she is straddling his torso, a knee pressing on either side of his waist. He cannot move his eyes anymore, so she narrates for his benefit.

"I'm rolling up your right sleeve. I'm tying off a vein." Then she holds up a hypodermic in his sight line. Medical training, he thinks. Eighteen percent of female serial killers are nurses. He is staring at the ceiling of the van. Grey metal. Stay awake, he thinks. Remember everything; every detail, it will be important. He thinks, if I live.

"I'm going to let you rest for a little while." She smiles and puts her flat, pretty face in front of his so he can see her, her blonde hair brushing his cheek, though he cannot feel it. "We'll have plenty of time for fun later."

He cannot respond, cannot even blink now. His breath comes in long, shallow rasps. He cannot see her push the needle in his arm, but he assumes she has, because then there is only darkness.

He wakes up on his back. He is still groggy and it takes him a moment to realize that the red-faced man is standing over him. In this moment, the very first moment of Archie's awareness, the man's head explodes. Archie jerks as the man's blood and brain matter blow forward, splattering Archie's face and chest, a vomit of warm, clotted fluid. He tries to move, but his hands and feet are bound to a table. He feels a piece of something hot slide down his face and slop onto the floor, and pulls hard against the bindings until his skin breaks, but he cannot budge them. He gags but his mouth is taped shut, forcing the bile back into his throat making him gag again. His eyes burn. Then he sees her, standing behind where the man's body has fallen, holding the gun she has just used to execute him. "I wanted you to understand right away how committed I am to you," she says. "That you

are the only one." And then she turns and walks away.

He is left then to contemplate what has just happened. He swallows hard, willing himself to remain calm, to look around. He is alone. The man is dead on the floor. Gretchen is gone. The driver of the van is gone. Archie's blood is pulsing so violently that it is the only sensation. Time passes. At first, he thinks he is in an operating room. It is a large space, walled with white ceramic subway tiles and well lit by florescent lights. He turns his head from side to side and sees several trays of instruments, medical looking machinery, a drain on the cement floor. He strains again at his binds and realizes that he is strapped to a gurney. Tubes are coming in and out of him: a catheter, an IV. There are no windows in the room and a faint earthy smell skirts the edge of his consciousness. Mildew. A basement.

He starts to think like a cop now. The others had been tortured for a couple of days before she dumped the bodies. That meant that he had time. Two days. Maybe three. They could find him in that amount of time. He had told Henry where he was going, that he had a psych consult about the newest body. He had wanted to see her, to get her advice. He was not prepared for this. But they would connect it. Henry would connect it. It would be the last place to which he could be traced. He had made a call to his wife on the way. That would be the last point of contact. How much time had passed since he had been taken? She is there again. On the other side of the table from where the body still lies, thick, dark blood seeping onto the gray floor. He remembers when she had first introduced herself — the psychiatrist who had given up her practice to write a book. She had read about the task force and had called him to see if she could help. It had been hell on all of them. She offered to come in. Not counseling, she had said. Just talk. They had been working on the case for almost ten years. Twenty-three bodies in three states. It had taken a toll. She invited those who were interested to come to a group session. Just talk. He had been surprised at how many of the detectives had shown. It might have had something to do with the fact that she was beautiful. The funny thing was, it had helped. She was very good.

She pulls the white sheet covering him down so that his chest is exposed, and he realizes that he's naked. There is no self-consciousness attached to it. It is merely a fact. She places a hand flat on his breastbone. He knows what this means. He has memorized the crime photos, the abrasions and burns on the torsos. It is part of the profile, one of her signatures.

"Do you know what comes next?" she asks, knowing that he does. He needs to talk to her. To stall. He makes a garbled noise through the duct tape and motions with his head for her to take it off. She ther head. "Not just yet," she says softly.

She asks it again. A little more harshly. "Do you know what comes next?"

He nods.

She smiles, satisfied. "That's why I prepared something special for you, darling." She has

an instrument tray beside her and she turns and withdraws something from it. A hammer and nail. Interesting, he thinks, amazed at his ability to detach from himself, to remain clinical. So far the victims had been seemingly random, male, female, young, old, but the torso damage, though it had evolved, had been notably consistent. She had never used nails before.

She seems pleased. "I thought you'd appreciate some variety." She lets her fingertips dance up his rib cage until she finds the rib she is looking for and then she places the point of the nail against his skin and comes down hard with the hammer. He feels the explosion of his rib breaking and gags again. His chest burns with pain. He fights to breathe. His eyes water. She wipes a tear from his flushed cheek and caresses his hair, and then she finds another rib and repeats the process. And another. When she is done, she has broken six of his ribs. The nail is wet with blood. She lets it drop with an innocuous clink back on the instrument tray. He can't shift his body even a millimeter without a searing pain like none he has ever felt. His nasal passages have clogged with mucus, he can't breathe through his mouth, he has to brace himself for agony with every lung expansion, and still he can't make himself breathe shallowly, can't slow the panicked, heavy pants that sound like sobs. Maybe two days was optimistic, he thinks. Maybe he would just die now.