

Chapter 1
October 14

On this warm October night, if you turned into Brightwood Trace beside the handsome brick entryway, and followed the graceful curve of Brightwood Circle past the three cul-de-sacs that branch off like fingers, you'd notice even through the gathering fog that a white bow with long streamers, one that might look good atop a large wedding present, has been secured to a tree in front of every house. Every house. This is not because of hostages in some foreign country or a deeply-felt political cause. It is to support one of their own. Paisley Lamm lives at the top of Lindenwood Court, the highest point in the development, and has to pass this way on every trip in or out.

No one is sure who tied the first ribbon to a tree this afternoon. Most people think it was Andrea Chess, Paisley's longtime friend, who knows her better than anyone in Brightwood Trace except Paisley's husband, Mason. Andrea is the one with the mushroom-colored hair falling in a bowl around her face, and those odd gray-green eyes that seem somehow colorless, like slightly dirty water. You wouldn't imagine Andrea as Paisley's best friend, but she is. For twelve years they've shared secrets, gotten each other through every crisis, given each other space. In Andrea's view, this has led to a special, dignified friendship few women ever enjoy. Andrea loves Paisley like a sister.

Most of the neighbors are much more ambivalent. Paisley is pleasant to everyone, so affable and good-natured the women find it hard to stay jealous even after their husbands stare longingly at her at a party and it ruins their night. They burn hot for a day or two, incensed that a woman of forty-six should look so good. It's unnatural. Then on Monday or Tuesday they run into Paisley at the supermarket or in the gym, where she offers a tomboyish wave and spills benevolence onto them from her snappy blue eyes. "Hey," she trills, and "Hey," they call back, and at that moment their ill-will vanishes like smoke. There's something irresistible about Paisley. There's something that makes her seem the gracious hostess even in the grocery store. The next time Paisley issues an invitation for coffee or wine, the neighbor will say, yes, of course, and forget until it's too late the way her husband looked at Paisley that time and probably will again.

Of course Iona Feld doesn't feel this way. At sixty, Iona is practically old enough to be Paisley's mother – maybe not quite – and hasn't been much interested in men since her husband died. . . . Iona isn't jealous of Paisley, but she enjoys her. At Paisley and Mason's many social gatherings, she watches with wry amusement the way Paisley works a room. The more aware Paisley is of men eyeing her, the more conscientious she is about distributing her charms with judicious fairness, a little for John, a little for Eddie, some for the women, too. It's almost an art form. . . .

This morning, Iona fought alarm, irritation, and an actual lump in her throat while driving to A.C. Moore to buy the biggest white bow she could find. . . . She was furious at being sucked into this ordinary, unexotic tragedy. She's had her own tragedy. She doesn't need this. At home she tied the ribbons around the enormous willow oak in her front yard, a tree she has always despised, while its rough gray bark practically glowered disapproval at having to wear a shiny white bow. . . .

By nightfall when the fog begins to gather, Iona is so worked up that she'd like nothing better than to take one of her long treks through the undeveloped field behind Lindenwood Court, her usual way of burning off energy. . . . She goes into her house instead, picks up the newspaper, and fumes.

Up on Lindenwood Court, across the cul-de-sac from Paisley's house, Ginger Logan stands rigid at her bedroom window, watching her twelve-year-old daughter, Rachel, slip quietly out into the front yard. It's all she can do not to follow Rachel outside. They had their family discussion about Paisley's situation at dinner. Theoretically, there's nothing more to say. Ginger wishes Paisley well, of course; they've been across-the-cul-de-sac neighbors for more than nine years. But mostly, she's concerned about her children. Well, not so much about Max who at fifteen wants only to drive. She worries more about her daughter. Twelve is such an impressionable age. Lately Rachel has become thoughtful and quiet, no longer a jabbering child. Ginger wants to act before it's too late. *Do something.* Make sure her daughter is not scarred by this, whatever happens. . . .

In the third house on Dogwood Terrace, Julianne Havelock paces back and forth in her kitchen for such a long time that her seventeen-year-old son, Toby – the only one of her three sons who still lives at home – turns off the TV comes in to ask if she's all right.

"I'm fine. Just upset," she says, though she hasn't been fine for days. More than anyone, Julianne knows what's going on. She knew how things would turn out even while Paisley and Mason were waiting for the definitive word. She knew from the beginning. And this . . . this *foreknowledge* . . . is eerie. She might as well be a palm reader or a gypsy with a crystal ball. Moving into the front hallway, she squints out the window toward her maple tree with its bow. She doesn't see it. She is like everyone else. It is not invisible just because of the fog.

As they put up the bows today, Julianne thinks, everyone in Brightwood Trace must have acted by rote. None of them could possibly have thought about what they were doing. The situation is, in the most literal sense, *unthinkable*. They are in shock. At the beginning of this unknowable journey, they sense – especially Julianne, Andrea, Ginger and Iona – that this is happening not just to Paisley, but to them all.