

Part One



The End



Darkness

It is March 14, 1997, a beautiful spring evening in Tempe, Arizona. It's a day that's no different from any other day, except in the way that it ends. Michael comes home from work and finds me sitting outside with our eighteen-month-old twin boys, Dominic and Zachary. I don't hear him come in, as we are playing with Tess, our twelve-week-old Akita puppy. Michael creeps up from behind and kisses me on the forehead. It's sweet. My husband has a sweetness to him that is very endearing. He sits across from me on the grass, and the boys reach out for their father. Tess, as usual, nudges her way in, trying to find a spot as close to his lap as possible. She loves Michael. When we visited the breeder to pick out a dog, Tess had chosen my husband as her own.

Michael glances over at his freshly planted garden with pride before scooping up one of the boys for his last bottle of the day. I know he'll be back to water his new crop after the boys go to bed. Michael loves to garden and is something of an artist with plants. He spends many minutes admiring the baby corn and countless new shoots and sprouts. As I always do, I pick up the other baby, and the two of us feed the boys before putting them down for the night. This is the time we look forward to as

our time, and dinner on this particular evening will be Michael's favorite: rib-eye steak, baked potato, and salad.

Michael's other favorite has recently become bourbon. His drinking has increased in the past six months, and I'm concerned. What had once been a social habit has now progressed into a nightly occurrence. What concerns me more, however, are his mood swings. We have been married for seven years and have no reason to be sad about *anything*. Life is good—I get to be a stay-at-home mother, Michael makes a decent living, our home is beautiful, and we have lots of love between us. Most importantly, we have two adorable, healthy babies to love and be loved by each day. Even though that picture sounds like bliss to most people, during the last six months, Michael has lived with a pervasive, inexplicable sadness. It's only on rare occasions that it disappears, only to be replaced with what I call the "happy, happy highs." During these times, I could say to Michael, "The garage is on fire," and I'd imagine him saying, "Okay, honey. Don't worry. I'll take care of it. I'm getting the hose!"

"Gretta," he said one day, several months earlier, after crying in my arms for what felt like an hour, "I think I might be manic depressive." Inside, I immediately went into panic mode, thinking to myself, "*Holy shit! What's he saying? Isn't that the disease postal workers get? The one that makes them literally 'go postal' and fire off rounds from semi automatics into crowds of people?*"

"What's goin' on, Michael? What's wrong?" I asked.

"I don't know. I don't know," he answered through his sobs.

"Is it me?" I asked, "You can tell me if it is."

"No, NO!"

"Is it the kids? Are you feeling pressure having twins? Because if you are, that's normal."

“No, NO!”

I spent the next thirty minutes trying to be the best therapist I could be. Was it finances? No. Work? No. His mother? Nope. His father or stepfather? Negative. I couldn't help him to identify a single issue that would cause the kind of distress that I was witnessing. I wondered, but didn't verbalize, whether or not there could be another woman involved. No, that didn't seem likely. Michael was always home, directly before and after work. He often called me during the day to see if I needed anything. He never missed an opportunity to tell me how much he loved me. And we were still passionate, even with two young children and seven years of marriage under our belt.

I quickly shifted focus. “Let's go to a counselor,” I said, trying to sound optimistic. “I'll go with you. We can all use a little therapy. I'm no perfect being either, Michael. Let's both go.”

“No, it's good just being able to talk with you about it,” he said. That's the last time we ever discussed his sadness and the last display of real despair I ever saw from him.

But something has shifted underneath the surface, and even though his emotions have eased, I notice, almost imperceptibly at first, that I'm walking on eggshells around him. Why? I can't be sure, but he has an edge. He isn't as gentle and patient as the man I know. And, with the increase of alcohol consumption, Michael's gloominess seems to be getting worse.

It's not like I've never seen him lose his temper. Within the last six months, we had a minor disagreement about something I can't even recall, and he pulled his hand back to slap me, stopping himself and walking away—totally unwilling to discuss it. I wondered if he remembered my warning to him just after our marriage. It was Christmastime, at our friends' party. Michael was drinking heavily and was staggering down their driveway.

“You’re not walking very good there, Mike,” I said.

“Get away from me,” he answered. And just like that, boom, he pushed me away from him with great force, almost knocking me over.

I was furious, but knew that if I opened my mouth, he wouldn’t be able to handle my wrath. Besides I was conscious enough to know that it’s futile to fight with a drunken man. First thing the next morning, however, the Irish in me couldn’t wait to vent my complete and total disapproval of the previous night’s incident. “If you ever do that again,” I said, “I won’t be around to hear your apology. You’ll never see me again.”

Michael felt horrible and promised that he’d never do it again. “I’m so sorry,” he said, and I trusted him. Until nearly slapping me seven years later, Michael never showed any type of violence again. My children only know the gentle, loving, affectionate, and sensitive nature of their father.

Usually about this time, Michael will take the boys for their nightly stroll through the neighborhood while I get a quick, beloved workout before finishing dinner. He knows how much I look forward to getting out and feeling the lightness of my body without the weight of the twins. Even ten-pound weights in my hands are welcome, as they aren’t attached to any emotional needs. But tonight, I don’t want to leave. I’m tired. I want to get the kids to bed, make a good dinner, have a little conversation, and go to sleep. Michael seems happy about that, and he loves it when I cook steak. He loves most anything I cook, but particularly steak.

After dinner, we decide to go out on the patio to enjoy the cool, clear night air and finish our wine. Michael is smiling and mentally seems to be in a really good place. As we get settled on

the patio, he makes a strange pronouncement. "I think I'll have a gin and tonic with my cigar," he says.

"Why do you want that?" I reply. He never mixes different alcohols after dinner. All I can envision is my own stomach gurgling under the pressure of such a concoction. *Whoa, that would make me puke*, I thought, but I said, "That's it for me." I announce, "I'm going to bed."

"I'll be in, in a minute," he says.

After finishing his drink, Michael turns out the lights, strips off his clothes, and gets into bed. The smell of bourbon and cigars wakes me up, and I cringe as he cuddles up next to me in the spooning position, my clue that he wants to make love. "Oh, I'm tired Mike; how about in the morning?" I say, knowing full well I never enjoy sex when he's drunk. The smell of old bourbon and the taste of cigars repulse me, not to mention the difficulty of connecting with someone only half present.

I have no problem telling him of my disinterest; we have a good sex life and there is always tomorrow. Plenty of times the shoe is on the other foot and Michael is the tired one. We'd just say, "Okay," and make up for it later, often the next morning. But not tonight, which shocks me to my core.

Suddenly, Michael's voice changes. His demeanor stiffens as if I were the enemy. He seems foreign and instantly cold. Through gritted teeth, Michael's voice rises, and he berates me, "I always do what you want. It's always you. You're so selfish!" This is so out of character, I have no idea to what he's referring. I'm thinking, "*This is ridiculous.*" He seems to be telling me with his energy that he hates me, but I know it isn't me he's yelling at.

"I don't have to live like this," he continues."

"What are you talking about, Mike? We can have sex in the morning! Stop it."

He's like a volcano of anger; the magma of his emotions rises with every passing second, no matter what I say. I feel like I'm watching my husband go mad, but I still have no idea that a true eruption is just around the corner.

"Michael, we can have sex in the morning. What's the big deal? Go to sleep!"

He races out of bed and into the hall that connects to the living room and is soon out of my eye line.

"Phew," I think, *"maybe he'll calm down out there. I'll just stay quiet and hope that he comes to his senses."* Five minutes go by before he appears in the doorway, clearly not calm or himself. He walks over to my side of the bed, bends down so that his face is right in mine, and starts screaming.

"You're selfish. You're selfish. You're selfish!"

I'm terrified—not for my safety, but because I don't know what to do. This yelling and ranting is nothing I'd ever seen before. What if the kids wake up?

"Mike, the kids," I said. "You're going to wake them up." He doesn't care. There is nothing I can say or do to reason with him. "Stop it, Mike, and go to bed. We'll talk in the morning," I beg. As he continues to tell me what a horrible person I am, I say, "No more. I'm going to my mom's house to sleep."

Michael doesn't utter a single word.

Not knowing what he is going to do, I watch my husband walk over to the dresser, open the top drawer, and pull out the loaded handgun he had been keeping there for the last few years. Michael loves guns—a passion born out of a childhood spent hunting with his father—and owns seven of them. With a determined gait and a focused stare, he walks a few steps out of our bedroom into the living room, turns to look at me, puts the gun to his head, and pulls the trigger.