

Chapter One

Eric Humphries stepped out of the shower, inhaling the aroma of brewing coffee drifting up from the kitchen downstairs. As a young man, his list of necessary attributes for the perfect woman never included a requirement for her to be an early riser but he never forgot how lucky he was to have married a woman that was. Every morning, she eased out of bed while he lay there drifting in and out of sleep, half-listening to the small sounds she made as she dressed and got going.

He couldn't imagine starting a day without her energy and enthusiasm. No matter how well he slept or how long, he was always reluctant to break through the inertia and stumble into the shower. His only motivation was the knowledge that Vicki waited downstairs with a smile on her face, a cup of coffee at the ready and the daily newspaper folded beside his placemat.

He put the towel on his head, tousling the dark brown hair that was losing the battle with the conquering strands of gray. He wiped off the rest of his body and tossed the damp towel on the bottom of the bed. He pulled a tee-shirt over his head and stuck one foot into his boxers. Before he could lift the other leg, a scream and the slam of a door echoed through the house.

“Vicki! Vicki!” he shouted as he pulled his underwear up to his waist. “Are you okay? Vicki?” he yelled as he took the turn on the stair landing, grabbing the newel post for balance. In two more steps, he came to an abrupt stop, staring at his wife.

Her back plastered flat against the door, her arms stretched from side to side. Her warm brown eyes had lost all signs of their usual calmness, darting about like mice in an overcrowded cage. They widened, shrunk and widened again. Her lips provided the only touch of color in a pale white face. “Your dad...”

“What about my dad?”

“He—he is here,” she wailed.

“Why don’t you let him in?” Eric asked as he came down the remaining steps to the foyer.

Vicki sobbed and hiccupped.

“Vicki, please let me open the door.”

She shook her head making her dark curls slap her face, as she straightened her spine and braced against the entryway.

Eric wanted to shove her out of the way and get to his dad. He hadn’t seen his father in months. The dementia had robbed the older man of so much and Eric knew he must have wandered to a strange place where he could not remember the way home or

even how to ask for help. Eric worried his dad was injured—or worse. What was wrong with Vicki? “Get out the way,” he insisted, fighting the urge to force her.

Vicki looked up at her husband’s fierce eyes and her shoulders slumped. “I don’t want you to see this,” she sobbed before stepping aside.

Eric pulled open the door ready to wrap his arms around his father but where his dad should have been standing, there was an empty space. Eric looked down and to the right at a pair of feet in freshly shined black dress shoes. He followed the dark grey legs of the pants up to a belt, moved up the length of a red tie and into the face. His father. Eric dropped to his knees beside him.

He reached out to his dad’s neck, desperately seeking a pulse. He pulled at the old man’s tie, tore open the shirt with enough force to send little white buttons dancing on the wooden floor boards. He counted each chest compression as he pushed down with force.

Vicki kneeled, wrapping her arms around her husband. “Don’t,” she sobbed. “Don’t, Eric. It’s too late. He’s cold.”

Eric shrugged her off and breathed air into the dead man’s slack mouth. Eric sat up and resumed the chest compressions.

“Eric, please?” Vicki wailed.

“Either help me or leave me alone.”

Vicki sat back on her heels and pulled a cell phone out of the pocket of her robe, pressing 9-1-1. “My father-in-law has been missing for five months,” her voice quavered. “Now, his body is on our front porch. Please send the police.”

“He’s not dead!” Eric shouted and bent over to expend more useless breaths into the shell that once was his father.

Vicki sighed. “Please send an ambulance, too.”