

## CHAPTER ONE

Ellen walked home from the diner the usual way, but something didn't feel usual about it. She couldn't put her finger on what it was – maybe it was something in the air or in the way the light reflected off of the snow in a myriad of never before seen colors. The neighborhood was home for almost twenty years and she never once felt uneasy, but as she walked, shadowy phantoms began playing at the edge of her vision so she quickened her pace. She sensed she was being followed, but each time she made a cursory glance behind her the street was devoid of any other life. The outdated mercury vapor street lamps provided a meager golden glow which made the shadows darker and even more threatening.

*My mind is playing tricks on me.*

She could sense darkly shrouded figures all around her that would vanish when she turned to look at them, leaving behind only surreal wisps. She knew something with ill intent was close, regardless of what she could see.

*What was that?...Ghosts? Ridiculous...oh God!*

She broke into a run as the hair on the back of her neck stood on end, warning her of immediate danger. Sparks of adrenaline and fear spiked down her spine. She was barely able to keep from falling on the wet, salt thawed concrete. Fear utterly consumed her mind, supplanting all thoughts of fight with flight.

*Home! I've just got to make it home!*

Home—safety—was only three blocks away.

Ellen's stomach blasted directly into her throat, churning with an unsettling cadence, making breathing become more difficult. As her need for oxygen increased, her skin shifted from shades of bright pink to almost red. She could feel something bearing down on her while she tried to stifle her ever increasing nausea.

*No, no, no, NO!*

She was two blocks from home, trying to close the distance faster, but unable to do so. She cut behind a parked pickup, leapt over the furrow of snow left behind by the plows, and followed an angle across the shiny blacktop of the street.

A cry for help hung in her throat, unable to escape her lungs as they burned all the air she could supply, not allowing any to be wasted. She knew her strict exercise regimen, geared to keep her diabetes in check, was the only thing granting her a scant lead over her pursuer.

She chanced a look over her shoulder, terrified of the hand she knew was about to grab her, drag her down, and rip her to pieces. The sidewalk behind her remained empty, but it did nothing to belay her fear. She kept at a dead sprint.

*Please let me get home! God, I'm almost there.*

Tears welled in her eyes, blurring her vision, ready to gush forth in a tidal wave. Lines creased her face and across her forehead as she grimaced with stress and fatigue that aged her with each stride. The front porch steps were only a block away.

Ellen's body physically hurt under the strain, unable to keep up the pace. She tried to conjure more speed from her aching legs, but her body refused, already beyond its physical limits. Voices, barely at a whisper, filled her ears, pouring even more fear into her in an unbridled rush.

*Dear God!*

The words were unintelligible, in a language she could not comprehend, but the intent of evil was as clear as day. The tears ran from her eyes even heavier, like a swell of water breaching the top of a dam. Twenty feet separated her from her front door.

*Keep going. Don't give up. DON'T GIVE UP!*

As quickly as it took hold, the fear vanished without a trace. Ellen felt completely calm and secure, albeit exhausted, almost as if the last few minutes never happened. She stopped running and looked around as she tried to catch her breath, leaning forward with her hands on her knees for support. As she heaved with exertion, she could see her breath fog in the cold air. Everything was just as it should be. She wanted to laugh at herself, but she couldn't shake the feeling that what happened was more than wild imagination.

*What had me so spooked?*

She turned to walk up the steps, blotting the tears from her cheeks and eyes with the sleeve of her coat. Her breathing worked back towards normal to remedy her used up and hollow inside condition.

A man dressed in black with his face hidden in silhouette stood on the second step. Ellen's fear returned a hundred-fold the second her eyes realized the shadowed visage. His hands were around her throat before her vision could focus, trapping the scream in her lungs.

*NOOOOO!*

She lashed out, striking him in any way she could, desperately trying to break free. Oh God, I was running right into this, not away from it! His lips moved, speaking in the same dialect as the voices that plagued her during her flight of fright. She felt her throat collapse under the mammoth pressure of his grip, sealing off her airway.

*Please, not like this!*

Bright spots of light shone around the edges of her vision, bolting her forward through an expanse of stars. She stopped flailing, finally succumbing to the firestorm burning in her chest, stealing her air. Her sight faded to black as a sharp pain shot through her neck, followed by a

sensation of numbness. The utter lack of feeling spread down her body like warm molasses, fading into the blackness of eternal sleep.