

Chapter One

It's the female ginkgo tree that smells. The male trees are odorless. But get a berry from one of the females caught in your shoe tread and the smell of vomit and rotting eggs will haunt you all day.

I am in love with my neighbor, Allan. He's Scottish with dark hair and black eyes and he speaks with that incredible burr. He's got salt and pepper eyelashes and a jaw line that begs you to pull him into you and kiss the skin on his neck until it bruises.

The ginkgo tree dates back 200 million years. It's one of the few specimens still living from when dinosaurs walked the earth. Magnolias and cockroaches also number among the survivors.

I can't do anything about my neighbor, besides fantasize. It's not just that he's married, or that I'm married, or that we both have kids – there are real complications. For one thing he's married to Maggie – someone who I actually like. One of the things no one mentions when they complain about middle age is how difficult it is to meet people who aren't deadly dull.

Allan's wife Maggie is interesting; she speaks all these odd languages like Malaysian and Thai. She was a Luce Fellow – studied low-income housing on the effects of childhood diseases in Indonesia and then traveled extensively in the Far East. I would feel funny sneaking around with her husband when she's off doing something fascinating, which she always is. Everyone wants her help and she's entirely selfless in giving it. She's not the type to talk about herself or her problems. She just does things. Last year when there was that hoopla over the Malaysian scandal, Maggie was quoted in every news story. She was at the trial, translating for the dead man's wife, who steadfastly claimed no knowledge even though they suspected her not only of embezzling funds, but also of sleeping with her brother-in-law, and because of that had most likely had her husband killed. Rather than sentence her, they deported her to Kuala Lumpur. Maggie accompanied the wife to the airport and there were photographs of the two of them hugging goodbye.

"I don't think she hired anyone," Maggie said.

"You think she's innocent?" I asked.

"Just the opposite. I think she did it herself," Maggie said. "She's quite capable with a knife. I think she slashed his throat all on her own. She wouldn't have wasted money paying someone to do something she could have done so easily."

If she weren't so nice, she would intimidate me.

Right now, Maggie's helping our neighbor Barbara adopt a baby girl from China. Mandarin is one of Maggie's languages. Barbara, in my opinion, is a case in point – someone who does nothing but talk about herself. Non-stop and in English so there is no chance you'll miss what she's saying. She came over a week after she had moved to the street and handed me two hefty garbage bags filled with what looked like Goodwill donations. "I'm sure your boys can use these," she said. What would teenage boys do with red and yellow cable-knit sweaters or size 9 faux leather pumps?

I think Maggie's out of her mind to get involved with Barbara, even if she is the only person Barbara knows who can understand the documents the Chinese government sends over. I'm the only one who doesn't like Barbara; everyone else thinks she's just great – so full of energy and charisma. I don't see it. She talks a lot. I'll give her that much. She's continually talking about what she's going to do – what we all should do – camping in the Laurel Highlands, picnics on the Allegheny, season

tickets to the opera, the flower show at Mellon Park, movies, fund raisers, cocktail parties. On and on it goes. There's nothing she doesn't want to do. Everyone finds her simply charming and full of great ideas. I took an instant dislike to her. My husband thinks that's unfair, but normal considering my current state of being.

It's the end of August. Unemployed since April, I am now a member of the leisure class. I get up every morning, see my sons off to basketball camp. I read both papers – the *NY Times* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Then I walk to the coffee shop with the classifieds. I started the habit of the coffee shop because I thought it would motivate me to see other people going to work every day. Instead what I've found is a great number of people who seem to be in my situation – not much to do with the day. We regulars guard our tables. We sit and drink and watch the others who run in and out without much connection, empathy, or envy. I listen to the kids behind the counter, who are incredibly mean-spirited about the customers. They rip on everything – but concentrate on people's habits, which they abhor.

“Who orders a triple shot latte? No one needs that much caffeine.”

“She never throws out her stir sticks. She leaves them right on the counter as if we're trash collectors.”

“He buys that muffin for his mutt.”

I'm curious to know what they say about me and wonder if they would find me odd if I asked them what I do that annoys them. But then I couldn't go back. That would put me into the weirdo category. I leave after two or three refills. Home to rearrange the house. I have moved almost every piece of furniture on the first floor. I'll start on the second just as soon as I'm satisfied with the living room. I'm still not sure about the couch under the window. My husband says the way I have it arranged now is not conducive for socializing. I say, so what? At least it's different.

I go to the computer and check my E-mail – mostly spam – and then I go onto my websites. There are two that I check daily – one is about ginkgo trees, the other about Scotland. These sites send me periodic updates – and now I'm learning everything I want to know about these two fascinating subjects.

The summer has passed quickly. Much more quickly than it would have had I still been working. Now a few days before Labor Day, Barbara phones me frantically. “I need Maggie,” she says. “Have you seen her? Do you have any idea where she is?”

Maggie has just stopped by. She's collecting toys for the Ronald McDonald Family House picnic that she throws for the family members staying in town over the holiday weekend. She does it every year – chicken wings and potato salad for sixty at Mellon Park.

“Barbara's looking for you,” I announce, letting Maggie decide if she wants to hide from her.

“I should go over and talk to her. I'm sure it's something to do with the Chinese adoption,” Maggie explains.

Maggie agrees to go over to Barbara's and I tag along because I'm curious to see what's going on. Two weeks ago, Barbara was desperately seeking a husband. I guess she's going to skip that step.

“Barbara's really going to adopt a baby?” I ask.

“Yes. Isn't that wonderful?”

“It's interesting.” I'll give her that much. “She doesn't strike me as the mothering kind.”

“Were any of us the mothering kind before we had kids?”

We walk down the street to Barbara's apartment. Barbara opens the door and sighs as if we're late. "Here you are," she says. "Thank God." Barbara ushers Maggie over to the cluttered desk and asks her to translate a letter she's just received from the Chinese agency that is in charge of all adoptions in some remote province in China.

I'm slightly suspicious. Wouldn't an agency have someone to translate their documents for their clients? Wouldn't that be an obvious step in the process? Maybe Barbara is doing something illegal. Maybe this is a black market adoption. My suspicion turns to curiosity.

Barbara explains her impatience. "I've waited two years for this," she says. The process, a very slow but very good one, has been made even slower for single women wanting to adopt because of a change in policy with the Chinese government. Maybe all her noise about finding a man/husband was simply a shortcut to a baby. I study Barbara for a few minutes. She has a big-time job as director of development at one of the big hospitals in Pittsburgh. It's Joe's hospital but he says he has absolutely nothing to do with development. She works with the administration and operates on their level far from the physicians. Joe says he reads about their decisions and plans like everyone else in the city – in the newspapers. It's a big job and I don't know how Barbara handles it. Maybe that's where she puts all her smartness and energy, into her work because socially she's not so sharp.

And I'm the one without the job. It does make one curious.

"My Mandarin is a bit rusty," Maggie apologizes humbly, but her admission agitates Barbara.

"Do you understand it or not?" Barbara asks, reaching for the papers. Maggie's busy reading and doesn't hear the bitchiness in Barbara's tone. Though maybe she does and chooses to ignore it.

Barbara actually stomps across the room in a huff as if this is going to make any difference to anyone. I roll my eyes. She's such an idiot. I can't believe she's contemplating motherhood. I feel like I should tell someone she's an unfit weirdo. Give her a kid and she'll probably flush it down the toilet or give it away in those garbage bags. The spotlight rarely leaves Barbara for long – I don't know how she's going to compete with a kid.

Barbara stands. "I need this done today. Should I find someone else?"

"Like every third person in Pittsburgh is fluent in Chinese." This from me.

"Caroline, do you ever do anything useful with that sarcasm?" Barbara asks.

Maggie looks up. "Allan thinks she's hilarious."

I blush and smile, then an odd noise comes out of my mouth – I realize it's a giggle. I cover my mouth and force myself to stop. Thirty-eight year old women do not giggle, but I am so pleased that I find it impossible to stop.

"I can think of other things I might call her," Barbara says.

Maggie asks for a pen. "I need to make some notes," she apologizes.

"Allan thinks I'm funny?" I'm not proud; I fish to hear the compliment again.

"Hysterical," she says. She is bent over the desk writing furiously.

Those words don't necessarily mean the same thing. I suddenly have hope that she'll sabotage Barbara's adoption process.

I attempt to ask Maggie for clarification. "When you said . . ."

Barbara shushes me. "Leave her alone. She's trying to work here."

Either way – hilarious, hysterical – Allan at least talks about me, which is more than I knew before and with this bit of encouragement, I'm off to dreamland – a place where neither Maggie or Barbara are ever invited.

There are other reasons why my fantasy concerning Allan exists solely in my head. One of the biggest obstacles is Allan. I don't have much evidence that these obsessively passionate yearnings are shared, though I did have some indication – a spark that got the whole thing started. Now I'm not so sure. In fact, there are times when I'm not sure Allan even likes me, which is why I am so pleased to hear that he thinks I'm hilarious. Most people consider humor a positive trait – I'm thinking that Maggie's hysterical for hilarious substitution was simply a slip of the tongue. Barbara's awkward social skills get everyone worked up.

On the other hand, his feelings about me don't really change anything. I lust after him steadily and seriously. I work full-time at this profession of fabrication. I've become so accustomed to my fantasy that any reality like his feelings for me doesn't actually come into play. The stories I construct about Allan have nothing to do with our real lives. In my imaginings, it's just him and me. There are no kids or wives. There are no husbands, no laundry, no indigestion. No veins, no weirdness. There is nothing uncomfortable; nothing needs to be negotiated. We're not sneaking around. We're not hurting anyone. We're just together. Two single people, patrolling the world for love. Miraculously he finds me. And he admires me greatly before I fall in love with him. We talk about love. Then we make love. He declares his love for me, then we make love again. In my fantasy I'm incredibly attractive, with long wavy brown hair. I have a model's figure and I'm intriguing. In most of the scenarios, I'm an agent for the government, an important one. In others, I'm a spy. I grew up during the Cold War and the world of trench coats, berets, and Russian accents has always been a part of my romantic fantasies.

Despite the circumstances of risk, menace, and danger lurking at every corner, Allan and I always manage to have a great time. The settings are beautiful, lots of seascapes, waves and wind; the bed covers are goose down duvets. The sex is wonderful. There is always red wine in glasses that don't tip over no matter how wild the sex. There are candles. I am extraordinarily skinny.

I come home from Barbara's thinking not about China or babies, but about Allan and the back of his neck. I sat behind him two weeks ago when some of the girls in the neighborhood put on a violin concert. The oldest musician was 12 and the concert was painful, but the hostess had made tea and little cucumber sandwiches and I sat directly behind Allan. He shaves or gets it shaved back there. He has a tiny line of white that shows through – making me think he'd look terrible bald. He has a few freckles, and once when I got too close, I could see the tiny white hairs stand up where my breath brushed his skin.

He swatted as if a fly had landed on him. I sat back and acted as if I was enjoying the music, which I couldn't really listen to. Allan seemed particularly sexually enticing that day – I wonder how everyone isn't throwing themselves at him – and all my senses were focusing on him.

The doorbell rings. I don't jump to answer it. The kids in the neighborhood have been particularly aggressive about door-to-door sales this year. Suddenly they're all little capitalists. They're all selling things for good causes. Tins of popcorn to help the soccer team get to Denmark for the international championship. Wrapping paper so the church group can go to Ecuador to help build churches in the mountain villages. The boy scouts, girl scouts, everyone needs something. But finally, because I have two sons who go door to door, I answer the bell.

It's Allan. I stammer out a hello. He's obviously here to whisk me away. He's madly in love and though he's been fighting it with all his might, is unable to do anything anymore to conceal it.

He apologizes. "I hope this isn't a bad time," he says.

I stare, trying very hard to discern if he is really there or if this is still part of my imaginary life.

"I was hoping I could talk to Joe," Allan says.

I struggle to think of something witty to say. Nothing comes to mind, so I continue staring at him.

"Joe," Allan repeats.

The screen door that separates us makes him look a bit fuzzy, much like the grainy quality of the movies I imagine us in.

"Joe?" I ask.

"Your husband."

"Oh, right." I remember him.

"I've got a couple of medical things I need to ask him."

Joe's a doctor – an E.R. physician and our friends often use him as a neighborhood emergency Mini-mart. Open 24/7/365. Allan is not one of Joe's usual customers.

"Am I interrupting something?" Allan asks. "Are you busy with dinner?"

He clearly doesn't understand my world.

"Hysterical?" I whisper, coaching him through the screen to bring the world into my control.

"Do you have a cold, Caroline?"

Men like healthy women. "I'm never sick, Allan."

"Bravo for you," he says. "You must save a fortune in cold tablets."

I have to remind myself not to be too crazy in front of Allan. I don't want him thinking I've lost my marbles. The struggle is mind-boggling. My ruminations of Allan are so fueled by my imagination that the reality of him jars my daydreams. In my made-up world, we are exceedingly close and obviously intimate; it's confusing to actually see him and act naturally. I'm afraid I'm going to say something that doesn't belong in reality.

We're still on daylight savings time and the evening air is rose colored. I invite him in and offer him a drink.

"That would be great," he says and comes in rubbing his hands. He does this a lot – an anticipatory gesture that I don't know how to interpret, but I take it as a positive sign – that he's overwhelmed by my presence and excited to see me. I lick my lips trying to determine if I'm still wearing lipstick. It doesn't seem like it.

We sit in the living room – which actually is fine for socializing as long as there are only two. He doesn't look ill. Maybe this is a ploy. Maybe he's really come to see me and is using Joe as an excuse.

Why do we pay so much attention to commitments we made to the State? Shouldn't there be a separation between current lust and nuptials that were made fifteen years ago?

He sighs.

"Tough day?"

"Unendingly problematic," he says. "Made even more so once I came home."

"That's too bad," I say. He's trying to confide in me. I have to listen carefully so I don't sound like a dimwit.

"Americans are emotionally fraught creatures, aren't they?" he asks.

“You’re telling me.” I nod.

“They’re actually quite mad.”

“And loud,” I add.

He pauses, puzzled. “Who said anything about loud?” He separates his legs and leans back into the couch. He smells like pine. Or maybe that’s from Tony, my male maid. Wednesdays are his day, though he’s not at all reliable.

“You did,” I say. “Last April you told me Americans were loud. This June we were fat and last week we were incredibly stupid.”

“I hope you’re not taking it personally,” he says.

“Me? Take anything personally? How could I?” I ask.

His wife is American. “From Idaho,” he always jokes. “Moscow, Idaho. Isn’t that ridiculously brilliant.” Being from such a place absolves her of the sins the rest of us suffer by association.

I’ve never been to Scotland, but from what I’ve gathered from Allan, the Scots are perfect. They have an astute knowledge of history and culture. Most can recite Robert Burns, Greek mythology, Shakespeare, and Racine. I’m not sure why Racine, but that’s the way it is. Unlike Americans who can’t name another country’s president or prime minister, the Scots are current on all matter of political concerns. Like Allan, they’re dark and good looking and have sarcastic opinions on everything under the sun. Not all of them have wives.

“Did you say yes to wine?” I walk over to the cabinet where we have a great deal of wine stocked. There are even clean glasses and a corkscrew – almost as if I had planned this.

“Whisky, wine, a gigantic hammer,” he says, that huge grin on his face. His teeth are quite small and very white. I wonder if he’s used a whitening process. “I’ll take whatever blurs the senses.”

See how well we could get along?

I pour out two glasses of wine. This is very familiar to me – something I’ve done over and over again in my head. Though there, I’m usually sitting in Allan’s lap. I opt for the chair across the way and sip my wine.

“Is Joe around?” Allan asks.

I explain that I’ve just come back from Barbara’s. “She’s really serious about this baby thing.”

He rolls his eyes.

He and Maggie have two daughters. I don’t think he’s anti-children, so I’m thinking he’s anti-Barbara, and with this I agree. She is an eye-roll. “You’re not kidding.” I nod, staring at his face. His lashes, as I might have mentioned, are very dark with flecks of gray giving the impression that he’s just walked in from the snow.

He drinks incredibly fast. Maybe he’s as nervous as I am, though he hides it better than I do. “I’m sorry, is Joe home?”

I shrug. That’s the fifth time in five minutes he’s brought up Joe. Is it really necessary that we talk so much about my husband? I drink and pretend that we’re having a conversation about our love, but then see the odd expression on his face and force myself to be a normal human being.

I explain that Joe has been jogging to work these days, so a car in the drive isn’t any indication of who’s here or not. I walk into the hallway and call up the steps. “Anyone home?”

Nothing but silence, which is also no indication that the house is empty. I have two teenage sons and they never answer their mother’s call. They ignore me until they need me.

“Do you ever talk to your husband, Caroline?”

“Am I supposed to?” I ask.

I replenish his wine glass.

“Cheese? Crackers?” I offer. A candle-lit soak in the claw-footed bathtub?

The light is just leaving the room. Allan drinks his wine in two swallows. I get up to refill his glass and he says something about drinking in the dark. “I could bring over a few light bulbs,” he offers.

“That’d be great,” I say and turn on one table lamp. I don’t see any reason to flood the room with harsh lights.

“Which Americans are mad?” I ask.

“All the ones I come in contact with.” Allan says. “They really are out of their minds.” He finishes the second glass of wine. At least I get that part right in my ruminations.

“Are you okay?” I ask. I’m not this dull in my daydreams, but I’m worried that Allan might be here to ask Joe about an irregular heartbeat or about blood in his urine. Has his primary care physician given him a three-month sentence? How can I live without him?

“What do you mean, Caroline?”

“Health-wise,” I clarify.

“Do I look okay?” He leans forward, but he moves into the shadows and I can’t see his face.

“Yes.” You look great. You’re one of the most handsome men I’ve ever met. You have this incredible mouth, perfect lips. I’d like to be the wine in your glass, the glass in your hand, the pillow near your arm.

“I’ve got a couple of questions for Joe,” Allan says. I stare at him. I’m good with questions.

Allan mistakes my silence for curiosity. “I’m sure he’ll fill you in when I leave.”

“Joe won’t tell me a thing,” I say. “He’s incredibly discreet.”

“That must be why I like you two so much,” Allan says. “You’re not like the rest of these pests.”

I hear praise in that sentence. He is using the plural; I’m included in that compliment.

Joe comes home. He’s wearing hospital scrubs and his running shoes. Allan stands up and I don’t think I’m imagining the flash of guilt moving across his face. He shouldn’t feel guilty. Emotions are unruly – crazy things – we believe we’re in control, but it’s not always the case.

Allan and Joe shake hands. “You golf today?” Allan asks.

Joe shakes his head. “Couldn’t get away.” Joe doesn’t golf, but Allan doesn’t seem to know it. He talks to Joe frequently about golf and golfing problems. He complains when the weather isn’t good enough for golf, when he thinks he should be playing instead of doing whatever it is that he’s doing.

“You got a minute?” Allan asks.

“Sure, sure,” Joe asks. “Let’s sit.”

Maybe to prove to Allan that there really is more than one discreet American, or maybe because I don’t like to see my husband and my ‘lover’ in the same room, I leave the two of them to have their discussion in private. Joe takes over my wine glass and I go up to our bedroom and flick on the television. I turn down the sound, and listen to the cadence of Allan’s voice. But I’m too curious. I am not by nature a discreet person. I put my ear to the heating vent and strain to hear what they’re saying.

It's not clear. I hear part of their conversation. Allan's talking, but I can't make out what he's saying. Joe's voice booms – Allan is right on that one – Americans *are* loud.

"Let me check on that for you," Joe booms.

"If it's not too much trouble," Allan answers.

"Not at all."

My son, Max, age 12, comes in and flops on the bed. He grabs the remote and flicks on the television. The sound booms, then echoes in the room. I stand.

"Jesus Christ," he says and jumps up as if I'm going to hit him. "Have you flipped? What are you doing on the floor?"

"I dropped my earring," I offer, but don't feel I need an excuse. It's my room. I can do what I want.

He stares at me, trying to figure out what I'm really doing. I stare back; the conversation continues downstairs. I won't hear any of it.

"Are you okay, Mom?" Max asks.

"Just fine," I say. "Go ahead, watch your program." I motion for him to get back on the bed.

But he doesn't.

Ever since I lost my job, the kids have been nice to me. It's a strain, not their first reaction, and I should bask in their care, but I feel it's a stretch for them. Joe must have talked to them and told them that they should be more considerate. And at times, they are. But it's not natural and makes us all a bit awkward.

Max leaves rather than stay in the same room with me.

The front door slams and Allan is gone. I turn to the window. Night is settling. I see his dark shape walking towards his house. He stops, lights a cigarette and smokes by the trees. I rush downstairs.

Joe sits in the living room, his head back against the chair, eyes closed. He's lit the room with the overhead lights – harsh, insensitive yellow lights. I flick them off.

"You didn't invite him for dinner."

"What's that?"

"Allan. You should have told him to stay for dinner."

"Why? Did you cook something?" Joe yawns. I know my husband, he suspects nothing of my fantasies.

Unemployed, I have no interest in cooking. Now that I have the time, I don't have the inclination. I had planned to call Wheel Deliver and order Thai noodles. I'm not sure how Allan feels about take-out food. We don't eat out a lot in my dreams. Food is not a big issue – maybe because I'm so skinny.

"What about his family?" Joe asks. He talks with his eyes closed.

"Oh," I say. "Are they home?"

I take Allan's glass into the kitchen. There's a sip left. I drink it and think about some sort of Catholic ritual of drinking from the same chalice. *You are unstable*, I tell my reflection in the window over the sink. I vow not to think of Allan for at least two hours – go over to the refrigerator and dial the number for take-out. "Dinner will be ready in 45," I shout to the house.

Later that night I ask Joe if everything is all right with Allan.

"As far as I know." He doesn't look up.

He has his laptop in bed, balanced on his knees. He's writing a mystery novel. It's about a man who kills his wife and gets away with it. He spends all his free time

researching methods and reading published mystery novels. The house is now decorated with stacks of current best-selling thrillers and cop novels.

I've read the first few chapters of Joe's book. I read them quickly, which Joe took as a positive sign. "You liked it?" he asked.

"I did," I told him.

"You really did?"

"I did. Really." And it's true. What he has is really good and I'm proud that he's doing it.

There are only four characters: the dead wife, the husband, and the two police officers.

"It's got to be the husband. You don't have any other suspects," I say. Then I try to think like Joe. "Unless it's one of the cops."

"Why should you trust anyone?" Joe asks. "Cops aren't always good. They've been known to go against the law when provoked."

"But they didn't know her," I tell him. "Wouldn't they need a motive?"

"That's what you think," Joe says.

Joe was an English major as an undergraduate. He tells me a lot of doctors majored in the humanities. Lots of doctors are clandestine writers. They have the material. It's too bad more of them don't write. Joe refuses to have doctors or hospitals or lawyers in his mystery. "It's going to be different than other detective books."

"He's in good health?" I ask.

"The cop?"

"Allan," I remind him who we're really talking about.

"In good health?" Joe stops typing. "Why?"

"I was just wondering." People usually come to talk to Joe about their ailments.

"He didn't say anything about his health."

"Then what did you two talk about?"

"His wife," Joe says.

"Maggie?" I'm intrigued, but puzzled. It seems an odd reason for Allan to seek Joe's medical expertise.

"I think he's only got one," Joe says. He looks out at me over his readers, not puzzled, but bemused.

"That's right," I say. "As far as I know, he's only got the one wife."

But there are others who love him. Madly, hysterically, as is our emotionally fraught American way.