UNDER CURRENTS

NORA ROBERTS

To the Greenbrier Girls
JoAnne, workout companion
Kat, my sweet, sweet Baby Mama
Laura, the handler of everything
Mary, shopping pal
Sarah, spirit magnet

PART ONE

THE CRUELTY OF LIES

Cruelty and fear shake hands together.

—HONORÉ DE BALZAC

Child abuse casts a shadow the length of a lifetime.

—HERBERT WARD

CHAPTER ONE

From the outside, the house in Lakeview Terrace looked perfect. The dignified three stories of pale brown brick boasted wide expanses of glass to open it to the view of Reflection Lake and the Blue Ridge Mountains. Two faux turrets capped in copper added a European charm and that quiet whisper of wealth.

Its lawn, a richly green skirt, sloped gently toward a trio of steps and the wide white veranda banked by azaleas that bloomed ruby red in spring.

In the rear a generous covered patio offered outdoor living space with a summer kitchen and those lovely lake views. The carefully maintained rose garden added a sweet, sophisticated scent. In season, a forty-two-foot sailing yacht floated serenely at the private dock.

Climbing roses softened the look of the long, vertical boards of the privacy fence.

The attached garage held a Mercedes SUV and sedan, two mountain bikes, ski equipment, and no clutter.

Inside, the ceilings soared. Both the formal living room and the great room offered fireplaces framed in the same golden brown brick as the exterior. The decor, tasteful—though some might whisper *studied*—reflected the vision of the couple in charge.

Quiet colors, coordinated fabrics, contemporary without edging over into stark.

Dr. Graham Bigelow purchased the lot in the projected development of Lakeview Terrace when his son was five, his daughter three.

He chose the blueprint he felt suited him and his family, made the necessary changes and additions, selected the finishes, the flooring, the tiles, the pavers, hired a decorator.

His wife, Eliza, happily left most of the choices and decisions to her husband. His taste, in her opinion, couldn't be faulted.

If and when she had an idea or suggestion, he would listen. If most often he pointed out why such an idea or suggestion wouldn't suit, he did—occasionally—include her input.

Like Graham, Eliza wanted the newness, the status offered by the small, exclusive community on the lake in North Carolina's High Country. She'd been born and raised in status—but the old sort, the sort she saw as creaky and boring. Like the house she'd grown up in across the lake.

She'd been happy to sell her share of the old house to her sister and use the money to help furnish—all new!—the house in Lakeview Terrace. She'd handed the cashier's check to Graham—he took care of things—without a second thought.

She'd never regretted it.

They'd lived there happily for nearly nine years, raising two bright, attractive children, hosting dinner parties, cocktail parties, garden parties. Eliza's job, as wife of the chief of surgery of Mercy Hospital in nearby Asheville, was to look beautiful and stylish, to raise the children well, keep the house, entertain, and head committees.

As she had a housekeeper/cook three times a week, a weekly groundskeeper, and a sister who was more than happy to take the children if she and Graham needed an evening out or a little getaway, she had plenty of time to focus on her looks and wardrobe.

She never missed a school function, and in fact had served as PTA president for two years. She attended school plays, along with Graham if work didn't keep him away. She embraced fund-raising, both for the school and the hospital. At every ballet recital since Britt turned four, she'd sat front row center.

She sat through most of her son Zane's baseball games as well. And if she missed some, she excused it, as anyone who'd sat through the nightmare of tedium that youth baseball provided would understand.

Though she'd never admit it, Eliza favored her daughter. But Britt was such a beautiful, sweet-natured, obedient young girl. She never had to be prodded to do her homework or tidy her room, was unfailingly polite. In Zane, Eliza saw her sister, Emily. The tendency to argue or sulk, to go off on his own.

Still, he kept his grades up. If the boy wanted to play baseball, he made the honor roll. Obviously, his ambition to play professionally was just a teenage fantasy. He would, of course, study medicine like his father.

But for now, baseball served as the carrot so they all avoided the stick.

If Graham had to pull out that stick and punish the boy from time to time, it was for his own good. It helped build character, teach boundaries, ensure respect.

As Graham liked to say, the child is the father of the man, so the child had to learn to follow the rules.

Two days before Christmas, Eliza drove the plowed streets of Lakeview toward home. She'd had a lovely holiday lunch with friends—maybe just a couple sips more champagne than she should have. She'd burned that off shopping. On Boxing Day, the family would take its annual ski trip. Or Graham and the kids would ski while she made use of the spa. Now she had a pair of gorgeous new boots to pack along with some lingerie that would warm Graham up nicely after his time on the slopes.

She glanced around at the other homes, the holiday decorations. Really lovely, she thought—no tacky inflatable Santas allowed in Lakeview Terrace—by order of the homeowners' association.

But, no point being modest, their home outshined the rest. Graham gave her carte blanche on Christmas decorating, and she used it wisely and well.

The white lights would sparkle when dusk rolled in, she thought. Outlining the perfect lines of the house, twining around the potted firs on the front veranda. Gleaming inside the twin wreaths with their trailing red and silver ribbons on the double doors.

And of course the living room tree—all twelve feet—white lights,

silver and red star ornaments. The great room tree, the same color scheme, but with angels. Of course the mantels, the formal dining table, all tasteful and perfect.

And new every year. No need to box and store when you could arrange for the rental company to come sweep it all away afterward.

She'd never understood her parents' and Emily's delight in digging out ancient glass balls or tacky wooden Santas. They could have all that with their visit to the old house and Emily. Eliza would host them all for Christmas dinner, of course. Then, thank God, they'd head back to Savannah and their retirement.

Emily was their favorite, she thought as she hit the remote for the garage door. No question there.

It gave her a jolt to see Graham's car already in the garage, and she checked her watch. Let out a breath of relief. She wasn't late; he was home early.

Delighted, especially since someone else had the car pool, she pulled in beside her husband's car, gathered her shopping bags.

She went through the mudroom, hung her coat, folded her scarf, removed her boots before sliding into the black Prada flats she wore around the house.

When she stepped into the kitchen, Graham, still in his suit and tie, stood at the center island.

"You're home early!" After setting her bags on the wet bar, she moved quickly to him, kissed him lightly.

He smelled, lightly like the kiss, of Eau Sauvage—her favorite.

"Where were you?"

"Oh, I had that holiday lunch with Miranda and Jody, remember?" She gestured vaguely toward the family calendar in the activity nook. "We topped it off with a little shopping."

As she spoke, she walked to the refrigerator for a bottle of Perrier. "I can't believe how many people are still shopping for Christmas. Jody included," she said, adding a scoop of ice from the ice machine, pouring the sparkling water over it. "Honestly, Graham, she just never seems to get organized about—"

"Do you think I give a damn about Jody?"

His voice, calm, smooth, almost pleasant, set off alarm bells.

"Of course not, my darling. I'm just babbling." She kept the smile on her face, but her eyes turned wary. "Why don't you sit down and relax? I'll freshen your drink, and we'll—"

He heaved the glass, smashing the crystal at her feet. A shard dug a shallow slice across her ankle with an added sting as scotch splattered over it.

The Baccarat, she thought with a little frisson of heat.

"Freshen that!" No longer calm and smooth, not nearly pleasant, the words slapped out at her. "I spend my day with my hands inside a human being, saving lives, and come home to an empty house?"

"I'm sorry. I—"

"*Sorry*?" He grabbed her arm, twisting as he slammed her back against the counter. "You're *sorry* you couldn't be bothered to be home? *Sorry* you frittered away the day, and my money, having lunch, shopping, gossiping with those idiot bitches while I spend six hours in the OR?"

Her breath began to hitch, her heart to pound. "I didn't know you'd be home early. If you'd called me, I would've come straight home."

"Now I have to report to you?"

She barely heard the rest of the words that hammered at her. *Ungrateful, respect, duty*. But she knew that look, that avenging angel look. The dark blond hair, perfectly groomed, the smooth, handsome face suffused with angry color. The rage in those bright blue eyes so cold, so cold.

The frisson of heat became electric snaps.

"It was on the calendar!" Her voice rose in pitch. "I told you only this morning."

"Do you think I have time to check your ridiculous calendar? You will be home when I walk in the door. Do you understand me?" He slammed her against the counter again, shooting a jolt of pain up her spine. "I'm responsible for everything you have. This home, the clothes on your back, the food you eat. I pay for someone to cook, to clean so you can be available to me when I say! So you damn well will be home when I walk in the door. You'll damn well spread your legs when I want to fuck you."

To prove it, he rammed his erection against her.

She slapped him. Even knowing what was coming—maybe because of what was coming—she slapped him.

And that rage went from cold to hot. His lips peeled back.

He plowed his fist into her midsection.

He never hit her in the face.

At fourteen, Zane Bigelow's heart and soul centered on baseball. He liked girls—he liked looking at naked girls once his pal Micah showed him how to bypass the parental controls on his computer. But baseball still ranked number one.

Numero uno.

Tall for his age, gangly with it, he longed to get through school, be discovered by a scout for the Baltimore Orioles—he'd settle for any American League team, but that was his number one pick.

Totally *numero uno.*

He'd play shortstop—the amazing Cal Ripken would have retired by then. Besides, Iron Man Ripken was back at third.

This comprised Zane's ambitions. And actually seeing a naked girl in the—you know—flesh.

Nobody in the world could have been happier than Zane Bigelow as Mrs. Carter—Micah's mom—drove the car pool gang home in her Lexus SUV. Even if she had Cher singing about life after love playing.

He didn't have a passion for cars—yet—just a young male's innate knowledge. And he preferred rap (not that he could play it in the house).

But even with Cher singing, his sister and the other two girls squealing about Christmas, Micah deep into *Donkey Kong* on his Game Boy (Micah's desperate Christmas wish was the new Game Boy Color), Zane hit the highest note on the happy scale.

No school for ten whole days! Even the prospect of being pushed into skiing—not his favorite sport, especially when his father kept

pointing out his little sister skied rings around him—couldn't dampen his mood.

No math, ten days. He hated math like he hated spinach salad, which was a lot.

Mrs. Carter pulled over to let Cecile Marlboro out. There was the usual shuffling, hauling of backpacks, the high-pitched squeal of girls.

They all had to hug, because Christmas vacation.

Sometimes they had to hug because it was, like, Tuesday or whatever. He'd never get it.

Everybody called out Merry Christmas—they'd called out Happy Holidays when dropping Pete Greene off, because he was Jewish.

Almost home, Zane thought, watching the houses go by. He figured to fix himself a snack, then—no homework, no freaking math—close up in his room and settle in with an hour on *Triple Play* on his PlayStation.

He knew Lois—off till like *après ski*—planned to make lasagna before she left for her own family holiday stuff. And Lois's lasagna was awesome.

Mom would actually have to turn on the oven to heat it up, but she could handle that much.

Better yet, Grams and Pop got in from Savannah tomorrow. He wished they could stay at his house instead of with his aunt Emily, but he planned to ride his bike over to the old lake house the next afternoon and hang awhile. He could talk Emily into baking cookies—wouldn't even have to talk hard for that.

And they were coming for Christmas dinner. Mom wouldn't even have to turn on the oven for that one. Catered.

After dinner Britt would play piano—he sucked at piano, which equaled another regular dig from his dad—and they'd do a sing-along.

Corny, totally corny, but he sort of liked it. Plus, he sang pretty good, so he didn't get ragged on.

As the car pulled over at his house, Zane exchanged fist bumps with Micah.

"Dude, Merry."

"Dude," Micah said. "Back atcha."

While Britt and Chloe hugged as if they wouldn't see each other for a year, Zane slid out. "Merry Christmas, Chloe. Merry Christmas, Mrs. Carter, and thanks for the ride."

"Merry Christmas, Zane, and you're always welcome." She shot him a smile, made eye contact. She was really pretty for a mom.

"Thank you, Mrs. Carter, and Merry Christmas." Britt practically sang it. "I'll call you, Chloe!"

Zane slung his backpack over one shoulder as Britt climbed out. "What are you calling her for? What could you have left to talk about? Y'all never shut up all the way home."

"We have plenty to talk about."

Britt, more than a full head shorter, shared his coloring. The dark hair—Britt's nearly to her waist and pinned back with reindeer barrettes—the same sharp green eyes. Her face was still sort of round and babyish while his had gone angular. Because, Em said, he was growing up.

Not that he was ready to shave or anything, though he did check carefully every day.

Because she was his sister, he felt honor bound to give her grief. "But y'all don't actually say anything. It's like: Ooooh, Justin Timberlake." He followed up with loud kissy noises, making her blush.

He knew Timberlake was her not-so-secret crush.

"Just shut up."

"You shut up."

"You shut up."

They back-and-forthed that until they reached the veranda—switched to snarling looks, as both knew if they went inside arguing and their mother heard, an endless lecture would follow.

Zane dug out his key, as his father decreed the house stayed locked whether or not anyone was home. The second the door cracked open, he heard it.

The snarl dropped from Britt's face. Her eyes went huge, filled with fear and tears. She slapped her hands over her ears.

"Go upstairs," Zane told her. "Go straight up to your room. Stay there."

"He's hurting her again. He's hurting her."

Instead of running to her room, Britt ran inside, ran back toward the great room, stood, hands still over her ears. "Stop!" She screamed it. "Stop, stop, stop, stop."

Zane saw blood smeared on the floor where his mother tried to crawl away. Her sweater was torn, one of her shoes missing.

"Go to your rooms!" Graham shouted it as he hauled Eliza up by her hair. "This is none of your business."

Britt just kept screaming, screaming, even when Zane tried to pull her back.

He saw his father's hate-filled eyes track over, latch on to his sister. And a new fear flashed hot inside him, burned something away.

He didn't think, didn't know what he intended to do. He shoved his sister back, stood between her and his father, a skinny kid who'd yet to grow into his feet. And with that flash of heat, he charged.

"Get away from her, you son of a bitch!"

He rammed straight into Graham. Surprise more than the power of the hit knocked Graham back a step. "Get the hell away."

Zane never saw it coming. He was fourteen, and the only fights he'd ever participated in consisted of a little pushy-shovey and insults. He'd felt his father's fist—a blow to the gut, sometimes the kidneys.

Where it didn't show.

This time the fists struck his face, and something behind his eyes exploded, blurred his vision. He felt two more before he dropped, the wild pain of them rising over the fear, the anger. His world went gray, and through the gray, lights sizzled and flashed.

With the taste of blood in his mouth, his sister's screams banging in his head, he passed out.

The next he knew, he realized his father had slung him over his shoulder, carrying him up the stairs. His ears rang, but he could hear Britt crying, hear his mother telling her to stop.

His father didn't lay him down on the bed, but shrugged him off his shoulder so Zane bounced on the mattress. Every inch of his body cried out in fresh pain.

"Disrespect me again, I'll do more than break your nose, blacken your eye. You're nothing, do you understand me? You're nothing until

I say you are. Everything you have, including the breath in your body, is because of me."

He leaned close as he spoke, spoke in that smooth, calm tone. Zane saw two of him, couldn't even manage to nod. The shaking started, the teeth-chattering cold of shock.

"You will not leave this room until I permit it. You will speak to no one. You will tell no one the private business of this family or the punishment you forced me to levy today will seem like a picnic. No one would believe you. You're nothing. I'm everything. I could kill you in your sleep, and no one would notice. Remember that the next time you think about trying to be a big man."

He went out, closed the door.

Zane drifted again. It was easier to drift than to deal with the pain, to deal with the words his father had spoken that had fallen like more fists.

When he surfaced again, the light had changed. Not dark, but getting there.

He couldn't breathe through his nose. It felt clogged like he had a terrible cold. The sort of cold that made his head hammer with pain, had his eyes throbbing.

His gut hurt something terrible.

When he tried to sit up, the room spun, and he feared throwing up.

When he heard the lock click, he started to shake again. He prepared to beg, plead, grovel, anything that kept those fists from pounding on him again.

His mother came in, flipping the light as she did. The light exploded more pain, so he shut his eyes.

"Your father says you're to clean yourself up, then use this ice bag on your face."

Her voice, cool, matter-of-fact, hurt almost as much as his father's.

"Mom—"

"Your father says to keep your head elevated. You may leave your bed only to use your bathroom. As you see, your father has removed your computer, your PlayStation, your television, items he's gener-

ously given you. You will see and speak to no one except your father or me. You will not participate in Christmas Eve or Christmas Day."

"But—"

"You have the flu."

He searched her face for some sign of pity, gratitude. Feeling. "I was trying to stop him from hurting you. I thought he might hurt Britt. I thought—"

"I didn't ask for or need your help." Her voice, clipped, cold, made his chest ache. "What's between me and your father is between me and your father. You have the next two days to consider your place in this family, and to earn back any privileges."

She turned toward the door. "Do as you're told."

When she went out, left him alone, he made himself sit up—had to close his eyes against the spinning and just breathe. On shaky legs, he stood, stumbled into the bathroom, vomited, nearly passed out again.

When he managed to gain his feet, he stared at his face in the mirror over the sink.

It didn't look like his face, he thought, oddly detached. The mouth swollen, bottom lip split. God, the nose like a red balloon. Both eyes black, one swollen half-shut. Dried blood everywhere.

He lifted a hand, touched his fingers to his nose, had pain blasting. Because he was afraid to take a shower—still dizzy—he used a washcloth to try to clean off some of the blood. He had to grit his teeth, had to hang on to the sink with one hand to stay upright, but he feared not doing what he'd been told more than the pain.

He cried, and wasn't ashamed. Nobody could see anyway. Nobody would care.

He inched his way back to bed, breathed out when he eased down to take off his shoes, his jeans. Every minute or two he had to stop, catch his breath again, wait for the dizziness to pass.

In his boxers and sweatshirt, he crawled into bed, took the ice bag his mother had left, and laid it as lightly as he could on his nose.

It hurt too much, just too much, so he switched to his eye. And that brought a little relief.

He lay there, full dark now, planning, planning. He'd run away. As soon as he could, he'd stuff his backpack with some clothes. He didn't have much money because his father banked all of it. But he had a little he'd hidden in a pair of socks. His saving-for-video-games money.

He could hitchhike—and that thought brought a thrill. Maybe to New York. He'd get away from this house where everything looked so clean, where ugly, ugly secrets hid like his video game money.

He'd get a job. He could get a job. No more school, he thought as he drifted again. That was something.

He woke again, heard the lock again, and pretended to sleep. But it wasn't his father's steps, or his mother's. He opened his eyes as Britt shined a little pink flashlight in his face.

"Don't."

"Shh," she warned him. "I can't turn the light on in case they wake up and see." She sat on the side of the bed, stroked a hand over his arm. "I brought you a PB&J. I couldn't get lasagna because they'd know if any was missing from the dish. You need to eat."

"Stomach's not so good, Britt."

"Just a little. Try a little."

"You need to go. If they catch you in here—"

"They're asleep. I made sure. I'm staying with you. I'm going to stay with you until you can eat something. I'm so sorry, Zane."

"Don't cry."

"You're crying."

He let the tears roll. He just didn't have the strength to stop them.

Sniffling at her own tears, swiping at them, Britt reached down to stroke his arm. "I brought milk, too. They won't notice if a glass of milk is gone. I cleaned everything up, and when you're done, I'll wash the glass."

They spoke in whispers—they were used to it—but now her voice hitched.

"He hit you so hard, Zane. He hit you and hit you, and when you were on the ground, he kicked you in the stomach. I thought you were dead."

She laid her head on his chest, shoulders shaking. He stroked her hair.

"Did he hurt you?"

"No. He sort of squeezed my arms and shook me, yelled at me to shut up. So I did. I was afraid not to."

"That's good. You did the right thing."

"You did." Her whisper thickened with tears. "You tried to do the right thing. She didn't try to stop him from hurting you. She didn't say anything. And when he stopped, he told her to clean up the blood on the floor. There was glass broken in the kitchen, to clean it up, to clean herself up and have dinner on the table by six."

She sat up, held out half the sandwich she'd neatly cut in two. In that moment he loved her so much it hurt his heart.

He took it, tried a bite, and found it didn't threaten to come up again.

"We have to tell Emily and Grams and Pop you're sick. You got the flu, and you're contagious. You have to rest, and Dad's taking care of you. He won't let them come up to see you. Then we have to tell people at the resort you fell off your bike. He said all this at dinner. I had to eat or he'd get mad again. Then I threw up when I went upstairs."

He took another bite, reached for her hand in the dark. "I know how that feels."

"When we get back, we have to say you had a skiing accident. Fell. Dad took care of you."

"Yeah." The single word rang bitter, bitter. "He took care of me."

"He'll hurt you again if we don't. Maybe worse. I don't want him to hurt you again, Zane. You were trying to stop him from hitting Mom. You were protecting me, too. You thought he was going to hit me. So did I."

He felt her shift, saw in the faint light of the flashlight she'd set on the bed that she'd turned to stare toward the window. "One day I guess he will."

"No, no, he won't." Inside the pain, fury rose. "You won't give him any reason to. And I won't let him."

"He doesn't need a reason. You don't have to be a grown-up to understand that." Though her tone sounded adult, fresh tears leaked. "I think they don't love us. He couldn't love us and hurt us, make us lie. And she couldn't love us and let it keep happening. I think they don't love us."

He knew they didn't—had known for sure when his mother had come in, looked at him with nothing in her eyes. "We've got each other."

While she sat with him, making sure he ate, he understood he couldn't run away, couldn't run and leave Britt. He had to stay. He had to get stronger. He had to get strong enough to fight back.

Not to protect his mother, but his sister.