

October 25, 1972

There were times when she wished he were dead. Not that she'd never met him, or that he'd never been born, but that he'd get hit by a car or get himself killed in some other violent way like a bar fight, or his arm would get caught in a machine and he would bleed to death before anyone could save him. And she wished that in those final moments, when he felt his life draining from him, that he'd understand what a bastard he was, what a waste of life. She could envision him, his blood pooling in a black kidney-shaped puddle beneath him as he repented in terror, understanding with a final clarity that he was about to pay for the man he was. In those dark moments he'd be sorry, so sorry. But it would be too late. That's how she felt about him.

She lay alone in the dark, on the old pilled quilt atop her bed. The radiator was cranking dry, hot air, making an occasional loud bang as if someone were hitting one of the pipes with a metal wrench. She strained to hear the soft, measured breathing of her daughter down the hall. A strong wind rattled the window. She knew it was cold outside, colder than it had been yet this autumn. But she was sweating a little. The heat in her apartment always ran too hot. In the night the baby (though she really wasn't a baby anymore at almost two years old) would kick off her covers. She was listening for that, for the sudden shift

the child made in her sleep when she pushed the blankets away. But she was listening, too, for other noises.

Her heart had finally stopped racing and the baby had finally stopped screaming, but she knew he would come back. She lay fully clothed in a gray sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers, the phone in her hand. A baseball bat lay beside her leg. If he came back, she would call the police again, even though they'd already come once tonight after he'd gone. She had a restraining order. They had to come no matter how many times she called.

She couldn't believe it had come to this, her life. If it weren't for her daughter, she'd think what a mess she'd made of it, how many mistakes, how many broken expectations. At least she knew that she did one thing well, that in spite of everything, her baby was happy and healthy and loved by her mother.

The clock beside her bed cast a green glow and the only sounds now were the child breathing and the hum of the refrigerator down the hall. It was old; there was a low groan and a slight rattle to it. She hardly noticed anymore except when she was listening closely to the darkness, worrying about where he was and what he would try next.

Their relationship had been all but over when she told him she was pregnant. If you could even call it a relationship. They'd gone out a couple of times. He'd pick her up in his Monte Carlo and take her to a pizza place where people seemed to know him. He'd pull out her chair and tell her she was pretty. He'd tell her that a couple of times over dinner, using it as filler for a conversation that faltered more than it flowed.

They'd seen The Candidate with Robert Redford and The Get-away with Steve McQueen, neither of which she had particularly wanted to see, not that he'd asked. He'd just drive them to the movie theater and walk to the ticket window, tell the clerk what he wanted to see. Maybe that should have been her first clue. If you're going to the movies with your date, shouldn't you ask her what she wants to see? In

the darkened theater with a bucket of popcorn between her legs, he'd play with her ponytail and whisper in her ear how pretty she was . . . again. The second time, during The Getaway, she'd let him touch her breast and almost liked it, felt herself go hot between the legs. That night, he'd come back to her apartment and they'd slept together. But he didn't stay the night. She'd slept with him again a few times after that, but he stopped taking her out for pizza and movies. And then, just as she was starting to count on hearing his voice on the phone, feeling his arm on her shoulder, he faded out of her life. They all seemed to do that, didn't they? Seemed like one week they were together, but by the next they were strangers. For a while she had heard from him every night, which turned into every other night. Then her phone stopped ringing altogether. She'd look at it, sitting there on the kitchen counter, pick up the receiver to make sure it was working.

She hadn't been raised to chase a man, to ask him out or ask why he'd stopped calling, so when she didn't hear from him, she never tried to reach him. Of course, she'd not been raised to let a man grope her in a theater and then sleep with him, either.

Anyway, he was nothing to her but a way to pass the time, a way to get over the man before him. How different the two men had seemed on the outside. The one before had been wealthy, treating her to fancy evenings in the city, buying her gifts, dresses and jewelry. He'd spoken French to her, and even though she didn't understand, she was impressed. Her mistake had been that he'd been her boss. And when he'd tired of her, he'd suggested that he'd make it comfortable for her to find another job. They were so different, this one and the one before. But in the end they were all the same, weren't they? They got bored and wanted her to go away. Or they became distant and cold. Or violent like this one.

Her parents, both heavy smokers, had died within two years of each other, far too young. Her mother died slowly and terribly from emphysema and her father from a sudden heart attack. She had no

brothers and sisters. So she had no one to shame with her unwed pregnancy, but no one to turn to, either. Maria was her only friend; a woman downstairs known to everyone as Madame Maria. The older woman made her living reading tarot cards in her apartment, giving guidance from “the Goddess,” as she liked to say. Madame Maria had told her that a gift was on its way to her. Maria always said that. This time she was right.

When she was sure, she went to see him. He asked her how she knew it was his. She started to really hate him then and wondered how she could have ever given herself so cheaply to someone so undeserving. She assured him that she wanted nothing from him, had just wanted to give him the opportunity to be a father. He left her standing in a dark parking lot. It started to rain, just a light mist, as she listened to the rumble of his Monte Carlo driving off into the distance. It had been a mistake to go see him; she’d misjudged him. Had thought he might do right by her. Wrong again.

Then, maybe it was guilt haunting him, or curiosity, or maybe even some latent capacity to love, but he started coming around when the baby was a few months old. And it seemed as if he might be taking an interest in being a father. But after a while, it was just like the movies: He thought he could start picking the show and the time, and cop a feel while he was at it. The battles started. The police were called. Apologies offered. Forgiveness granted for the sake of the child. Over and over . . . until the unforgivable afternoon. Then the battles really began.

She spent many nights like this since then, lying in the dark fully clothed, waiting. And she’d had so much time to think about why it was happening. She’d gone over every interaction they’d ever had, dissecting and analyzing all her words and actions, wondering what she might have done differently. But the only thing she came up with was that she should have noticed about the movies, how he never asked her what she

wanted to see. That should have told her what kind of man he was. Sometimes it's the little things that tell the tale.

She remembered that afternoon; it was seared into her like a brand on her skin. "B" for bad mother. She remembered getting the call from Maria at work, racing home to her apartment, where she'd let the baby stay with him during her shift. She remembered hearing the wailing, unmistakable, heart-wrenching, a connection directly from her child's heart to hers as she took the stairs two at a time. She remembered bursting through the door to see him sitting on the couch, his face slack with fear. The door to the nursery was closed as if he'd shut it against the child's crying. She was sick, every membrane on fire with fear, as she threw open the door. The baby sat in her crib, bright red from crying, her arm bent horribly, unnaturally. She grabbed her child and ran, screaming, "What did you do? What did you do? Look what you've done!" He sat there, mute, his arms outspread. She didn't look at him again as she ran with her screaming, injured child in her arms.

She didn't, she couldn't wait for an ambulance. As gently as she could, she put the baby in her car seat. The little girl's cries felt like knives, cutting and killing her inside. Her own tears felt like they should be blood. She tried to keep her voice measured, cooing as she drove. "It's okay. It's okay, my love. Mommy's here. Mommy's here."

In the emergency room, the doctor took the child from her arms and she followed him as he rushed her into the belly of the hospital to the pediatric floor. She prayed; she prayed that her baby's doctor, who alternated between the Little Angels clinic and the hospital, would be here today. Her prayers were answered and in minutes her daughter was under his careful hands.

"Oh my, little girl. What has happened to you?" he said quietly. She could do nothing but stand mute beside them.

"Mom," he said gently. He never used her name when he was attending to the baby. "I know this is scary, but I'm going to ask you to

go wait outside so that I can fix this little munchkin right up. You're very upset and frightened right now and she knows that, she can feel it. Can you be very brave and wait outside?"

She nodded against her will and allowed herself to be shepherded outside by a nurse. The nurse, a young woman with bright blue eyes behind thick horn-rimmed glasses, looked at her with equal parts sympathy and suspicion. There was judgment there, too. Cold and certain. Could they think I'd hurt my daughter? she wondered through the fog of her fears. Could they think that?

It seemed as if her chest would explode from the sheer force of the emotion churning there as she watched the doors to the examining room. The baby's crying had gone from screams to whimpers and then there was silence. She felt paralyzed, lashed to the orange plastic chair on which she sat, unable to bring herself to investigate the silence. Then, after a hundred years, the doctor emerged.

"She's going to be fine," he said gently, sitting beside her and putting a hand on her knee. He went on about the delicacy of a broken bone in a toddler and all the special considerations they would take when setting it and how they would need to proceed with the healing of it. The words She's going to be fine repeated in a loop in her mind until her heart had accepted the information and started to return to its normal rhythm, until her blood started its passage again, bringing her back to life. She had been suspended in her terror, hovering between life and death, until she knew her child was no longer in pain.

"It's okay," he was saying to her, looking into her eyes. "It's going to be okay."

But there was something else in his eyes, too. There was worry and there was suspicion in an expression that was normally so kind and warm.

They were at the hospital for most of the night, as the child was sedated and her arm was set in the tiniest cast. The doctor stayed with

them until it was time to go home. As she was preparing to leave, the doctor touched her arm and looked at her with an expression she couldn't read.

"You love your child more than anything, don't you?" he asked her, sounding so sad.

"More than anything."

"Are you going to be able to protect her?" It seemed like such an odd question, especially since it was the echo of the question her own aching heart was asking.

"Anybody wants to harm this child, they'll have to kill me first."

He nodded. "Let's see it doesn't come to that. Make sure you follow up on pressing those charges. And I'll see you at the clinic on Thursday—or before, if there's any problem." His voice had gone stern and she nodded obediently.

"I wish," she said as he turned away from her, "that she had a father like you."

He looked at her strangely, seemed about to say something, then decided against it. He smiled at her, a warm, comforting smile full of compassion. "So do I. So do I."

Whenever she thought of that moment, it filled her heart with a renewed hatred for the man who'd hurt her child. It cemented her resolve against his constant begging for forgiveness, his constant pleading for a minute, just a minute with the baby, and then his raging against her when she denied him. It had been an accident, hurting the baby. He'd never meant to hurt her, he claimed. He'd seemed contrite enough. But she kept thinking about what the doctor had asked her. Are you going to be able to protect her? The only way she could be sure the answer was yes is if she kept him out of their lives.

She might have been dozing a bit, but something jarred her and she transferred her grip from the phone to the baseball bat. She lay silent, adrenaline running, listening to the night. The baby shifted in

her sleep and sighed. She heard the slightest snap, more like a ping, the sound of a metal spring straining, as if the screen door were opening, ever so quietly.

He'd never been quiet before. He'd always come banging. She felt her throat tighten and she quietly got off the bed, the phone forgotten, the bat heavy in her hand. She walked to the doorjamb and peered out into the small living room of her apartment. From there she could see the front door. The lock looked too flimsy suddenly and she cursed herself for not having installed the dead bolt and chain as the police had recommended. She hadn't been able to afford it. The window beside the door was gated, but it hung over a landing that anyone could reach by a flight of stairs.

Did she just see his shadow move in front of the window? The curtains were drawn but the streetlight in the parking lot shined bright throughout the night and sometimes she could see the shadows of people passing on the way to their own apartments. She listened again and heard nothing. She was about to relax when she heard it again, that straining metal spring. Was he standing outside her door, inside the screen? Her breathing came more quickly and her chest felt heavy.

She looked at the phone she had left on the bed and thought about calling the police. But she couldn't face them coming here for nothing again. He'd already gone by the time they arrived earlier. And even though they took her report again respectfully, she was starting to feel like the little boy who cried wolf. If she called them again, and it really was nothing, she'd be so embarrassed. She gripped the bat with both hands and moved toward the door.

She moved quietly, slowly. He'd always come loudly, she reminded herself. He'd never tried to quietly break in and hurt them. Or her other worst nightmare, steal her baby. In the area, three children had gone missing in the last year. Every night, their little faces looked out at her from the television screen, their bright smiles, their sweet eyes like a haunting. Gone from their homes, each of them. None of them found,

not even a trail to be followed. Every once in a while she'd hear on the news that there'd been a sighting in a mall or at a rest stop or an amusement park. But then the lead would go nowhere. She thought more than a little about those parents, the gaping holes in their chests, their lifetime of horrible questions and unspeakable imaginings. Maybe the only thing that kept them alive was hope, the only thing that kept the razors from their wrists and the guns from their mouths was the idea that they'd open their doors one day and see their child again. She couldn't imagine the crippling grief for a child who might be alive somewhere, unreachable, or might be dead . . . never knowing what would be worse.

She was close to the door now, just three feet away, standing beside her secondhand couch. She hadn't heard anything as she crept toward the door, so she stood frozen like a statue with the bat poised.

O N E

It's dark in that awful way that allows you to make out objects but not the black spaces behind them. My breathing comes ragged from exertion and fear. The only person I trust in the world lies on the floor beside me. I lean into him and hear that he's still breathing but it's shallow and hard won. He's hurt, I know. But I can't see how badly. I whisper his name in his ear but he doesn't respond. I feel his body but there's no blood that I can tell. The sound of his body hitting the floor minutes before was the worst thing I've ever heard.

I feel the floor around him, looking for his gun. After a few seconds I feel the cool metal beneath my fingertips and I almost weep with relief. But there's no time for that now.

I can hear the rain falling outside the burned-out building, its loud, heavy drops smacking on canvas. It's falling inside, too, trickling in through gaping holes in the roof down through floors of rotted wood and broken staircases. He moves and issues a low groan. I hear him say my name and I lean in close to him again.

"It's okay. We're going to be okay," I tell him, even though I don't have any reason to believe this is true. Somewhere outside or up above us a man I thought I loved, along with other men whom I couldn't identify, are trying to kill us, to protect an awful truth that I've discovered. I am hurt myself, in so much pain that I might pass

out if I didn't know it meant dying here in this condemned building on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. There's something embedded in my right thigh. It's possibly a bullet, or a large spike of wood, or maybe a nail. It's so dark I can just barely see the large hole in my jeans, and the denim is black with my blood. I'm dizzy, the world tilting, but I'm holding on.

I hear them up above us now, see the beams of their flashlights crossing in the dark through the holes in the floors. I try to control my breathing, which to my own ears sounds as loud as an oncoming train. I hear one of the men say to the others, "I think they fell through. They're on the bottom." There was no answer but I can hear them making their way down over creaking wood.

He stirs. "They're coming," he says, his voice little more than a rasp. "Get out of here, Ridley."

I don't answer him. We both know I'm not leaving. I pull at him and he tries to get up, but the pain registers on his face louder than the scream I know he suppressed to protect us for a few minutes more. If we're not walking out of here together, we're not walking out at all. I drag him, even though I know I shouldn't be moving him, over behind an old moldy couch that lies on its back by the wall. It's not far but I can see his face white and gritted in terrible pain. As I move him, he loses consciousness again and in an instant feels fifty pounds heavier. But I've seen all four of his limbs move and that's something. I realize that I'm praying as I pull him, my leg on fire, my strength waning. *Please God, please God, please God*, over and over again like a mantra.

The way the couch is lying, it forms a crawl space against the wall just big enough for the two of us. I pull him in there and lie on my belly beside him. I pull an old crate over toward the edge of the couch and look through the wooden slats. They're closer now and I'm sure they've heard us because they've stopped talking and turned their flashlights off. I hold the gun in both hands and wait.

I've never fired a gun before and I don't know how many bullets are left in this one. I think we're going to die here.

"Ridley, please, don't do this." The voice echoes in the dark and comes from up above me. "We can work this out."

I don't answer. I know it's a trick. Nothing about this can be worked out now; we're all too far gone. There have been plenty of chances to close my eyes and go back to the sleep of my life as it was, but I haven't taken any of them. Do I wish now that I had? It's hard to answer that question, as the wraiths move closer.

"Six," he whispers.

"What?"

"You have six bullets left."