

ONE

The Present

It was barely eight A.M. and the phone was already ringing. Caroline could make out the distinctive three-ring chime that signaled a long-distance call even with the bathroom door closed and the shower running. She chose to ignore it, deciding it was probably a telemarketer or the press. Either alternative was odious, but given a choice between the two, Caroline would have opted for the telemarketer. Telemarketers were only after your money. The press wanted your blood.

Even after all this time.

Fifteen years tomorrow.

She buried her head under the shower's hot spray, the lather of her shampoo oozing across her closed eyes and down her cheeks. That couldn't be right. How could fifteen years of seemingly endless days and sleepless nights have passed by so quickly? At the very least, she would have thought public curiosity in her would have waned by now. But if anything, such interest had actually increased with each successive anniversary. Reporters had been calling for weeks, some

from as far away as Australia and Japan: What was her life like now? Were there any new leads? Any new men? Another suicide, perhaps? Did she still harbor hopes of seeing her daughter again? Did the police still consider her a suspect in the child's disappearance?

Except Samantha would no longer be a child. Barely two when she'd vanished without a trace from her crib at an upscale Mexican resort while, according to the press, *her parents cavorted with friends at a nearby restaurant*, her daughter would be seventeen now.

Assuming she was still alive.

So, in answer to some of their questions: there were no new leads; she would never give up hope; she no longer gave a hoot what the police thought about her; and her life would be a lot better if the vultures of the press would leave her the hell alone.

Her head bowed, water dripping from her nose and chin, Caroline reached up to turn off the shower taps, satisfied that the phone's intrusive ringing had finally stopped. She understood it was just a temporary respite. Whoever had called would call again. They always did.

Stepping onto the heated white-and-gray marble floor of her bathroom, she wrapped herself in her white terry-cloth bathrobe and swiped at the layer of steam that coated the large mirror above the double sink with the palm of her hand. A forty-six-year-old woman with wet brown hair and tired green eyes stared back at her, a far cry from the "beautiful" and "reserved" young woman "with haunted eyes" that the newspapers had described at the time of Samantha's disappearance, somehow managing to make the words "beautiful" and "reserved" ugly and accusatory. Around the ten-year mark, "beautiful" became "striking" and "reserved" morphed into "remote." And last year, a reporter had demoted her further, referring to her as "a still attractive middle-aged woman." Damning her with faint praise, but damning her nonetheless.

Whatever. She was used to it.

Caroline rubbed her scalp vigorously with a thick white towel, watching her new haircut fall limply around her chin. The hair-

dresser had promised the bob would result in a more youthful appearance, but he hadn't reckoned on the stubborn fineness of Caroline's hair, which refused to do anything other than just lie there. Caroline took a deep breath, deciding that tomorrow's press clippings would probably describe her as "the *once* attractive mother of missing child Samantha Shipley."

Did it even matter what she looked like? Would she be any less guilty—of neglect, of bad parenting, of *murder*—in the court of public opinion because she was less attractive than she'd been at the time of her daughter's disappearance? Then, she'd been excoriated in the press for everything from the cut of her cheekbones to the shortness of her skirts, from the shine of her shoulder-length hair to the sheen of her lipstick. Even the sincerity of her tears had been called into question, one tabloid commenting that at one press conference, her mascara had remained "curiously undisturbed."

Her husband had received only a tiny fraction of the vitriol that had come Caroline's way. As handsome as Hunter was, there was a blandness about his good looks that made him less of a target. While Caroline's natural shyness had the unfortunate tendency to come across as aloof, Hunter's more outgoing personality had made him seem both accessible and open. He was portrayed as a father "barely holding himself together" while "clinging tight to his older daughter, Michelle, a cherub-cheeked child of five," his wife standing "ramrod straight beside them, separate and apart."

No mention of the fact that it had been at Hunter's insistence that they went out that night, even after the babysitter they'd hired failed to show. No mention of the fact that he'd left Mexico to return to his law practice in San Diego barely a week after Samantha's disappearance. No mention of the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back," the final betrayal that had doomed their marriage once and for all.

Except that had been her fault, too.

"Everything, my fault," Caroline said to her reflection, withdrawing her hair dryer from the drawer underneath the sink and point-

ing it at her head like a gun. She flicked the “on” switch, shooting a blast of hot air directly into her ear.

The ringing started almost immediately. It took a second for Caroline to realize it was the phone. One long ring, followed by two shorter ones, indicating another long-distance call. “Go away,” she shouted toward her bedroom. Then, “Oh, hell.” She turned off the hair dryer and marched into the bedroom, grabbing the phone from the nightstand beside her king-size bed, careful not to so much as glance at the morning newspaper lying atop the crumpled sheets. “Hello.”

Silence, followed by a busy signal.

“Great.” She returned the phone to its charger, her eyes pulled inexorably toward the newspaper’s front page. There, next to the yearly rehashing of every awful fact and sordid innuendo that had been printed over the last fifteen years, the rewording of every salacious detail—“Adultery!” “Suicide!” “True Confessions!”—was a large photograph of two-year-old Samantha, smiling up at her from beside an artist’s sketch of what her daughter might look like today. Similar sketches had been plastered all over the Internet for the past two weeks. Caroline sank to the bed, her legs too weak to sustain her. The phone rang again and she lunged for it, picking it up before it could complete its first ring. “Please. Just leave me alone,” she said.

“I take it you’ve seen the morning paper,” the familiar voice said. The voice belonged to Peggy Banack, director of the Marigold Hospice, a twelve-bed facility for the terminally ill in the heart of San Diego. Peggy had been Caroline’s best friend for the last thirty years and her only friend for the last fifteen.

“Hard to miss.” Again Caroline struggled not to look at the front page.

“Asshole writes the same thing every year. Are you all right?”

Caroline shrugged. “I guess. Where are you?”

“At work.”

Of course, Caroline thought. *Where else would Peggy be at eight o’clock on a Monday morning?*

"Listen, I hate to bother you with this," Peggy said, "especially now . . ."

"What is it?"

"I was just wondering . . . Has Michelle left yet?"

"Michelle's at her father's. She's been staying there a lot since the baby . . ." Caroline took a deep breath to keep from gagging. "Was she supposed to work this morning?"

"She's probably on her way."

Caroline nodded, punching in the numbers for Michelle's cell as soon as she said goodbye to Peggy. Surely even someone as headstrong and self-destructive as her daughter wouldn't be foolish enough to skip out on her court-mandated community service.

"Hi, it's Micki," her daughter's voice announced in tones so breathy that Caroline barely recognized her. "Leave a message."

Not even a "please," Caroline thought, bristling at the nickname "Micki" and wondering if that was the reason her daughter had taken to using it. "Michelle," she said pointedly, "Peggy just called. Apparently you're late for your shift. Where are you?" She hung up the phone, took a deep breath, then called Hunter's landline, determined not to be negative. Maybe her daughter's alarm clock had failed to go off. Maybe her bus was running late. Maybe she was, right this minute, walking through the doors of the hospice.

Or maybe she's sleeping off another late night of partying, intruded the uninvited voice of reality. Maybe she'd had another few too many before getting behind the wheel of her car, ignoring both her recent arrest for driving under the influence and the suspension of her license. Maybe the police had pulled her over, effectively scuttling the deal her father had worked out with the assistant district attorney, a deal that allowed her to avoid jail time in exchange for several hundred hours of community service. "Damn it, Michelle. Can you really be that irresponsible?" Caroline realized only as she spoke that someone was already on the other end of the line.

"Caroline?" her ex-husband asked.

“Hunter,” Caroline said in return, his name teetering uncomfortably on her tongue. “How are you?”

“Okay. You?”

“Hanging in.”

“Have you seen the morning paper?”

“Yes.”

“Not an easy time of year,” he said, always good at stating the obvious.

“No.” *Although you seem to be managing rather well*, she thought. A young wife, a two-year-old son, a new baby girl to replace the one he’d lost. “Is Michelle there?”

“I believe she’s helping Diana with the baby.”

As if on cue, an infant’s frantic wails raced toward the receiver. Caroline closed her eyes, trying not to picture this latest addition to Hunter’s family. “Peggy called. Michelle’s supposed to be at the hospice.”

“Really? I thought she was going in this afternoon. Hold on a minute. Micki,” Hunter called loudly. “It’s probably just a misunderstanding.”

“Probably,” Caroline repeated without conviction.

“What did you think of the sketch?” Hunter surprised her by asking.

Caroline felt her breath freeze in her lungs, amazed that her former husband could manage to sound so matter-of-fact, as if he was referring to an abstract work of art and not a picture of their missing child. “I—It’s—” she stammered, her eyes darting between the photograph and the drawing. “They’ve given her your jaw.”

Hunter made a sound halfway between a laugh and a sigh. “That’s funny. Diana said the same thing.”

Oh, God, Caroline thought.

“What’s up?” Caroline heard Michelle ask her father.

“It’s your mother,” Hunter said, his voice retreating as he handed Michelle the phone. “Apparently you’re supposed to be at the hospice.”

"I'm going in this afternoon," Michelle told her mother, the breathy whisper of her voice mail nowhere in evidence.

"You can't just go in whenever you feel like it," Caroline said.

"Really? That's not how it works?"

"Michelle . . ."

"Relax, Mother. I switched shifts with another girl."

"Well, she hasn't shown up."

"She will. Don't worry. Anything else?"

"You should probably call Peggy, let her know . . ."

"Thanks. I'll do that."

"Michelle . . ."

"Yeah?"

"I was thinking, maybe we could go out for dinner tonight . . ."

"Can't. Have plans with my friend Emma."

"Emma?" Caroline repeated, trying to disguise her disappointment. "Have I met her?"

"Only half a dozen times."

"Really? I don't remember . . ."

"That's because you never remember any of my friends."

"That's not true."

"Sure it is. Anyway, gotta go. Talk to you later."

The line went dead in Caroline's hand. She dropped the phone to the bed, watching it disappear amid the rumpled white sheets. "Damn it." Was Michelle right? Her daughter had always had a lot of friends, although none of them seemed to stick around for very long, making it hard to keep track. Something else to feel guilty about.

She checked the clock, noting it was closing in on eight-thirty. She had to be in school in half an hour. She pushed herself to her feet, already exhausted by the thought of twenty-three less-than-eager students slouched behind their desks, glazed eyes staring up at her, their dislike for the subject obvious and unequivocal.

How could they not love math? she wondered. There was something so glorious, so pure, so true, about mathematics. Her father

had been a math teacher and had passed his passion for it down to her. It was about more than just solving puzzles and finding solutions. In an irrational world so full of ambiguity, so fraught with happenstance, she'd basked in the absoluteness of it, taken comfort in the fact there was no room for either interpretation or equivocation, that there was always only *one* right answer and its rightness could be *proved*. Another sign, Michelle would undoubtedly argue, and had on more than one occasion, that mathematics bore absolutely no relationship to real life.

Caroline returned to the bathroom and finished drying her hair. Then she put on the navy skirt and white silk blouse she'd laid out the night before. "Don't you have anything else to wear?" Michelle had once asked.

"Don't you?" Caroline had countered, indicating her daughter's standard uniform of skinny jeans and oversized T-shirt. Like many young women of her generation, Michelle was an ardent follower of the latest trends in fashion, fad diets, and exercise regimens. "Everything in moderation" was a concept as foreign to her as algebra.

"Okay," Caroline said to herself. "Time to get moving." She was already running late. She said a silent prayer there'd still be a pot of coffee brewing in the staff room. She could tolerate a lot of things, but a day without coffee wasn't one of them.

The phone started ringing just as she was heading out the door. The first ring was immediately followed by two shorter ones, indicating yet another long-distance call, likely the same person who'd phoned earlier. "Don't answer it," Caroline said, this time out loud. But she was already walking toward the kitchen, pulled toward the sound as if by a magnet. She picked the phone up in the middle of its fourth ring. "Hello?"

Silence.

"Hello?"

The sound of breathing.

Great, Caroline thought. Just what I need—an obscene caller. Long

distance, no less. "I'm going to hang up now," she announced, lowering the phone.

"Wait."

She brought the phone back to her ear. "Did you say something?"
Silence.

"Okay. I'm hanging up now."

"No. Please."

The voice belonged to a young girl, possibly a child. There was an urgency to her voice, something at once strange and familiar that made Caroline stay on the line. "Who is this?"

Another silence.

"Look. I really don't have time for this . . ."

"Is this the home of Caroline Shipley?" the girl asked.

"Yes."

"Are you Caroline Shipley?" she continued.

"Are you a reporter?"

"No."

"Who are you?"

"Are you Caroline Shipley?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

Yet another silence.

"Who is this?" Caroline repeated. "What do you want? I'm hanging up . . ."

"My name is Lili."

Caroline mentally raced through the class lists of all her students, past and present, trying to match a face to the name, but she came up empty. Could this be another one of Michelle's friends she didn't remember? "What can I do for you, Lili?"

"I probably shouldn't be calling . . ."

"What do you want?" Why was she still on the phone, for heaven's sake? Why didn't she just hang up?

"I think . . ."

"Yes?"

“I’ve been looking at the sketches on the Internet.” Lili paused. “You know . . . of your daughter.”

Caroline lowered her head. *Here it comes*, she thought. It happened every year at this time. Five years ago, a man had called from Florida, claiming his new neighbor’s daughter bore a suspicious resemblance to recent sketches of Samantha. Caroline immediately took off for Miami, missing all three of Michelle’s performances in her high school’s production of *Oliver!*, only to have her hopes dashed when the man’s suspicions proved groundless. The following year a woman reported seeing Samantha waiting in line at a Starbucks in Tacoma, Washington. Another wasted trip followed. And now, with the widespread release of the most recent sketches in the papers, on the Internet . . . “Lili . . .,” she began.

“That’s just it,” the girl interrupted as once again Caroline felt her knees go weak and her breath turn to ice in her chest. “I don’t think Lili is my name.” Another silence. “I think my real name is Samantha. I think I’m your daughter.”