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The background of the cover is a painting of a suburban street at night. The scene is dimly lit, with a blue car parked in a driveway in the center. Houses with lit windows and a utility pole are visible. The overall mood is mysterious and atmospheric.

MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

a novel

RILEY SAGER

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of
THE ONLY ONE LEFT

ALSO BY RILEY SAGER

Final Girls

The Last Time I Lied

Lock Every Door

Home Before Dark

Survive the Night

The House Across the Lake

The Only One Left



MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

A NOVEL

RILEY SAGER



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147271499

To Patricia Cole,
I think you would have loved this one.

Saturday, July 16, 1994
6:37 a.m.

Morning sunlight seeps into the tent like a water leak, dripping onto the boy in a muted glow. The trickle of light on his cheeks wakes him from a deep slumber. He opens his eyes, just a little, his vision hazy through a web of lashes still sticky with sleep. Peering up at light tinted orange by the tent's fabric, he tries to pinpoint the position of the sun, wondering what time it is and if his mother is already awake, sipping coffee in the kitchen, waiting for them to come in for breakfast.

It's stuffy inside the tent. The July heat never abated during the night and now fills the air, thick and heavy. He'd wanted to keep the tent flap open while they slept, but his father said mosquitoes could get in. So the flap remains zipped shut, trapping the heat, which mingles with the distinct smells of boys in summertime. Grass and sweat, bug spray and sunblock, morning breath and body odor.

He wrinkles his nose at the smell and feels a pop of sweat on his brow as he rolls over in his sleeping bag. It feels safe. Like a hug.

Although awake, he doesn't want to get up just yet. He prefers to stay exactly where he is, as he is. A boy on a lazy Saturday morning, smack-dab in the middle of a lazy summer.

His name is Ethan Marsh.

He is ten.

And this is the last carefree moment he'll have for the next thirty years.

Because just as he's about to close his eyes again, he notices another bit of light. A bright vertical slit glowing on the side of the tent.

Strange.

Strange enough to make him sit up, eyes now fully open, taking in the single slash in the fabric that runs from the top of the tent all the way to the ground. It's slightly puckered, like skin that's just been sliced. Through the gap, he sees a sliver of familiar yard. Freshly cut grass. Light blue sky. The glare of sun that's only just now clearing the distant trees.

Seeing it, Ethan is hit by a realization he's vaguely known since waking but is only now beginning to understand.

He is in a tent.

In his own backyard.

Completely alone.

But when he went to sleep the night before, there had been someone else with him.

Someone now gone.

ONE

S*criiiiiit*ch.

I wake with a start, unnerved by the sound zipping across the dark room. It echoes off the walls and snakes back to me in multiple waves. I lie in bed, completely still, eyes wide open, until the noise fades.

Not that it was ever there to begin with.

Decades of experience have taught me that it was just in my head. Dream, memory, and hallucination all at once. My first since coming back to this house. Honestly, I'm surprised it took so long, especially with the anniversary of what happened here fast approaching.

Sitting up, I look to the clock on the nightstand, hoping it reads closer to dawn than midnight. No such luck. It's only quarter after two. I've got a long night of no sleep ahead of me. With a sigh, I reach for the notebook and pen I keep next to the clock. After much squinting in the darkness, I find a fresh page and scribble four frustrating words.

Had The Dream again.

I toss the notebook back onto the nightstand, followed by the pen. It lands with a clack against the notebook's cover before rolling onto the carpet. I tell myself to leave the pen there until morning. That nothing will happen to it overnight. But the bad thoughts arrive quickly. What if the pen leaks, its midnight-black ink staining the cream-colored carpet? What if I'm attacked in the middle of the night and the only thing I can use to defend myself is an uncapped Bic, which now sits out of reach?

That second one, as alarming as it is improbable, pulls me out of bed. I grab the pen and set it on the notebook. There. *Much* better.

Anxiety soothed—for now—I'm about to crawl back under the covers when something outside catches my attention.

A light.

Not unusual for Hemlock Circle. Despite the lack of streetlights, it's never completely dark here. Light spills through bay windows onto immaculate front lawns and brightens second-floor bedrooms before the sun rises and long after it sets. The sconces flanking the Chens' front door burn from dusk to dawn, warding off both trespassers and the bats that occasionally try to roost in the eaves. All summer long, the Wallaces' backyard pool glows an alien blue. At Christmas, lights twinkle at five of the six homes in the neighborhood, including the Patels', who put theirs up at Diwali and don't take them down until a new year begins.

Then there are the garage lights.

Every house has them.

A pair of motion-activated security lights centered above the garage doors that glare like headlights when triggered. In the evenings, they flick on and off around the cul-de-sac with the frequency of fireflies as residents return from work in the waning light, go out to fetch the mail, haul recycling bins to the curb.

As it gets closer to midnight, a few will continue to spring to life. When deer skulk through the neighborhood on their way to the woods. Or when Fritz Van de Veer sneaks out for a cigarette after his wife, Alice, has gone to bed.

The light that's caught my attention is the one above the Patels' garage, two houses away. It illuminates a patch of their driveway, the glow turning the asphalt ice white. Curious, I go to one of the windows in a bedroom I still don't consider my own. Not technically. The room that once was mine, and in my mind still is, sits across the hall, now vacant. This is my parents' bedroom, where I rarely ventured as a child. Now, though, through a series of recent developments I'm still grappling with, it's become my own.

The windows in this new room offer a panorama of Hemlock Circle. From where I stand, I can see at least a piece of every house on the cul-de-sac. I glimpse a sliver of the old Barringer place on the left and a corner of the

Chens' house to the right. Across from me, in full view from left to right, are the Van de Veers', the Wallaces', and the Patels', where the garage light still glows.

What I *don't* see is anything that could have set it off. Mitesh and Deepika Patel are presumably inside and fast asleep. No animals scurry from the light. No wind blows that could have caused a nearby branch to sway hard enough to trigger the motion sensor. All I can see is an empty driveway on a quiet cul-de-sac in the dead of night.

Soon I can't even see that, for the Patels' garage light suddenly goes out.

Ten seconds later, the one at the Wallaces' house clicks on. It's next door to the Patels', separated by the single road that leads into the cul-de-sac, which is currently free of cars, free of people, free of anything.

I draw close to the window, my nose almost touching the glass, straining to see something—any small thing—that could have triggered the light above the Wallaces' garage.

There's nothing.

Nothing visible, that is.

Still, I stay pressed to the window, watching, even after the Wallaces' garage light clicks off. The only thing I can think of that could have triggered it is a bat. They thrive here, as the Chens' porch lights can attest, feeding off the many insects that live in the woods circling the cul-de-sac. They're also notoriously difficult to see in the darkness.

But then the light above the Van de Veers' garage springs to life, and I know my theory is wrong. Bats flit willy-nilly, chasing prey. They don't methodically move from house to house.

No, this is different.

This is...worrisome.

Unease spreads through my chest as I think about thirty years ago. I can't help it. Not after what happened here.

When the Van de Veers' light turns off, I begin to count.

Five seconds.

Then ten.

Then a full minute.

Long enough for me to think that whatever is out there has moved on, likely into the woods, which means it was an animal. Something simply too small and quick for me to spot, but not small and quick enough to evade the hair-trigger garage lights of the houses on Hemlock Circle. The tightness in my chest eases, and I allow myself a sigh of relief.

Then the light above the Barringers' garage turns on.

The light itself is just out of view, but the glow it throws onto the lawn and sidewalk makes my pulse do a stutter step.

Whatever's out there isn't gone.

In fact, it's getting closer.

Several scenarios pop into my head, starting with the worst, because that's my default mode. Always going straight to the most alarming, the most dire. In this case, that would be that someone is circling the cul-de-sac.

Someone I can't see but who is definitely out there.

Moving from house to house, searching for another child to snatch.

Second in line, and just a shade less worrisome, is the idea that whoever is outside has come to case Hemlock Circle, testing the security lights to see how easy it would be to break into one of the houses here.

The third scenario is that it's just someone going for a late-night walk. Someone from one of the other cul-de-sacs located in this two square miles of suburban sprawl. Someone who, like me, is riddled with insomnia and decided to try to walk it off.

But if this is just an innocent stroll, why doesn't whoever is out there make themselves visible?

The paranoid-but-logical answer is that it's *not* an innocent stroll. It's something else. Something worse. And I, as likely the only person on Hemlock Circle currently awake, owe it to everyone else to try to put a stop to it.

When the light at the Barringer house next door flicks off, I make my move. Knowing that this house is next, I hope to catch whoever it is in the act. Or at least make it known that not everyone on the cul-de-sac is asleep.

I leave my parents' bedroom and hurry down the hall to the stairs. On the first floor, my bare feet slap against hardwood as I cross the foyer to the front

door. I unlock it, fling it open, step into the warm mid-July night.

There's no one else out here.

I can tell that instantly. It's just me, breathing heavily, dressed in only a pair of boxer shorts and an LCD Soundsystem concert tee. I hear and see nothing as I cross in front of the house toward the driveway. When I round the corner, my movement triggers the security light above the garage doors, which flicks on with a faint *click*.

For a second, I think someone else has set it off and whirl around, panicked. By the time I realize it's just me, bugs have already started to swarm the garage light. I watch their incandescent spinning, feeling simultaneously foolish and on high alert.

An annoyed voice in my head that's plagued my thoughts for years now, suddenly pipes up. *Get a grip, Ethan. There's no one out here.*

Just to be certain, I stand completely still, scanning the cul-de-sac for signs of someone else. I remain there so long that the garage light eventually switches off, plunging the driveway—and me—back into darkness.

That's when I sense it. A presence, faint in the night air. It lingers in that way certain smells do. Cigar smoke. Perfume. Burnt toast. It's like someone had been here mere seconds ago. Perhaps they're still here, hidden among the trees that ring Hemlock Circle, watching me.

You're being paranoid, the voice in my head tells me.

But I'm not. I can *feel* it. The same way you can tell someone is in the next room, even though they're not making a sound.

What's more unnerving is how familiar the presence seems. I don't know why. It's not like I know who's out here—if it's anyone at all. Yet the hairs on my arms stand on end, and a chill slithers through me, defying the balmy air.

Only then do I realize whose presence I'm sensing.

One I'd never thought I'd feel again.

"Billy?" I say.

Although a mere whisper, the name seems to fill the night, echoing through the restless dark, lingering long after it's been spoken. By the time it fades, I know I'm mistaken.

Such a scenario is impossible.
It can't be Billy.
He's been gone for thirty years.

TWO

I remain outside for another minute or so, waiting in the dark, desperately hoping to sense more of Billy's presence. But it's gone. Not a hint of him—or anyone else—remains.

Rather than go back to bed when I return inside, I roam the dark and silent house that both does and does not feel like home. I can't remember the last time I slept a full eight hours. For most of my life, sleep has come in fits and starts. I fall asleep quickly. An immediate plummet into sweet slumber. The problem always comes later, when I wake after only an hour or two, suddenly alert, restless, and filled with an undefinable sense of dread. This can last for several more hours before I'm able to fall back asleep. Sometimes that falling-back-to-sleep part never happens.

Chronic insomnia, my doctor calls it. I've officially had it since my twenties, although it started long before then. Over the years, I've done the sleep studies and kept a sleep journal and tried every suggested remedy. Removing the TV from my bedroom. Reading an hour before bed. Hot showers and chamomile tea and sleep stories droning on in the darkness. Nothing works. Not even sleeping pills strong enough to sedate an elephant.

Now I just accept that I'll always be awake between one and four a.m. I've grown accustomed to those dark, quiet hours in the middle of the night, when it feels like I'm the only man in the world not asleep.

Rather than waste them, I try to put those wakeful hours to good use, keeping an eye on things while everyone else sleeps. In college, I roamed dormitory halls and circled the quad, making sure all was well. When Claudia and I shared a bed, I'd watch her sleep, unnerving her every time she woke to

find me staring at her. Now that it's just me, I spend that long, lonesome stretch of night looking out the window. A one-man neighborhood watch.

Dr. Manning, the last in a long line of therapists stretching back to my teens, said it stems from a combination of guilt and anxiety.

"You can't sleep," she told me, "because you think you might miss another chance to stop something terrible from happening. And that whoever took Billy will eventually come back to take you."

She said it with the utmost sincerity, as if I hadn't already been told that a dozen times before. As if that all-too-obvious assessment would somehow allow me to sleep through the night. I pretended it was some major breakthrough, thanked her profusely, left her office, and never returned.

That was seven years ago and, contrary to what I let Dr. Manning believe, I still can't sleep.

Right now, my insomnia is manageable. I catch up on rest with midday naps, snoozing on the couch as the evening news murmurs in the background, sleeping in on Sundays until noon. That'll change when the school year starts in September. Then I'll have to be up by six, whether I've slept or not.

Tonight, though, is still mid-July, allowing me to roam from room to room. I've done nothing to the house in the week since I moved in while my parents moved out, and the place now has a disjointed, temporary feel. As if all of us—my parents, the movers, me—gave up halfway through. Most of my possessions, including half my clothes, remain in boxes stacked in corners of empty rooms, waiting to be unpacked. They're joined by everything my parents left behind—furniture that was either too big to fit into their downsized Florida condo or too unloved to make the trip.

In the dining room, chairs surround an empty space where a table should be. In the kitchen, the cabinets have been raided of most plates, utensils, and glasses, leaving only mismatched stragglers behind. In the living room, the sofa remains, but the matching armchair in which my father falls asleep every evening is gone. As is the TV. And the grandfather clock. And at least one end table, although the crystal bowl that once sat atop it now rests on the beige carpet.

Each time I notice it reminds me that I need to do something with the place. I can't let it stay like this for much longer. But I also have no desire to settle in for real, which would make this feel less like a temporary situation and more like the sad, permanent move I fear it is.

Until last week, it had been almost thirty years since I lived here full-time. I didn't go back to school the fall after Billy vanished. Rather, not the school I'd been attending. The one with familiar halls and teachers I knew and friends I never saw during the summer even though we lived only a mile or so apart. Instead, my parents sent me to a private school in upstate New York where no one knew who I was. Or what had happened in my yard. Or how I'd rarely slept a full night since.

It was a relief living in a creaky dormitory, surrounded by boys who were blissfully incurious about me. I used that to my advantage, blending in with the crowd until I graduated. No one noticed me, and I made every attempt to keep it that way. The few close friends I did have were still kept at arm's length when it came to Billy. Even though I told no one about him, they couldn't help but notice how gloomy I got right before the holidays or summer breaks—and how happy I was to be back at school when they ended.

I think my friends assumed I hated my parents. The truth was that I hated this house. I hated being reminded of what happened here. I hated waking up in the middle of the night, looking out my bedroom window, and seeing the same patch of grass where Billy vanished. Most of all, I hated the guilty feeling that overcame me every time it happened.

Billy was gone.

I was still here.

Somehow, that didn't seem right.

When it came time to choose a college, I picked one even farther away from home. Northwestern. There, it was even easier to blend in with the crowds of students tramping through golden summers and brutal winters. I fell in with a group of misfits. The same kind of video game geeks and comic book nerds who are popular now but definitely weren't back then. Even among them, I was bit of an outcast, preferring books to Game Boys, quiet gatherings to parties.