

**BEST
HOUSE
ON THE
BLOCK**

A THRILLER

T.R. RAGAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PRAISE FOR T.R. RAGAN

Such a Beautiful Family

“Readers will keep turning the pages to see what happens next. Ragan consistently delivers the goods.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Count to Three

“This heartbreaking tale of child abduction and a mother’s tireless devotion will resonate with many.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“As brutal and intriguing as episodes of *You* . . . the story is captivating and the writing genuinely thrilling . . . *Count to Three* keeps the suspense up and threatens that the tides could turn at any time.”

—Associated Press

Don’t Make a Sound

“Those who like to see evil men get their just deserts will look forward to Sawyer’s further exploits.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Overall, a great crime read.”

—*Manhattan Book Review*

“[A] dizzying flurry of twists and turns in a plot as intricate as a Swiss watch . . . Ragan’s warrior women are on fire, fueled by howling levels of personal pain.”

—*Sactown Magazine*

“A heart-stopping read. Ragan’s compelling blend of strained family ties and small-town secrets will keep you racing to the end!”

—Lisa Gardner, *New York Times* bestselling author of *When You See Me*

“An exciting start to a new series with a feisty and unforgettable heroine in Sawyer Brooks. Just when you think you’ve figured out the dark secrets of River Rock, T.R. Ragan hits you with another sucker punch.”

—Lisa Gray, bestselling author of *Thin Air*

“Fans of Lizzy Gardner, Faith McMann, and Jessie Cole are in for a real treat with T.R. Ragan’s *Don’t Make a Sound*, the start of a brand-new series that features tenacious crime reporter Sawyer Brooks, whose own past could be her biggest story yet. Ragan once more delivers on her trademark action, pacing, and twists.”

—Loreth Anne White, bestselling author of *In the Dark*

“T.R. Ragan takes the revenge thriller to the next level in the gritty and chillingly realistic *Don’t Make a Sound*. Ragan masterfully crafts one unexpected twist after another until the shocking finale.”

—Steven Konkoly, bestselling author of *The Rescue*

“T.R. Ragan delivers in her new thrilling series. *Don’t Make a Sound* introduces crime reporter Sawyer Brooks, a complex and compelling heroine determined to stop a killer as murders in her past and present collide.”

—Melinda Leigh, #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author

Her Last Day

“Intricately plotted . . . The tense plot builds to a startling and satisfying resolution.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Ragan’s newest novel is exciting and intriguing from the very beginning . . . Readers will race to finish the book, wanting to know the outcome and see justice served.”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“*Her Last Day* is a fast-moving thriller about a woman seeking answers and the man determined to help her find them.”

—*New York Journal of Books*

“If you like serial-killer thrillers that genuinely thrill and have plenty of depth, now’s the time to discover Jessie Cole and T.R. Ragan. Dare you not to read this one in one sitting!”

—Criminal Element

“T.R. Ragan provides a complicated mystery with plenty of atmosphere, gore, and dead bodies to satisfy readers. This is not a cozy, but a hard-core mystery with a variety of victims, an egotistical killer, and a high-powered ending.”

—*Gumshoe Review*

“[*Her Last Day*] hooks you instantaneously; it’s fast and furious with a pace that never lets up for one minute.”

—*Novelgossip*

“Readers will obsess over T.R. Ragan’s new, tenacious heroine. I can’t wait for the next in the series!”

—Kendra Elliot, author of *Wall Street Journal* bestsellers *Spiraled* and *Targeted*

“With action-packed twists and turns and a pace that doesn’t let up until the thrilling conclusion, *Her Last Day* is a brilliant start to a gripping new series from T.R. Ragan.”

—Robert Bryndza, #1 international bestselling author of *The Girl in the Ice*

**BEST
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OTHER TITLES BY T.R. RAGAN

Stand-Alone Novels

Such a Beautiful Family

Count to Three

Sawyer Brooks Series

Don't Make a Sound

Out of Her Mind

No Going Back

Jessie Cole Series

Her Last Day

Deadly Recall

Deranged

Buried Deep

Faith McMann Trilogy

Furious

Outrage

Wrath

Lizzy Gardner Series

Abducted

Dead Weight

A Dark Mind

Obsessed

Almost Dead

Evil Never Dies

Writing as Theresa Ragan

Return of the Rose

A Knight in Central Park

Taming Mad Max

Finding Kate Huntley

Having My Baby

An Offer He Can't Refuse

Here Comes the Bride

I Will Wait for You (a novella)

Dead Man Running

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T.R. RAGAN

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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**BEST
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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

DON'T EVER GIVE UP ON YOUR DREAMS!

When I set out to write my first novel more than thirty years ago, my goal was to someday see my book on the shelves at a brick-and-mortar bookstore. My first novel, *Return of the Rose*, took me five years to research and write. I enrolled in creative writing classes, joined my local chapter of Romance Writers of America, critiqued with other authors, and went to every workshop possible while raising four children. I wrote in the car, in the bedroom, in the dining room, late at night, and early in the morning. I kept a recorder in my nightstand in case I awoke with an idea for a scene. I read every night and I still do. I sent proposals to agents and editors, cried when I read the rejections, and jumped out of my seat every time the phone rang.

I haven't seen one of my books in a bookstore yet. (It still could happen!) But that's okay because bigger dreams awaited me. My stories have allowed me to connect with literary agents, editors, and millions of readers—people who appreciate my vision, understand my characters, and continue to ask for more.

Writing fiction is not for the faint of heart. Dreams take passion, hard work, determination, and an unwavering belief in yourself.

Never stop believing. You can do it!

PROLOGUE

Behind the wheel of his silver Toyota Highlander, he sank into the seat, feeling meh about his job and life in general. The car's brakes squealed as he came to a stop. The glare of the sun piercing through the windshield didn't help his headache, the lingering effect from drinking too much wine last night. He and his wife had often talked about cutting back on their alcohol consumption, even quitting altogether, but it was just that—talk. Even as the rich, oaky flavors swirled around his tongue, he'd known they would never do it. Wine was one of the few things in life that helped to make the world tolerable.

It was lunchtime. Tired of eating at his desk, he had decided to run an errand, one of many on a never-ending list. He would grab a burger and eat in the car. As he drove toward town, he made a sudden right turn, hoping that the brief detour might shake things up enough to jolt him out of the rut it felt he'd been in lately. He inwardly laughed at how stupid the idea was. Basically, his "detour" was the short path to town, taking him through a less than desirable neighborhood. He'd been this way before. The abandoned street was littered with more grocery carts than cars. Nothing moved but a swirl of crumpled papers and plastic.

He blinked twice and nearly slammed on his brakes when he saw a toddler wobble out of a neglected, one-story house—a run-down structure with two broken windows and what looked like a bedsheet serving as a curtain inside. The kid teetered across the weed-choked lawn and headed for the street.

Panicked for the kid's safety, he pulled to the curb before the child reached it. He looked over his shoulder, sure someone would run out their front door at any moment. But nobody came. The toddler had curly hair, was one or two years of age, he guessed. Boy or girl? He wasn't sure. For some reason, he leaned toward boy.

The beat of his heart felt like a drumroll inside his chest as he glanced in the rearview mirror, then left to right. Nobody was around. He kept waiting for a harried parent or babysitter to shout from some distant nook or cranny, but that didn't happen.

What should I do? His hands shook as he opened the center console, reached into one of two brown bags, and grabbed a lollipop, a cherry one. He opened the door right as the kid

ran past, climbed out, and said, “Hey there. What are you doing?”

The child looked over his shoulder at him, giggling as if this were a game, and kept moving.

“I have candy! Want a lollipop?”

The kid stopped, looked his way again, his eyes locking on the lollipop.

“It’s yours if you want it.” His heart was beating so fast he was sure it would explode. If the kid had continued in the direction he’d been going, a car could have hit him. Or worse, someone with bad intentions might have scooped him right up. As he wagged the lollipop, he glanced about at all the houses with windows he couldn’t see through. “You don’t want it? Should I give it to another kid?”

The child turned away as if going over his options, then pivoted and headed straight for him. The kid was so damn cute. From the looks of things, judging by the hand movements and the trouble he seemed to have with balance and shifting his weight, he had been walking for only a few months. Hardly over a year old? His adrenaline spiked as the toddler wobbled closer, almost within reach.

He didn’t think, merely acted. He grabbed the kid and jumped into his car. Snug behind the steering wheel with the kid on his lap, and without another look around, he drove off.

The child squirmed in his arms but hardly made a peep.

Making sure to follow the speed limit, keeping his eyes on the road despite having an awkward hold of the child in his lap, he made a right at the stop sign. A few blocks later, he made a left. Upon reaching a deserted field of dead grass less than a mile from the entrance to the freeway, he pulled to the side, gravel pinging off the undercarriage as he came to a stop. He peered down and to the right as the kid looked up at him. The smile on the child’s face made something crack inside him. The corners of his mouth softened. His heart melted. The kid wasn’t afraid. Not one bit.

“Let’s put you over here, where I can buckle you in safely.” He lifted the child and set him gently on the passenger seat. The smell hit him like a tidal wave crashing against the shore—a soggy, poopy diaper. After snapping the child’s seat belt in place, he unwrapped the lollipop and handed it over. It was too big for him to choke on. The child was content; no reason to bother with the chloroform hidden away in the center console.

He took a long, deep breath. He’d done it. And yet it wasn’t over, not by a long shot. How long until the missing kid was all over the news? *Shit*. He needed to get going. What was he thinking, sitting here for so long? Another quick peek at the child brought a wave of new worries. It was illegal to have a small child in the front seat, wasn’t it? And without a safety seat, to boot. He needed to get home. Quickly. The freeway would be faster, but the

thought of taking that route frightened him. More cameras. More policemen. Right? All those vehicles with drivers. No, he would avoid the freeway and take the longer route home.

What had he done? He'd been on his way to grab a burger and run a few errands, and now this. Everything was happening too fast.

Fifteen harrowing minutes later, the adrenaline pumping through his veins finally started to slow as the garage door rattled downward and clanked against the ground, shutting out the sunlight and the fear of being caught in the act of wrongdoing. He sat motionless in the semidark, his fingers still clamped tight around the steering wheel. Was what he'd done criminal? No. Whoever was watching over the child, letting the toddler wander off into the unknown . . . *They* were the criminal.

As he worked on convincing himself he'd done nothing wrong, his breathing continued to slow and his palms finally stopped sweating.

The moment felt surreal. It was hard to believe he had done it.

"Gammy?" came a tiny voice from the passenger seat.

He looked at the child with the chubby cheeks covered with sticky goo from the lollipop and found himself mesmerized by how perfect he or she was, horrible poopy smell and all. "You and I," he said to the kid, "are going to have a wonderful life together."

The kid's toothy smile caused his chest to swell with something he hadn't felt in ages: Hope. Happiness. A chance for new beginnings.

As a kaleidoscope of thoughts swirled around inside his head, he zeroed in on the kid's teeth. He had lots of them. At least eight. Maybe more. After Oliver was born, they had spent every day obsessing over firsts: First step. First tooth. First Christmas. Oliver had died from leukemia before his first birthday.

A tear slid down the side of his face at the thought of his baby boy. They'd never ever wanted to replace Oliver. In fact, he was irreplaceable, and yet he and his wife had always planned on having lots of kids. But it wasn't to be. They'd tried everything—OI, IUI, IVF. Nothing had worked. Not even adoption, since their application was denied after discovering he'd failed to list a past bankruptcy. When he tried to explain that it had happened a long time ago and their finances had been healthy for many years, they told him it wasn't about money but about being honest. In the end, he lost the battle. As far as he was concerned, those agencies were depriving parentless children of willing parents. The system was criminal. He'd fallen into a deep depression until one day, while showering, he got an idea. He began thinking—obsessing—over finding a child to bring home.

When he told his wife about his idea, he regretted it instantly. The shame he saw in her eyes was so humiliating he dropped the idea. Months later, unexpectedly, she asked him about his plan to find them a child, only this time she wanted details. Knowing it might be

his only chance to sway her, he talked until he was blue in the face, promising her he would find a child in need, convincing her the child would be better off with parents who cared so much. They both knew they would be loving, attentive parents who would be able to give their son or daughter anything he or she needed. And that was that. Her nod spoke louder than words. *Do it.* She was ready.

And so began his search.

Every day he ate his lunch at parks and schools—anywhere small children sometimes wandered off. That was nearly two years ago. Somewhere along the way, his plan took a back seat to his rapidly increasing workload at the office. And thus, finding a child had been the furthest thing from his mind today as he drove to town to pick up the suit his wife had dropped off at the dry cleaner's last week.

"Come on," he said as he unsnapped their seat belts. "Let's get you cleaned up."

"Gammy?"

"Toys," he said happily as if he hadn't heard what the child said. "We have lots of toys inside. You're going to be a very happy kid. I promise. Welcome home."

CHAPTER ONE

Four Years Later

Sixty-five-year-old Rosella Marlow made her way up the long, curved staircase that began in the center of the foyer and ended on the second floor of her stately Victorian home, the most coveted house in the area, winner of the Best House on the Block award in 2018 and again in 2022. Last year, though, the award had gone to Chloe and Wesley Leavitt, whose house was across the street, sending shock waves through the neighborhood. At least, that's how Rosella saw it. The Fabulous Forties district in Sacramento, California, an area so named because of the numbered avenues it occupied—Fortieth through Forty-Ninth, between J Street and Folsom Boulevard—was known for its architecture, an ensemble of Tudor homes with ivy-covered walls, Colonial Revivals, countless Victorians marked by gables and steeply pitched roofs, and charming bungalows.

The Leavitt home was none of those things. It was all stucco and earth tones. No charm or character. Chloe Leavitt defined her residence as having the characteristics of an Arts and Crafts home. But where were the artistic details influenced by nature? There were no stained-glass windows or tile work with fauna motifs. The decorative wood carvings were minimal. Chloe Leavitt and her home were not worthy of such a distinctive award. To make matters worse, Chloe was in charge of judge selection this year. The whole thing was a travesty.

Rosella stopped midway up the stairs to let out a huff at the thought, but also to catch her breath. Although she did her best to eat well and exercise a few times a week, she had recently been diagnosed with osteoporosis. Her daily routine could no longer be executed with the same ease. Aching joints and sore muscles were quickly becoming the norm.

At the landing, she straightened her sore back and took some time collecting herself. A moment later, she was back in motion. The sound of her footfalls bounced off the wood floors and echoed around her as she headed for her office—what used to be her late husband Lance's favorite room, the place he went for privacy and peace of mind. As she stepped

through the wide-open double doors, her heels sank into plush carpet. Walking past a long stretch of gleaming dark wood built-in bookshelves, she made her way to the massive antique desk near the fireplace carved out of marble. When Lance was alive, the desk had faced the double doors since he'd preferred to see who came and went, despite few, if any, visitors. After he passed away, Rosella had the furniture rearranged. Now the desk faced the three enormous picture windows looking out over the neighborhood.

Rosella went to the fireplace, opened the gas valve, and lit the bar. Even in the summer months, her bones felt brittle and cold. Once the wood stacked on the grate caught fire, she shut off the starter and took a seat behind the ornate desk her husband had claimed was built sometime in the Napoleonic era and once owned by royalty. Inside the top drawer, she found the mystery letter someone had placed in her mailbox three weeks ago. She unfolded it. No name. No return address. She had received it around the same time she'd first noticed someone was watching her.

On that particular day, she'd been sitting at her desk, distracted by all the commotion going on outside with the annual Fab 40s 5k Run/Walk, which had people passing her house in droves. As she often did when her stack of mail grew too tall, she'd lit the fireplace before sifting through the mail—bills, advertisements, a postcard addressed to someone she'd never heard of—using Lance's sterling silver letter opener, the one with the snake coiled at one end, to unseal the envelopes. In quick, robotic movements, she'd touched each piece, then rolled her chair closer to the fireplace and tossed the advertisements and envelopes into the blazing fire. She'd then sorted the opened mail, unfolded a piece of paper, and read five words handwritten in big red block letters:

I Know What You Did

Perplexed, she'd scanned both sides of the paper for any hint of who the author might be. Realizing she might have tossed a possible clue into the fire, she jumped to her feet, grabbed the iron poker, and scrambled to retrieve the envelope before it went up in flames. Using the tip of the iron to poke and prod, she spotted the envelope right as the heat caused the edges to twist and curl. She reached toward the envelope, but the flames licked her palm, forcing her to draw back and watch it quickly turn to ash.

Every day since, she'd wondered who might have written the note. Was it the same person she had seen watching her from a distance? If they'd set up security cameras outside as Lance had talked about doing when he was alive, she might have caught the person already. She inhaled. She felt threatened and she didn't like it. Who was watching her, and