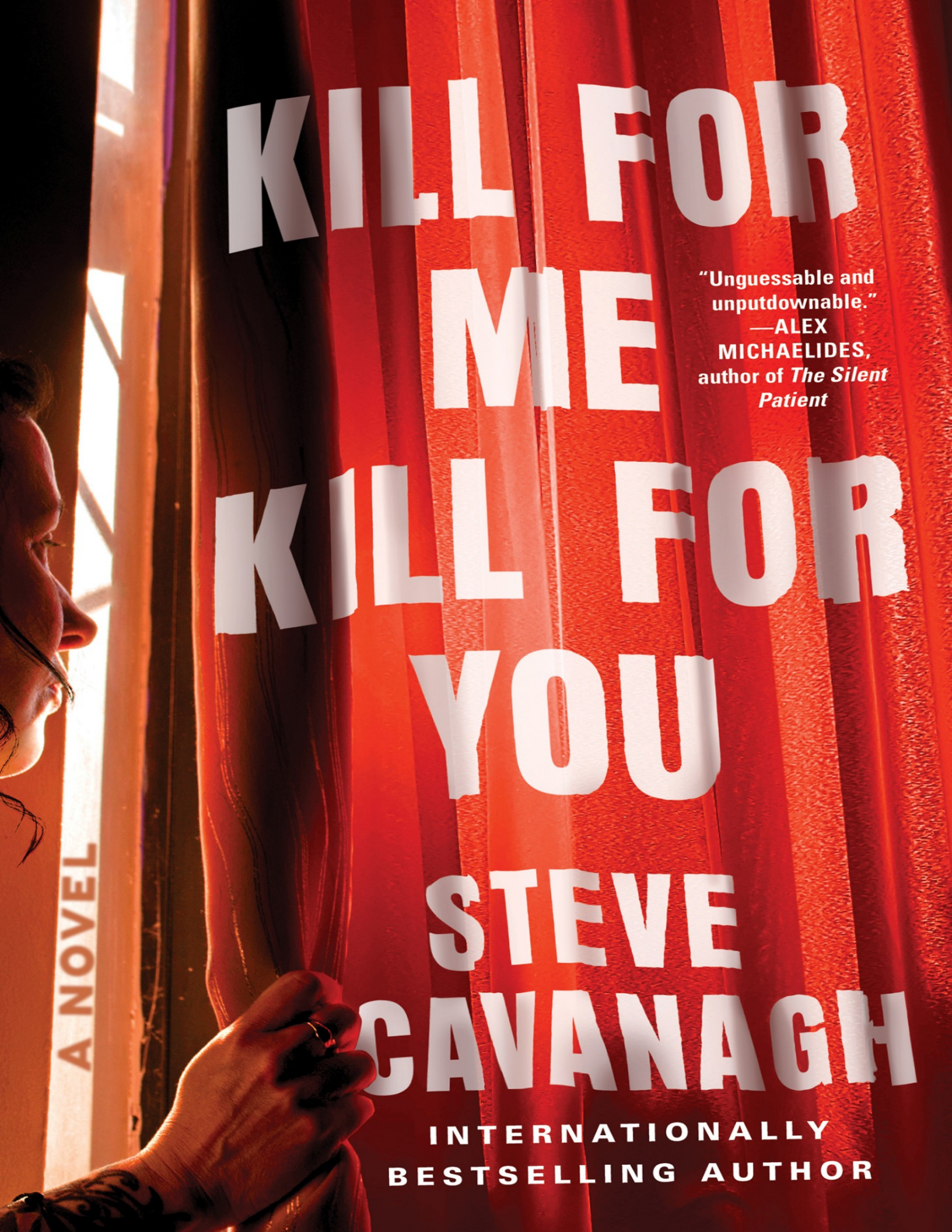




KILL FOR ME KILL FOR YOU

STEVE CAVANAGH

"Unguessable and
unputdownable."

—ALEX
MICHAELIDES,
author of *The Silent
Patient*

A NOVEL

INTERNATIONALLY
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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KILL FOR ME,
KILL FOR YOU

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KILL FOR YOU
STEVE CAVANAGH

ATRIA BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

For Marie and Tom

Stronger than lover's love is lover's hate. Incurable, in each, the wounds they make.

EURIPIDES

Revenge, the sweetest morsel to the mouth that ever was cooked in hell.

WALTER SCOTT, *THE HEART OF MIDLOTHIAN*

CHAPTER 1

AMANDA

Amanda White lifted the lid from the electric baby bottle sterilizer and stared inside at the .22-caliber revolver. It looked like the gun was sweating, its steel frame and barrel beaded with balls of hot condensation, the steam rising gently from the base. Turning away, she found her soft leather gloves, put them on, and carefully lifted the weapon clear.

The gun had to be clean today. No fingerprints. Last night she had the idea of using the sterilizer to remove any prior trace of her DNA from the weapon. It seemed fitting somehow that one of Jess's things should have a part in this. She was surprised that the sterilizer still worked. It hadn't been used since Jess's first birthday, when she'd switched her to sippy cups. She and her husband, Luis, had decided to keep the sterilizer, though, in case Jess ever had a baby brother or sister down the line.

None of that could happen now.

The heat from the sterilizer had begun to peel away the duct tape wrapped round the butt of the gun. It still felt alien in her hand. All of those days she'd driven out to the woods to practice shooting tin cans hadn't mattered. She still wasn't used to handling the weapon. She was a New York liberal. Anti-gun. A law-abiding taxpayer. Perhaps she was none of those things anymore. Death changes you.

When that death was your six-year-old girl and, a week later, your husband, there was more to it than mere grief. That kind of death didn't ride alone. It brought more dark horsemen with it: unemployment, debt, addiction and pain that at times was too great to bear. Amanda's life had imploded in loss.

She put the revolver on the dining table, dried it with kitchen towels, and loaded it with five expectant rounds of ammunition.

She only needed one of those rounds to end her suffering. It was an easy shot. Her arm would rise, the barrel level with the top of the man's head, and then... pull the trigger. She checked the clock. Six thirty in the a.m. He would be leaving his apartment soon. She needed to get ready. At seven fifteen Amanda passed through the entrance to the Ninety-Sixth Street subway station on the Upper West Side. A light rain was just beginning to fall. A man with dark hair, wearing a black overcoat, swiped his MTA card at the turnstile. Amanda waited a beat, pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her ball cap. Five more people passed through the gate before Amanda slid her card over the sensor and turned left for the platform designated *Downtown & Brooklyn*.

She skipped down two flights of stairs. Before she reached the bottom, she saw the man in the overcoat again. Side view. He had a dark beard, which he kept neat. AirPods in his ears and a thick scarf round his neck, tucked into the folds of the coat. Like the other twenty or so people on the platform, he had his head down, gazing at his cell phone. Time check. Seven nineteen. They had just missed the express to South Ferry that only stopped at Times Square, Penn Station, Fourteenth Street, and Chambers Street. If he'd taken the express, he would've had to get off at Chambers Street, then change for Flatbush to make his stop at Wall Street.

Amanda kept him in her sight line but moved behind him to his eight o'clock position. Not directly behind him, because he might pick up her reflection in the train window as she moved. Her face was mostly covered, by the cap and scarf, but she couldn't take the chance he might spot her, recognize her.

Like he had last time.

At seven twenty-one, the #1 rolled in on a blast of ice-fresh September wind. The train slowed, stopped. Amanda moved forward. A voice on the PA system announced the train's arrival. There were now maybe a hundred people spread out on the platform. Rush hour on the subway. People going about their lives, getting through the journey, thoughts of their jobs already heavy in their minds.

Not for Amanda. Not anymore.

The train doors slid open and commuters poured out. Amanda had to brush past a teenager in a school uniform and a construction worker with his hard hat clipped to his

shoulder bag. They both said something as Amanda pushed in. She didn't care. She couldn't risk the man in the overcoat making it onto the train without her, leaving her stranded on the platform. That had happened before too.

She moved forward. He was five feet ahead. The departing passengers had left room in the car, but not much. There were two of the prized orange seats left. As usual, he made for them, and managed to get one this time. Amanda turned her back on him, took hold of a pole in the center of the car, and let it fill up. Let the embarking passengers jostle her up the car a little until she was close enough to reach out and touch him. She kept her back to his seat row.

The doors closed. Bodies crushed together all around her. Yet she had enough room to turn. And she did. A half turn. There were two people standing side by side in front of the seated man in the overcoat. Their backs were to each other. An arm's width between them. The man in the overcoat started manspreading. The woman seated to his right gave him a dirty look and then swiftly returned her attention to the laptop balanced on her knees. The young man to his left was playing a video game on his phone. They ignored the man. Or tried to.

Amanda unlocked her cell phone, selected the first of the preprogrammed timers and hit START just as the train began to move.

The timer ticked down from one minute thirteen seconds—the average time between train doors closing at Ninety-Sixth Street and the doors opening again at Eighty-Sixth Street.

When she still had a job, she'd been a manager in a retirement home, having worked her way up from caregiver to the person who ran the joint for the company. She had found that if she had something to accomplish, she would only do it if she sat down and wrote out a plan. Step by step. This was how she got her degree at night school. This was how she got her promotions to supervisor, deputy manager, and then manager. This was how she planned one of her paintings or sketches, which she worked on late into the night.

This was how she planned the murder she was about to commit.

Amanda took another glance in the man's direction. She wasn't concerned he'd spot her from behind or even from the side when they were this close. He wouldn't be able to

see her face in any of the windows unless he stood up. She wore sneakers, a pair of baggy black sweatpants, a puffy coat, and a hooded sweatshirt beneath it. As covered up as she could get without standing out.

There were three stops on this train that gave her the opportunity she needed. It had to be timed perfectly. The shot coming just as the doors opened. Her aim concealed by the mass of bodies around her. Then she would scream, like others surely would, drop the gun, and run like crazy off the train. A gunshot on a crowded railcar would cause a panic, a stampede to get to safety. She would be one woman in a mass of people getting out of there, up the stairs, and straight out of the station, her head down in the crowd, and no one would be able to identify her. Not eyewitnesses, not security cameras. She would hide, perfectly, in plain sight.

The next stop would be Eighty-Sixth Street. Ten seconds left on the timer.

Ten seconds until the doors opened.

Amanda tilted her head slightly, side to side, checking to see who was getting off. She didn't want to be exposed. She needed bodies between her and the target. It looked like the pair between her and the man were staying on board.

The train slowed and stopped. A dozen people got off and a dozen more got on. A man in a business suit and raincoat carrying a half-folded golf umbrella boarded and stood beside Amanda, but with his back to her. The doors closed, the train started to move, and she hit the second timer.

One minute and twenty-two seconds until the doors would open on Seventy-Ninth Street. The longest average travel time of the three stops to Times Square. It was just one minute and fifteen between Seventy-Ninth and Seventy-Second, but Seventy-Ninth had better exits. No point in trying to estimate the average journey time from Seventy-Second to Times Square, as the train frequently slowed to let other trains through because the stop was so busy.

She'd planned for this, in detail. Now was the time.

The counter read fifty-one seconds.

Amanda took a breath, let it out slowly and put her hand in her coat pocket. Took hold of the revolver. Her gloves were thin leather, but even so it was a delicate maneuver to snake her finger through the trigger guard without the leather catching.

The two passengers beside her still had their backs to one another, preserving the gap between them. She could see the top of the target's head, pointed down, his focus centered on his cell phone.

The train slowed down.

Fifteen seconds until the train doors opened. Fifteen seconds until she pulled the trigger.

The clickety-clack rhythm of the wheels on the rails slowed down a beat as the train reduced speed.

They emerged from the tunnel. The carriage suddenly lit up. She glanced out of the window. The platform looked busy. Some people to her right made their way through the mass of bodies toward the door.

A screech of steel on steel as the brakes kicked in harder. Eight seconds.

Click-clack.

She turned toward the target. Five seconds.

Click—clack.

She took a deep breath. Held it. Three seconds.

Click——clack.

Amanda drew the hammer back on the pistol in her pocket until she heard it...

The man's head shot up. He stared straight at her.

"You," he said, rising to his feet.

Amanda tried to pull the gun but hesitated. He'd seen her. He'd spoken to her. And that would draw attention. If she shot him now, people might see her do it. Since she'd lost her family, Amanda sometimes went days without another person speaking to her. This man, Wallace Crone, was the last person she wanted to speak to her. And his voice addressing her was like being shaken out of a long dream. The train driver hit the brakes hard, throwing her off-balance.

That moment's hesitation was long enough to give Crone the advantage and ruin her chance. He stood, grabbed her by the lapels, and shouted, "Help! Police, help!"

He pushed forward and the back of Amanda's head hit one of the upright poles.

"Get off me," she said.

His face was right up close to hers. She could smell the coffee on his breath. He gritted his teeth, called out again.

“Help me! Someone call a cop!” he said.

Amanda managed to pull the gun. Held it low, out of his line of vision.

“What’s the problem here?” cried a voice. It sounded deep, authoritative. A man. A cop. Transit police. She could hear him moving toward them.

She dropped the gun, unnoticed, into the half-open golf umbrella of the businessman beside her. He promptly moved away, his eyes wide at the scene in front of him, not knowing whether to intervene and on whose behalf.

Amanda lost her balance and fell backward, Crone on top of her.

She saw the cop standing over them, pulling at Crone’s arm, asking what the hell was going on.

Crone let go, but as he got up, he said something else. Something she’d heard him say a hundred times. But now, as those words broke the silence of her loss and her loneliness, they sounded as hollow as old bones.

She hadn’t believed those words when she first heard them. She didn’t believe them now.

“I didn’t kill your daughter.”

CHAPTER 2

RUTH

Ruth Gelman poured the remains of the bottle of Pinot Grigio into her glass and instantly regretted it. Scott sat across the dining table from her, his wineglass empty for the past half hour of their Friday night meal. He'd watched her pour the wine, tipping the bottle upside down until she'd taken the final drop. But he didn't complain. The disapproving look was more than enough.

"I've had a rough day," said Ruth by way of apology.

"It's fine," he said. "I don't want to get loaded before the game anyway."

Ruth noticed he hadn't asked her about her day. He never did on these Fridays. Ruth pushed her plate away. She'd barely touched the salmon, and the asparagus lay whole on the side. Even as she had prepared the meal, the thought of sitting down to eat it was far from her mind. She had no appetite this evening. Only a thirst. Food was antithetical. It didn't help her get to that serene space after the fifth glass. Scott was going out tonight. He went out every other Friday with the guys. Poker. Bowling. Pool. Sometimes they dropped the pretense and just hit a bar.

"Poker?" she asked.

He nodded, said, "At Gordon's place."

"How is he?"

"Poor bastard has been hitting the bottle all week."

Gordon was one of Scott's oldest friends. A fellow Manhattan lawyer whose life was disintegrating. His wife, Alison, had kicked him out the week before after she found

messages on his phone from another woman. Gordon had been having an affair, and now he was paying the price.

“How are Alison and the kids?” asked Ruth.

“She won’t talk to him. You should message her and find out,” said Scott.

“So you can tell Gordon? I don’t think so. Alison and I were never close. If she reached out to me, that would be different, but I’m not fishing for information for Gordon. He’s your friend. I don’t want to get involved. And hey, don’t tell me Jack will be there.”

Rolling his eyes at the mention of Jack, Scott said, “I don’t think so. Last I heard he was still on vacation in Atlantic City.”

That was one good thing, at least. Jack was an old friend of Scott’s that he just couldn’t shake—or more likely he didn’t want to. No matter how much Ruth pressed him. They had been friends in high school, and while Scott had risen, Jack had fallen. Drugs, gambling, online fraud. If it was bad and illegal, then Jack was into it.

“Well, if Jack’s not there, at least you won’t be high when you come home,” said Ruth.

Scott sighed, rose from the table with his plate and carried it to the sink. He rinsed it and put it in the dishwasher then came back over.

“Not hungry, huh?” he said.

There was more in that question, and she knew it. They’d been trying for a baby for a few months now. At thirty-nine, Ruth thought she couldn’t put it off for much longer. She wanted kids, truly. But ideally she wanted to be in a more stable position at the real estate firm before making that jump. She didn’t want to be reliant on Scott and his income from corporate law.

“What time will you be home?” asked Ruth.

“Don’t wait up. The state that Gordon’s in, I’d expect it to be a late one. He’ll want to get wasted and forget his troubles—at least for one night.”

She nodded. He took her plate, scraped the food into the trash. He still hadn’t asked her what was wrong. It had not been anything in particular that had gotten to her that day. Just the stress of being a Manhattan real estate agent. Traversing the city, meeting potential buyers, and moving those sales. Competition was fierce and she’d lost a client during the week. Nothing unusual about it, but it hurt just the same. If she unburdened her troubles on Scott, he would feel guilty about going out with his friends. He would still go out, of course, and that might hurt Ruth even more. They’d been married five

years and nothing much had changed since they'd moved in together. Scott still had his squash games twice a week, still went out with the guys every other Friday like it was holy writ, but since he'd insisted that Ruth stop her birth control pills, he'd begun to give her dirty looks when she opened a bottle of wine.

If she opened a second bottle, she could expect to wake up the next morning to find an article waiting for her, hot from Scott's printer, beside a bowl of granola on the breakfast bar. It was invariably some study on the links between female infertility and alcohol consumption.

Ruth hardly ever went out with friends. She'd always been a little light in that department. Had been since she'd left high school. Ruth was never great at keeping friends. Always too busy with something. She had people she could call up but never did. Letting old friendships slide and not making new ones was a failing. Something she recognized. A promise to call school buddies and meet new people regularly appeared on her half-assed list of New Year's resolutions. A drink after work on occasion with some of the partners in her firm was all that she had by way of a social life.

Scott had worked in the district attorney's office as a prosecutor the first year they met. It was always going to be a temporary thing. Putting in some time to gain criminal law experience, give a little back to the community. His last six months on that job had been a series of interviews with white-shoe law firms from old money whose business now stretched across the globe. He took a position as a litigator. This was not a nine-to-five job. At first it didn't bother Ruth; a real estate agent needed to do some evening appointments too. But with Scott's friends and social life Ruth sometimes wondered where she fit into his plans other than as the little woman who would one day bear his children.

Ruth took a fresh bottle of wine from the fridge, filled her glass, and moved into the living room. She sat down on the plush couch and began channel surfing. Scott's arms folded round her shoulders and she felt his breath on her neck. First his stubble grazed her cheek and then she felt his soft lips in that sweet spot just below her ear. He stepped over the back of the couch, sat beside her and they kissed. He held her then for a time and said, "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too," said Ruth.

“No need for you to be sorry. You’re not the one being an asshole,” he said. He smiled, paused, and added, “For a change.”

Ruth giggled, grabbed a cushion and hit him on the head with it in mock offense.

“I’m never the asshole in this relationship.”

“Of course not. Look, you want me to grab a glass and join you? I could blow off the guys for one night.”

“No, it’s fine. I know you need your buddies. We can always do something tomorrow.”

“We could go for a meal, then catch a movie. My special treat.”

“That’s a date. Now go have fun.”

He held her tightly before letting go and getting up off the couch.

This was what Ruth had always wanted. To feel safe and secure in a lover’s arms. Her mother and father had split up when she was just seven. Ruth had no idea their marriage was even in trouble. Everything was fine and then it wasn’t. One minute they were all in matching pj’s, opening presents under the Christmas tree—the next she was seeing Dad every other weekend. Her eyes flicked to the wedding photo on the console table. Scott carrying her to the limousine. Confetti and the blurred images of friends and family in soft focus framed their image. They both looked so happy. A layer of dust sat on the picture. In a way, Ruth found that dust comforting. They weren’t a new couple, still getting to know one another, still wondering what the other was really thinking.

Scott gave her love. But, more than that, he gave her safety and security.

And it was those feelings that Ruth prized most of all. That this wasn’t just a long but ultimately doomed relationship. They were stable. Solid. They had dust on their wedding picture.

“Okay, I’m out of here. I love you,” he said from the hallway.

“I love you too,” Ruth said. She thought about looking up an article on the effects of alcohol on sperm, printing it out, and leaving it for Scott to find in the morning—as a joke, of course. She decided against it. She listened to his boots on the parquet floor of the hallway, the click of the dead bolt sliding free, the brief blare of noise from a passing car, and then a deep, resonant slam as the front door of their brownstone shut.

She took a long drink from her glass, set it down, went through to the kitchen. Standing on a chair, she retrieved a shallow, rectangular tin can from the top of the

cupboard, brought it down, and opened it on the counter. Rolled a joint, stood at the back door overlooking the small garden. You couldn't really call it a garden. A six-by-eight patch of grass, but it added half a million to the list price of the house. She held the joint in her lips to light it. She didn't make a habit of smoking pot. Last time she'd lit up was Tuesday, just three days ago. She'd come out to the garden while Scott was in bed to watch the Tribute in Light: two spires of spotlights projected into the sky from the top of Battery Parking Garage in memory of the lives lost on September 11. Like a lot of New Yorkers, that anniversary was hard, and she needed something to take the edge off.

The pot helped with her anxiety, and she thought one joint wouldn't hurt. She wasn't pregnant. The trash bag in their bathroom was filling up with negative pregnancy tests. With just a little more time and some more high-value clients on her roster, she would feel better about taking the time off to start their family. She sometimes looked at little booties and newborn outfits in the window of mother-and-baby stores. Those things gave her a feeling of excitement and warmth. Ruth took another hit from the joint. It was mild stuff, bought long ago.

She remembered her second date with Scott. They had met briefly at a party. One of Ruth's old friends had invited him. They got to talking and he asked for her number. For a low-intensity date, he brought her to another party at one of his friend's apartments in Brooklyn. They made small talk, standard second-date stuff, finding out more about one another; then Ruth had spotted some people with a bong in the kitchen. She took a hit and instantly regretted it. While Ruth had smoked a joint before, she'd never taken a hit from a bong, and it produced an instant coughing fit. Scott took her up to the building's roof terrace. She could still remember the sky from that evening: only a few clouds, thin and wispy against a deep blue-black night, and more stars than she'd ever seen before.

"Take deep breaths," Scott said.

Ruth inhaled, and while her throat and lungs no longer burned, the intake of oxygen provoked a strong feeling of nausea.

"I think I'm going to throw up," said Ruth. "I'm so, so sorry. This is a horrible date."

"It's fine," said Scott. "Normally my dates wait until they see me naked before vomiting."

Ruth laughed and her head spun. She stumbled into Scott, her palm landing on his solid chest to steady herself. He had a good build; he was just being self-deprecating.

Gazing up into his face, Ruth said, "We're on a rooftop in New York, I'm a little high, and we're very close. Aren't you gonna give me a cheesy line right now and try for a kiss?"

"You want a cheesy line?"

"The cheesier, the better."

"I think your father is a thief," Scott said, "because he obviously stole some of these stars and put them in your eyes."

"Oh my God, that's soooo cheeeesssy," Ruth said. And they both laughed.

"What did you tell me you do for a living?" she asked.

"I told you, I'm a prosecutor."

"Well, you should arrest yourself or something, because that was baaaad," she said, and raised her chin toward him, softly closing her eyes.

"I think I should get you home," said Scott.

Within a half hour, a cab pulled up outside Ruth's apartment building. They got out of the taxi and Scott joined her on the sidewalk.

"Do you want to come up?" asked Ruth.

"I do, but not tonight. I think you need some coffee."

Ruth remembered the feeling of disappointment. She'd let herself down, and now Scott didn't want to see her again.

"If you didn't want to come up to my place, why did you come with me in the cab?" she asked.

He leaned in toward her, said, "I wanted to make sure you were safe."

For the first time, Ruth felt a flood of familiar and long-gone feelings. Feelings of comfort and security.

"There's an ice-cream parlor two blocks over. I'll see you there tomorrow at one? My special treat. They've got rum raisin."

Ruth giggled, said, "Now I think you're really trying to make me puke."

With the memory of that night curling a smile into the corner of her mouth, Ruth stubbed out the joint. When the time came for Ruth and Scott to have a kid, it would be just fine. Her baby's parents would always be together. Her child would never have to go through what Ruth had endured. Scott and Ruth were rock steady.

Back in the living room she brought the bottle of wine with her and found an old movie on TCM. It was just starting. She settled in for the night. Finished the second

bottle and then went to bed.



Ruth woke from a bad dream in darkness. The clock on the nightstand showed it was eleven forty-five p.m. She reached behind with her left hand. No one on the other side of the bed. Just cold sheets. Shaking her head, she sat up. The time between turning off the movie and going to bed seemed a little hazy, but she remembered she had a glass of water by her bed. She drank, tried to force the remnants of the dream from her mind. Moments earlier, she had been in her boss's office, being fired for losing a property developer client, and she didn't care to go back to that nightmare. It had not been the first time she'd had that dream.

She sat up fully in the bed and reached for her phone. It wasn't by the bedside. She must have left it downstairs on the couch. She finished the water. The glass hit the nightstand with an almighty crash. The sound of glass exploding on a hard floor.

Ruth sat up straight, touched the base of the bedside lamp to turn it on.

Her empty glass was intact. Perfect.

She heard glass being crunched underfoot. Cracking. The skittering of glass fragments across tile. It was coming from downstairs.

Silence.

Glass being crushed. Silence.

Crunching glass.

The small hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Her skin rose in goose bumps, the fear rising on her flesh, but then she heard something—a voice, perhaps—downstairs.

Scott.

Scott was downstairs, drunk, and he'd dropped a glass or plate. It had happened before. More than once. Especially when he was out with his degenerate pal, Jack. Maybe Jack had returned from Atlantic City and he'd been giving Scott coke all night.

Ruth threw off the covers, tied up her dark brown hair, and went downstairs in her night things. A tank top and silk shorts. She hit the light switch on the landing, then took the last set of stairs to the first floor.

She started calling out for Scott before she reached the bottom of the stairs.

“You frightened the hell out of—”

The kitchen light wasn’t on. From the light on the stairs, she saw broken glass on the kitchen floor. She reached inside, feeling for the switch. Flipped it.

The kitchen floor was covered with glass. She looked around, then saw that a pane had been smashed in the back door. The small one just above the door handle. The rest of the panes in the grid were intact. Then, in one of those panes, Ruth caught a reflection. A man, tall, dark clothing. Fierce blue eyes, a long narrow nose, and a square jaw.

He was right behind her.

An arm clamped around her throat and a hand stifled her scream. There was something in that hand. Something soft. It smelled bad. A chemical odor.

Ruth fell to the floor, her knees giving way.

Her vision swam and then she heard his voice. Deep, crackling in a long, thick throat. Raspy and broken and utterly, utterly terrifying.

“Hello there, sweetheart...”

And the darkness took her.

CHAPTER 3

AMANDA

Amanda had been waiting for her lawyer for almost three hours on the first floor of the Manhattan Criminal Courthouse on Centre Street. She'd been arrested on the train two weeks ago, and somehow managed to make bail even though she'd been arraigned on charges of harassment and contempt of court.

The bench outside the courtroom was unforgiving oak and her back was beginning to get sore. A steady flow of people had entered the courtroom, alone or with loved ones: some had come out again and some hadn't. She guessed some of the folks who had not emerged from court with their tearful relatives had gone straight to Rikers Island or to the Tombs next door to the courthouse. Amanda knew she could be one of those headed to prison before the day was out. The public defender, Gail Sweet, had told her as much on the phone last week. She would do her best for Amanda, but she also advised, "Pack a toothbrush, just in case."

"Mrs. White?" said a voice.

The lady standing above her was in her fifties and wearing a bright bloodred blouse over a pale blue business suit. She had a perm, an armful of files and a large bag overflowing with charging cables, pens, and rolled-up pieces of paper.

Amanda nodded.

"I'm Gail Sweet," she said.

They talked for a half hour, then Gail left to talk to the prosecutor. She came back with a deal. One that Amanda didn't want. But there was no doubting it was a good deal