

CHAPTER ONE

Vivian couldn't think of the precise word for what she felt, as she stared at the small squirming mass of flesh. Disbelief? Shock? Dread? Detachment? Loathing? Disgust? Even nausea. None of them was strong enough alone, and there was no one word that encompassed everything she felt. Hatred? No. Any hatred she had was reserved for Walter. It had been that way for a while. She wasn't a hating kind of person, but he'd forced her, and she finally gave in. She sometimes wondered if her habit of keeping a good black suit ready, still in the thin plastic cleaner's bag, was wishful thinking. She couldn't remember the first time she'd thought, on hearing his car in the driveway, "Why couldn't he have been killed in a car wreck?" There had been so many times. This night had been no different. The clock over the mantle said 10:45. Even for a Monday, he was early.

"Does it have a name?" she asked.

It was the only question she could think of. What would be the proper question to ask your husband of nearly twenty years, when he brings home his baby by another woman, and without a word, casually places the carrier on the table, as though it were a bag of groceries you'd asked him to pick up on the way? She stared at the little bundle swathed in soft yellow. It stared back at her, out of eyes just like his -- same shade of brown, same shape.

Walter was at the bar pouring himself a drink -- as if he hadn't had enough already.

"I don't remember what she said. You can name it whatever you want."

"What I want? I don't have anything to do with this." She heard her voice rising, despite her calm exterior. She had suffered the indignity of his affairs before -- many times. Enough times that there was no indignation left. No hurt, either. She didn't care anymore what he did in the streets, but her home was a cocoon of beauty she made for herself. She surrounded herself with contentment. Whenever he came home, no matter what time, she felt invaded. But bringing this home -- this dirty linen, this evidence of his stupidity -- was an extreme violation.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, as calmly as she could manage.

"Well, we'll just have to deal with it, Vivian," he said, his back to her. He turned the glass up and emptied it. "We have no choice."

"What do you mean, we?"

"Just that, Vivian. What else is there for us to do?"

"Us?! You must be out of your mind. What on earth makes you think I am going to accept this...this -- "

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"Cause you're that kind of woman, Viv." He poured another drink. "Besides, you've always wanted a baby. I thought you'd be happy."

"Happy? Happy? You...arrogant...son-of-a-bitch! How can you fix your mouth to say you think I'd be happy about your child by one of your whores!" She felt bubbling deep inside herself, hot lava bubbling. She took deep, measured breaths, to hold it down. She heard the baby's whimpering grow louder. "You need to come see about your...this."

He turned to face her.

"You know I don't know anything about babies. You're a woman. You see about it."

The volcano erupted. Clouds of dry ash spewed forth, pushed ahead by red-hot lava. Vivian marched to him, and with a wide arc of her arm, slapped the glass out of his hand. Walter didn't react when it hit the hard ceramic tile and shattered.

"You low-life dog!" she screamed at him. "How dare you! How dare you!" The rage she felt was hotter than the lava, and it poured forth, heaping obscenities on him. The look on his face -- the slight smile, the hint of smugness -- infuriated her so, that she struck out at it. She tried to slap it off, claw it off, but he held her hands -- and the smirk. She jerked her hands away and slashed wildly at him, but he caught them each time.

"Control yourself, Vivian. Calm down. Quit acting like a hysterical child. Try to act like an adult."

She didn't hear the words, but she did hear the insult. The screaming she heard was her own -- and the rage. She jerked her hands with her whole body, while he held them still. As the lava flow slowed to spurting, the release of emotion from her body left her limp on her knees amid the broken glass and wetness. He held her hands above her head. The screaming she heard in the distance was not hers. It came slowly into focus. It.

"Now, look what you've done," he accused. "I can't deal with this. I've got to chair the committee meeting in the morning. I'm going to bed." When he released her hands, she fell in a heap on the floor.

Walter was at the stairs before Vivian saw the piece of glass. It was large enough, and jagged. She picked it up and fingered it, rubbing the sharp edge against her thumb. She knew the perfect place to jab it into his soft flesh. Angry, insistent screaming snatched her attention away from the thought. She sat up and stared at the carrier, across the room on the table. The screaming grew louder, echoing and reverberating in the cavernous living room. She stood up and slowly walked to the source. She stood over it, watching it. The yellow blanket had been pushed aside by the baby's

squirming, revealing tiny fists, balled up on each side of its face. The eyes were squeezed shut. No tears. Its face was red, its mouth tiny and O-shaped. With each angry scream, the little body shook violently. Vivian understood. She wished she could do that, too. Just lie on her back on the Persian rug, ball her fists, draw her knees up, close her eyes, and scream until her whole body shook. But she couldn't. So why did it get the luxury?

"Hush!" she snapped at it.

It startled at the sound of her voice. The screaming stopped suddenly. The eyes opened and looked at her. A curious look, examining her. Just as suddenly, the screaming started again.

"Hush!" she tried again. The response this time was louder, more demanding.

Vivian was tempted to put her hand over its face and hold it there, until the screaming stopped -- until the breathing stopped. But she knew that wouldn't help -- for the victims to be punished. They were both victims, she and it. And she knew in her heart she could never harm the baby. Finally, she slipped her slender fingers around it and picked it up. It hushed immediately, drawing in two quick breaths, dregs of the screams, then let out a relieved sigh. She held it in front of her and it started squirming, jerking its little legs. She walked to the sofa and sat down, setting it in her lap, its head flopping forward. It started waving its arms and screaming again. She stood up, still holding it around its torso. It stopped screaming. The arms and legs were moving, seeming to clutch for her. She put it against her shoulder and patted it. It quieted. She sat back down. It screamed again. She stood up. Maybe it was hungry.

Vivian walked to the table and picked up the baby bag that Walter had dropped in the chair. She set the bag on the table, and with one hand, rummaged through it, searching for a bottle. There was none, only three disposable diapers. Selfish, thoughtless jerk! He could at least have stopped and bought something for it to eat. It was probably wet, too.

She took one of the diapers, walked to the kitchen, and wet a paper towel, before going back to the sofa. She laid it on its back, unsnapped the little yellow jumpsuit, and pulled its legs out. The diaper looked heavy, and the smell of urine offended her nostrils. It must not have been changed for hours. When she tore the tapes loose on both sides and pulled the diaper away from its chafed skin, she smiled. It was a girl. Goody for him! He always talked about having a boy. "Real men produce boys," he'd said.

As Vivian cleaned her up, she noticed the place at the base of her buttock where the darker pigment looked like she'd been stamped with a little heart. She touched her forefinger to it. When she put the dry diaper on her, the

baby seemed to appreciate it, even stretching her little bowed legs, making it easier for Vivian to get them back in the jumpsuit.

Vivian sat back and closed her eyes, exhausted, but feeling a small sense of accomplishment. In a moment, she felt a little foot kicking at her. When Vivian opened her eyes and looked at the baby, she was scrunching her face and squirming, working up to a wail. Vivian didn't know what to do. There was no milk in the house. There never was. He couldn't tolerate it, and she didn't like the taste. To quiet the wailing, she picked the baby up and put her on her shoulder. The tiny mouth latched onto her shoulder and began sucking, then dissatisfied, screamed again. Vivian bounced her up and down, but it didn't help. This was his problem. He could deal with it. She carried the baby up the stairs.

Vivian flipped the light on in their bedroom. Walter was sprawled on his back across the bed, sleeping like a dead man, in only his suit pants. His chest and feet were bare. Drunk, she thought in disgust. She kicked his foot that was hanging off the bed, and called his name. He didn't move. She kicked his foot again, harder. He still didn't move. What help would he be, even if she were able to wake him?

Walter's head was turned sideways, and she saw the three long, thin welts across his cheek, that disappeared into his neatly trimmed beard. She'd seen welts on his back before. His newest lover must be kinky, she thought. Maybe the woman hadn't left the baby in his office as he'd said. He'd become a professional liar. Probably, she'd given him one last piece, then left him and the baby in a motel room. A gutter place, for a gutter man. Vivian thought about the shard of glass.

There was nothing else to do. Vivian lay the still-screaming baby on the bed, slipped into a pair of jeans, and tucked her pajama top into the waistband. When she got to the car, she laid the baby on the seat and tried to fasten the seat belt around her, but it wouldn't work. She fastened her own and put the baby in her lap. The baby quieted some in the soothing ride of Walter's Mercedes.

As soon as she parked in front of the "Stop and Rob," the baby started squalling again. Inside, she struggled with the baby and her purse, carrying items to the counter -- a baby bottle, three cans of infant formula, and a bag of diapers. The baby's screams filled the store. The look of irritation on the clerk's face pissed her off, as she juggled the baby, the sack, and her purse back to the car. She was glad she'd left the motor running. She didn't know how she would have managed keys, too.

As she put the car in reverse, Vivian jumped at the knock on the window. Instinctively, she pressed the lock button, and turned to see the uniformed

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cop bent over, peering in the window. She breathed a sigh of relief, then rolled the window down.

"Evening, ma'am."

She nodded. The baby screamed and squirmed.

"Are you planning to drive off with that baby in your lap?"

"What?"

"State law requires you to have the baby in an approved child safety seat. Do you have one?"

"What?" she asked irritably. "No. Of course not."

"Then, I'm going to have to write you a citation. I need to see your license and proof of insurance."

"A ticket?! You can't be serious. This isn't even my baby. Why would I have a car seat?"

"Your license and insurance?" he asked, more sternly this time.

Exasperated, she fumbled in her purse with one hand, holding the baby with the other to keep her from rolling off her lap.

"You say this isn't your baby?" he asked off-handedly, as he examined her documents.

"It's my husband's baby. He just brought it home a couple of hours ago. I don't even want this damn baby. Please don't give me a ticket. I've had enough shit for one night. He went to sleep, and left me with this screaming baby. It had to have some milk and so -- "

The glimpse she caught of herself in the rearview mirror startled her. Her face was a mess, and her hair was all over her head. The way she looked, and was rambling, justified the suspicious look she saw on the cop's face.

"Are you having a problem, ma'am? Do you need someone to talk to?"

She understood what he was thinking.

"No. No. I'm sorry. I just made that up. I'm okay. Just give me the ticket, so I can get the baby to bed."

As he handed the ticket to her to sign, the suspicion melted into a chuckle.

"I thought I'd heard them all, lady. But yours has been the best by far. I can't wait to tell my wife."

Again on the ride home, the baby quieted. Thank God. One more scream would have pushed her over the edge. She needed to hear herself think. She had it worked out for the night. But what about tomorrow? She had class

tomorrow. What was she going to do? Why did she have to do anything? Why was this her problem? She'd take care of this tonight, but tomorrow it would be his problem.

As soon as she put the nipple in the baby's mouth, she sucked and slurped so hard, Vivian thought she would choke. As the liquid disappeared, the sucking became less frantic. Halfway through, the baby released the nipple, took a deep breath, and rested a minute before attacking it again. The baby fell asleep before the bottle was completely empty. Vivian didn't know whether burping her would wake her and start the noise again. She eased from the couch and carried the baby upstairs.

Walter hadn't moved, except that his mouth was slightly open, allowing a soft snore to escape. She lay the baby on her stomach next to him, thankful she didn't wake. Looking at him with disgust, Vivian was certain she would never share his bed again. She collected the few things she would need immediately -- toothbrush, pajamas, underwear, makeup, a change of clothes -- and carried them into the downstairs bedroom. She'd complete the move tomorrow after she finished studying at the law library.

Several hours later, the baby's wailing woke Vivian just enough to be reminded of where she was. She punched the unfamiliar pillow into a shape to simulate the one she was accustomed to, and drifted almost back to sleep. Then she realized the noise was not in her head. She lay listening. There was no change in the pitch or level. She realized Walter was not going to respond. She looked at the clock on the dresser -- 4:54. She dragged herself out of bed.

"Hush, baby." The little girl opened her eyes when Vivian picked her up. She seems to recognize me, Vivian thought distastefully. She didn't want to be recognized. She was only doing what was necessary to get to tomorrow. She prepared another bottle, holding the baby on her shoulder. She took her to her room, lay on the bed with her, and gave her the bottle. Vivian realized the baby hadn't cried since she picked her up. There was a look of contentment on her face, as she sucked more leisurely than before. Even with her eyes closed, she looked like him.

Vivian wondered what the mother looked like. She ran through the pictures in her mind of the ones she suspected, the ones whose sly smiles she'd seen him return. But none of them had been noticeably pregnant in the last several months. Who could the mother be? She looked at the baby, trying to determine an age. He hadn't said. Four months? Six months? Karla's baby was six months old. This one was definitely younger. Two months? Maybe. Vivian couldn't tell. And what kind of mother would leave a baby this little? And why? Vivian couldn't imagine a circumstance that would force her to do it -- if she'd been able to have a baby.

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She looked around the room. This would have been the nursery, if things had gone as they had planned when they bought the house. The room had been bare the first years. As they became financially able to decorate it, the dream had faded. She'd finally chosen an Oriental motif -- the furniture, the curtains, the wall decorations. Very adult. Very un-nursery. The baby, sleeping peacefully, even looked out of place, ensconced in the champagne-colored satin sheets and comforter. Vivian felt her own eyes being dragged closed, and surrendered to sleep. She dreamed of the baby she had wanted for so long, the one she'd prayed for.

She was awakened by the little foot kicking her in the stomach. She looked into the little eyes. His eyes. The baby didn't smile -- exactly -- but the kicking stopped momentarily. Vivian took a sharp breath, as she recognized the odd feeling as wetness and sprang out of the bed. She remembered she hadn't changed the diaper when she brought the baby downstairs. "Be right back, baby," she said, and headed for the kitchen.

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"Ex-cuse me? Going somewhere?"

Walter stopped in his tracks, at the back door. By the steam rising from the cup of coffee on the kitchen counter, she judged he'd heard her coming, and thought he could beat her to the door.

"What about your baby? You know I have a class at nine. What are you going to do?" Vivian looked at the clock on the microwave -- 8:06. Even if she dressed as fast as she could, she'd be late.

When he turned to face her, she saw the desperate look in his eyes.

"Vivian, I'm going to work this out. I swear. I just need a little time. I've got that committee meeting this morning. At nine. You know what they'll say if I'm late -- "

"Your baby, Walter?" she cut him off.

"I know, Viv. I'll figure something out. I'll take care of it. But I have to do this first. It's going to be televised. You can miss one class. I'll come back as soon as the meeting is over. We'll talk then. I promise, Viv." He was heading out the door.

"There's nothing to talk about, Walter. Walter! Walter!!"

The door closed behind him. The baby's cries stopped her from following him long enough for him to get the car started and roar down the driveway. Her mouth crimped tightly, Vivian picked up the cup of coffee and took a diaper and the last can of formula with her.

The darkened wet spot on the satin sheet had spread.

"Hush, baby. It's me again. But not for long."

The baby quieted as soon as Vivian got close, and Vivian felt the eyes watching her intently and patiently. She moved the baby to a dry place on the bed, and changed her diaper. As she drained the last can of formula into the bottle, she told her, "This is the last of the milk. I wish I'd remembered to tell Walter to bring more on his way home."

He ought to be back before more was needed, she thought, as she lay on the bed and gave the baby the bottle. Ways and Means was an important committee, but it was early in the session, so the meeting shouldn't last that long. A couple of hours at the most. She'd just send him back to the store. She certainly wasn't going to risk another ticket. And, she wasn't going to pay for the one she got, either. She was surprised that the cop hadn't noticed that the signature didn't match the one on her driver's license. She'd signed it "Walter Carlson" in a perfect imitation of his writing. He'd have to take care of that, too. The baby's little hand touched hers, holding the bottle. A soft little touch. Tiny fingers, square-shaped on the ends, just like Walter's. She moved the baby's hand away from hers.

"Don't touch me, baby. I won't be in your life long. Walter's gonna take you back to your mama soon. Or maybe he'll keep you. I don't know. Don't care. Me? I'm going somewhere else. I just haven't figured out where yet."

When the bottle was finished, Vivian put the baby on her shoulder and burped her. Now what? 8:45. She needed to change the sheets. But what to do with the baby? She felt helpless and stymied. What on earth was she thinking! She wasn't helpless. Stymied, maybe. Thrown for a loop, even. But not helpless. She lay the baby on a towel on the floor, replaced the sheets and comforter, and took the wet ones to the washer. As she walked out the bedroom door, the baby began to whimper.

"Don't even start with me, baby," Vivian muttered under her breath. While in the laundry room, Vivian heard the baby crying. As soon as she came back to the bedroom, the baby quieted. She went in the bathroom to shower and change. When she walked out of view, the baby started. Vivian tried to ignore her while she undressed. The insistent cries brought her back to the bedroom.

"What do you want?!" she snapped.

The baby hushed immediately.

"Oh, I get it. You don't want to be alone. That's where you and me are different. I want to be alone. I'm gonna be alone. Soon. But right now, I've got to shower, and I guess you may as well come with me."

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She picked the baby up, took her to the bathroom, and put her on the towel on the floor. The jumpsuit was wet and smelled of urine. It wasn't really fair to the baby for her to be stinky. It wasn't her fault that her daddy was a dog and her mama was a...who knows. Vivian took the little jumpsuit off, covered the baby with another towel, and washed the jumpsuit out under the faucet. As she left the room, she said, "Now you keep quiet, I'll be right back." The baby just looked at her and blinked her eyes. Vivian rushed across the house to the utility room, threw the jumpsuit in the dryer, and rushed back. But there was no need. The baby was quiet. Vivian hurried through her shower, got dressed, and put on enough makeup to pass. Now what? Nothing to do but wait. But she wasn't a woman to waste time. She lay the baby on the bed, went to the study, and brought back her textbook. She would use the time to prepare for the next day's class. Administrative Law was the most boring class she'd had since she started law school. It wasn't long before she and the baby were asleep.

Vivian woke to the baby's whimpering and kicking. She looked at the clock -- 12:05. Where the hell was he? She called out to him. No response. She went to the garage. Only her car was there. She jerked the phone off the wall in the kitchen and dialed his office.

"Sherman, is Walt there?"

"No, Vivian, he left for lunch."

"Did he say he was on the way home?"

"No. He was with Representatives Bailey and Mitchum. I think they were going to Bailey's club for lunch and then to play golf. But he definitely said he was coming back later. Should I have him call you when he returns? Or page him now?"

Vivian had the urge to slam the phone down, but Sherman had done nothing to deserve such rudeness. He and Walter were cousins -- sons of two sisters. She didn't know exactly what the trouble was that sent him to Austin from Philadelphia, but it didn't matter to her. He was an i-dotter like she was, and he looked out for Walter. That was enough for her. She and Sherman had a good understanding, and she trusted him. She often wished he could find a good woman who could help him keep his life on track.

On the other end of the line, Sherman frowned at the sound of Vivian's voice. He knew her well enough to know that she wasn't reacting well to this situation. In the office arena, they treated each other with respect. She treated him like the extremely competent aide that he was, and he treated her like the boss's wife who could fire him in a heartbeat. He knew what had happened to his immediate predecessor -- the cute little miniskirted, ambitious coed, who couldn't add. For her, the fact that Walter shared her

bed fairly regularly added up to her having the license to disrespect Mrs. Carlson to her face. No matter that he thought Walter treated Vivian shabbily, Sherman had seen her put her foot down. When she did, Walter did what she wanted. Sherman wasn't about to lose another job -- and he was good at math.

"No, that won't be necessary, Sherman. Just have him call me when he gets back."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Sherman asked.

"No. That's all right. Just have him call me."

What Vivian really wanted to do, she thought as she eased the receiver back on the hook, was slam the phone upside Walter's head. But Walter was unavailable, and by now, the baby was in a full wail.

Vivian grabbed the jumpsuit out of the dryer, dressed the fretting baby, and carried her to the car. She spotted the box on the worktable. Just the right size. She took the plastic bottles of oil out and tried it. It fit perfectly on the floor in the front seat of her Camry. She went back in the house and grabbed two towels. She made a nest of one and laid the baby in the box. She'd use the other one to cover the box if she ran into Officer Friendly again. Not taking any chances, she passed by the "Stop and Rob" and drove to the full-service grocery store.

The array of choices was amazing. Vivian hadn't stopped on the baby aisle in years -- not since she'd given up hope of having a baby. She didn't remember whether there had been so many choices before, or maybe then she hadn't been looking for anything in particular. Then, her eye had been attracted to the cute things, the gadgets. This time she had a purpose. She picked the same formula she'd bought before, for no other reason than she recognized the can. A case this time. And another bottle. She wondered if the baby needed real food and picked a box of rice cereal and several jars of strained foods, just in case. The display caught her eye. Hair things. She looked at the baby's head. Lots of hair. She threw a package of barrettes in the basket. She took two pink jumpsuits down. A little girl should have pink. Yellow was motivated by uncertainty. Could fit either sex -- didn't fit either. She looked at the rattles and toys, but decided she wouldn't be around long enough to bother. On the other hand, every girl needed a possession that was hers, and hers alone. She selected a soft, terry cloth-covered ring with a clown head that made a muted rattling noise.

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Vivian got the baby fed and dry and put her to bed before settling back to her studies. She kept her eye on the clock. At 6:30, she finally figured out, Walter wasn't coming home.