

The Last One to Leave

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Chapter One

The GPS dies three miles before I get there, for no reason at all.

It's not a gradual thing – the signal fading, the circle spinning, the app doing its best. It simply stops. The screen freezes on a street grid that doesn't match what's in front of me, a neat blue lattice of roads that belong to somewhere else entirely, and then it reboots to nothing. A blank white field. I wait for it to come back. Ten seconds, twenty.

Nothing happens.

I pull over onto the side of the road, engine running, and find the map I printed from the estate file – an afterthought, I'd told myself, professional habit. But when I pull it open, I don't bother fooling myself anymore. My foot has already been lifting off the gas at the right moments, my hands turning the steering wheel before I registered making a decision.

I don't need a GPS or a map. As much as I wish it wasn't true, this area is still engrained in me.

I fold the map, put it on the passenger seat, and drive.

I continue down a county road that the county has apparently stopped maintaining. I keep wondering if there will be a forced detour, a sign telling me the route is closed, but there's nothing – just the road getting narrower and the weeds on the side of the road getting wilder. And then, at the end of it, Ridgeway Lane. A street that sits on its own,

with ten nearly identical houses making up the whole neighborhood, five houses on each side of the street. There's a line of woods behind them, which stretches up to the mountains to the east.

The street where I spent the first 18 years of my life. The street I left and haven't been back to in 10 years.

I've been trying to keep my mind occupied on the drive here, thinking about the estate paperwork, the moving company I still need to book, the forms I'll need to request from the county. I don't think about my mother's funeral, or estranged childhood friends, or girls who disappeared and never came back.

At least I try not to.

I turn off the county road and enter the narrow entrance labeled with a faded blue sign: "Ridgeway Lane."

Immediately, I can tell that something is off.

I feel a split-second wave of dread, like the nightmarish moment before you realize the monstrous face in the dark is just your jacket hanging over a chair.

But then I blink, and everything looks fine. It's just a street.

God, I'm pathetic. How many years has it been, and I still can't let it go.

I take in the scene through my car's windshield. I expected this, but I admit it's a little unnerving: Every house is boarded up – plywood across the windows, the paint underneath gone to mildew and weather. The yards are overgrown past the point of simple neglect.

I have a vague memory of when the evacuation from Ridgeway Lane began. It was gradual. Neighbors who I stopped seeing except through the front windows of their house, and then one day they were packing up, leaving before we ever saw a "For Sale" sign in their lawn. Fewer lights at the end of the street in the evenings. Fewer kids my age playing four-square in the Morrises' driveway.

I asked my mother once why all our neighbors seemed to be moving away. She had looked at me with that concerned-mother look before shrugging and saying too casually, “Oh, people come and go.”

But that wasn't true, and I knew it even then. People were going, sure, but not coming. No new families came to replace the ones who moved away.

I drive slowly. The houses pass on either side – boards across every window, hazard tape strung along the fence posts, the same dull weathering on each one. Number 4, where the Nguyens used to live. Number 7, where the Delaneys held block parties in the driveway until suddenly they didn't. The orange “Vacated” notices on the fences are identical, printed in the same font, positioned at the same height. As if someone came along the street methodically and applied them all at once, and then never came back.

Then, at the far end of the street, there is a man.

Standing still, right in front of my mother's house. He's too far away for me to see his face, but something about the set of his shoulders — the way he holds his weight slightly back on his heels, the particular angle of his head — makes me slam on the brakes. My father stood like that. I lean forward against the steering wheel and stare, and for one second I am absolutely certain.

I lurch the car into park, right there in the middle of the road, throw the door open, and step outside to call to him.

But the man is gone. There's nothing there. Just the end of the street, the tree line, the mountains beyond.

Of course. Of course my mind is doing this. I buried my mother yesterday. I drove four hours. I haven't eaten. Grief can mess with people's perception of things — that's what I've heard, anyway — and apparently what my grief has decided to conjure, on a street I haven't stood on in ten years, is my father. My father, who has been dead for seventeen years.

Well, missed opportunity, grief: it would've made more sense to conjure up a vision of my mother. She's the one that lived on this street, at least up until a month ago, when she was admitted to the hospital. That was the last place she ever lived. Now she doesn't live anywhere.

I get back in my car and roll up to Number 9, my childhood home.

It's the only house on the street with no plywood across the windows. No hazard tape along the fence. The yard is overgrown, but not in the same way as the others – not the years of unchecked growth that has claimed the neighboring lots, but the ordinary overgrowth of a month unattended. It is the only house on the street that looks as if someone was living in it until recently. It is the only house on the street that looks as if someone still could.

Because the truth is, everyone on the street left. Everyone except my mother. And I never knew why.

As my eyes take in the house, I notice the front door is slightly ajar. An inch or two of darkness visible inside the house, the latch not engaged.

My horrible first thought is the man standing in front of the house. That he was real, that he has been in this house, and that I only imagined he was my father because that was what my mind needed to do. Except: who would squat on Ridgeway Lane? The whole street is practically a sealed evacuation zone. There is nothing here. Wherever that man went, he did not go inside my mother's house.

There are other, more rational explanations. The estate attorney. He was the last person here before me. It's possible he didn't check the door properly when he left. Maybe the latch has always been temperamental and he didn't know to lift and press before turning the key. I tell myself this is what happened — the attorney, the latch — and I get out of the car and walk to the door of my childhood home.

I push the door open with two fingers, waiting for the familiar creak of the hinges, but they're silent, like everything else around me.

The hallway smells of dust and old paper and something faintly underneath that I can't identify – something mineral, almost, or like deep water. Different from what I remember, though I'm aware my memory of what this house smells like is not reliable. I was seventeen the last time I stood in this hallway. I was a different person then.

I go into the living room first.

The room is just as I remember it: the sofa, the small side table, a maroon lamp base with a yellowing shade. I'm already turning away when something stops me. I look back at the interior wall to my left. There is a doorway in it.

I grew up in this house. I know the floor plan the way I know my own hands. There was never a door there. The living room opened up into the kitchen, and off the kitchen was the hall leading to the rest of the house. But that wall right there was solid. I have a memory of sitting against it with a huge atlas, looking at the colorful maps of the world, my back against the baseboard.

I debate not opening the door, but finally I turn the knob and push it open. It's an empty space, about three by five feet. A closet.

Why didn't my mother tell me she remodeled at some point in the last ten years? She loved this house, against all reason. She surely would have told me if she made changes to it, even if it was just adding a coat closet.

I stand in the new closet doorway and look at the room and then back at the wall. The doorframe is old – the paint cracked at the top corner, the wood slightly swollen at the threshold. It looks as if it has always been there, not recently added to the house.

I cross to the front window. Through it, the street is flat and still in the afternoon light. The other houses sit in a row like gutted-out, forgotten museums.

Except... I do a double take. Number 6, the third on the left across the street. The windows are clear, with no plywood or hazard tape. The paint

has a faint sheen, as if it's recent. The yard is cut short and edged along the path. I stand at the window and look at it for a moment, recalibrating. I could have sworn, driving in, that all of them were boarded. I must have missed it.

Someone must have moved back there. Recently.

I go to the kitchen to look out the backyard window.

Through the kitchen window, the backyard is completely still. No movement. The apple tree I climbed when I was a kid is still there, but it's bigger – the branches wider, denser, claiming more of the light.

I suddenly realize what's so eerie about the silence: There are no birds.

There should be birds chirping, right? It's early spring, there are trees everywhere, no humans around except me and my imaginary visions of my late father.

It's fine, I tell myself, shaking my head. I don't need to stand here worrying about birds. I am here to clear a house and settle an estate.

I sit down and make a list of what to tackle first. I'm always making lists. This will help me to get everything done as quickly as possible. Then I can get out of this house that I never wanted to return to.

I try to ignore the creeping sense of wrongness that is still settled over me. I try to forget about what I already know about this street. That it has a way of keeping people. That I am, statistically, old enough now to understand that some disappearances are not accidents, and that years ago, when I stood on this street as a child, someone I knew walked to the end of it and did not come back.

Luckily, I've spent nineteen years not thinking about Mara.

I can probably manage another few days.

Chapter Two

I start in the kitchen.

It's a professional decision. A smart one, I think. The kitchen is where most people keep the things that need to be dealt with first: bills, warranties, expired insurance documents, a drawer full of batteries and takeout menus and anything else that didn't have a better home.

I have a system. I brought color-coded folders, a label maker, and four sizes of archive boxes, and I am going to work through this house room by room, category by category, until it is empty and the estate can be closed and I can leave.

I am not going to think about the doorway that doesn't fit any of my memories of this place.

I am not going to think about the man I imagined outside, who then disappeared. I'm not going to think about anyone disappearing.

I open the first box and label it: *Kitchen – General / Discard*. Then I open the nearest cupboard and draw my hand back involuntarily.

The cupboard is organized.

Not just tidied, but full-on Marie-Kondo-would-be-proud-organized. The cans are grouped by type, labels facing forward. The jars are in descending height order. There are rubber-banded bundles of takeout menus sorted by cuisine and then by approximate distance from the house. I pick up the nearest bundle. The menus on top are recent –

within the last year, judging by the phone numbers, which mostly have the new area code. Underneath them, older ones.

My mother was not an organized person. She was warm and distracted and *sorry-I-thought-I-put-that-here*. She kept her important documents in a shoebox she called "the office." When I was eight she lost her car keys in the freezer and we didn't find them until February.

I put the menus back the way I found them and open the next cupboard.

It's the same. Everything is arranged with a logic I can see clearly: similar items grouped, oldest stock at the back, perishables already cleared into a neat bag by the door, as if someone came through ahead of me and started the work. I stand in the middle of the kitchen for a moment and look at the open cupboard doors.

My mother didn't do this. This is not her system. It's more like... the way *I* would organize things.

I open my notebook and scribble: *Kitchen reorganized?*

I can't help it — I take notes about everything. It's a side effect of working with archives since graduating college. If it's written down, that means it's concrete, real. It won't be forgotten.

I move through the rest of the ground floor the same way, not packing anything up yet, just noting what's around me. In the sitting room, books are alphabetized on shelves, and there's a neat accordion file beside the armchair. Next, the downstairs bathroom, with cleaning products arranged by use, a typed list of all the products taped to the inside of the cabinet. In the hallway, there's no pile of mail or knickknacks — just the wooden dish Mom kept her keys in, empty, centered at the exact midpoint of the table.

My mom lived in this house for at least five years after the last neighbor moved away. Alone, with evacuation notices on every fence and no near

neighbors. Apparently, during those years she became, methodically and completely, a different person.

I carry the accordion file from the living room to the kitchen table.

Utilities. Maintenance. City. Medical. Vehicle. Insurance. Personal.

Each tab contains forms in chronological order. I flip through the maintenance section. Annual boiler service, every October, for seven consecutive years. Receipts, all of them.

My mother could never find a receipt. She considered them a theoretical category of objects that existed for other people.

The “City” tab is thicker than the others. I pull the whole section out and lay it flat, feeling drawn to it like it’s got an answer I’ve been waiting for, though I can’t say what the question is.

The oldest letter is dated fifteen years ago. Formal letterhead, city seal, reference numbers in the header. I begin skimming it, but then stop and read it more slowly, my brows furrowing in confusion the more I read.

Dear Resident,

This notice is issued by the Office of Regional Planning and Environmental Compliance on behalf of the City. Following a period of ongoing assessment, Ridgeway Lane and the surrounding area has been designated Zone 4C under the Regional Environmental Management Protocol.

Site conditions within Zone 4C have been evaluated and determined to present risks to the health and safety of current occupants. The nature of these conditions is subject to ongoing review and cannot be disclosed in full at this time, pending completion of the formal assessment process. Residents are advised that prolonged occupancy of the zone is not recommended.

I set the letter flat on the table and press my palm to it, as if I could push it down into the woodgrain and make it disappear. It doesn’t make sense. Is Ridgeway Lane really not safe?

I grew up in this house. I played in the backyard, I drank from the tap, I breathed the air here until I was eighteen years old. And if this letter

means what it says — if the area has been considered unsafe since before I left — then I was living inside a risk that my mother knew about and never told me about. She never mentioned this letter to me, ever.

I set the first letter aside and pick up the next one. Same letterhead, three months later. A follow-up notice, the language almost identical but slightly more pointed. Words like *compliance* and *mandatory* in bold letters, as if bolding them was the same as making them happen.

Did the neighbors get these notices too? Is that why everyone left?

I sort through the other letters that were stored with the first two, checking the dates on each one. It seems that after receiving a handful of warning notices, each of which my mom presumably ignored, the city stopped sending them to her. My mother was strong-willed, stubborn. She loved this house. I can imagine her opening the letters and ignoring the instructions without hesitation. Or slamming the door on a government official that came to lecture her. Or going down to City Hall and threatening litigation if they tried to force her to move.

The next document in the stack is not a letter.

It's longer. Heavier paper. The letterhead is different — not the city crest but something more ambiguous, a department name I don't recognize. I turn to the last page first, a habit I've picked up from constantly reading and filing old documents and letters. A letter writer typically signs their name on the last page, not the first, and I learned long ago that it makes a lot more sense to read a document through when you know who the author is.

At the end of this document are three signature lines, and I quickly realize it's a contract. My mother's name, printed and then signed. A title: *Regional Environmental Liaison*, accompanied by a scribble of a name I can't decipher. And a third line, which has been redacted with a thick black bar. I hold the page up to the light from the window. Nothing comes through.

I go back to the first page and read it properly. Then I read it again.

It takes me a few minutes to realize what the contract is saying, partly because it's in stark contrast to the earlier evacuation notices I was just looking at.

Finally, I understand: My mother was being paid to stay here.

A quarterly disbursement, the contract calls it — a modest sum, listed against a description of services rendered: *ongoing site monitoring and occupancy maintenance*. The language is very careful. It does not say what is being monitored. It does not explain what occupancy maintenance entails.

I sit back in my chair and close my eyes, wondering what this means. First, the city sent evacuation notices to my mom, which she never mentioned to me. Presumably, the other neighbors got evacuation notices too, which my mom must have known about. And then what happened? She refused to leave, so they offered to pay her to stay instead?

Or was it a different agency that paid her? Is that why she refused to leave in the first place, because she had the promise of a buyout?

My mind is spinning, racing through all the explanations that don't make sense. Because I don't know what else to do, I write in my notebook, very slowly: *Evacuation notice. Contract. My mom was paid to stay here.*

I've been trying to work out my mother's last years since the hospital called to tell me she was dying. I had to ask the nurse to repeat herself twice. I kept waiting for the part where she explained why my mother hadn't told me she was ill.

She'd had eighteen months of treatment and I hadn't known.

It's not like we were the closest of mothers and daughters. We never had the more-like-sisters vibe that I sometimes saw in moms and their girls, shopping at the mall together, or snapping selfies on vacation. But we talked. We were on good terms, I thought. I called her, usually every

week and we talked about the news and gas prices and the weather. I never visited her here – she knew I refused to come back to this place – but she came to visit me a few times a year.

She had never looked sick to me. But maybe I just hadn't been paying attention. And now I had another sinking suspicion forming in my gut—that maybe she had gotten sick because of whatever health risk was hovering over Ridgeway Lane.

As if I needed another reason to want to get out of here as fast as possible.

I flip through the rest of the accordion file until I get to the one marked *Personal*.

Evan Morley – February 11th.

I knew Evan Morley. His family lived in Number 3. We were friends until we were sixteen, and then we were more than friends until I left for college and decided that *more than friends* was something I couldn't sustain across two hundred miles and four years of deliberately becoming someone else. We haven't talked in years, though I know for a fact I never deleted his number from my phone.

I have no idea what this piece of paper means, seeing that Evan and his family definitely don't live on Ridgeway Lane anymore.

The phone rings. Not my cell phone, but the landline.

I don't recognize the number. Local area code, or what would have been the local area code before they changed it. I answer anyway.

The man on the other end has a calm, official voice, the kind produced by many years of speaking to people in an official capacity.

"Ms. Calloway? This is Mr. Aldrich, Regional Environmental Management Office. I understand you're settling your mother's estate. I was hoping we might have a brief conversation."

This is not what I was expecting. "How do you know I'm here?" I ask, not doing much to mask my confusion.

A small pause. "We keep periodic monitoring of the site. Purely routine."

My eyebrow arches at his use of the word "site" instead of street or neighborhood. If my mother's filed-away letters weren't enough proof that something weird was happening on this street, this phone call is.

"What is it you want, Mr. Aldrich?" I ask, not trying to hide the suspicion in my voice.

"I'd like to send someone by to discuss the property. Your mother's residency was a special arrangement — one the office facilitated, under some fairly specific terms. That arrangement doesn't transfer to the estate. There are environmental considerations still in play for this area, and it would be in everyone's interest to have the house cleared promptly and the estate finalized. Once that's done, we could help facilitate a sale. There's already a motivated buyer."

A buyer? As far as I know, none of the houses on Ridgeway Lane have ever been bought. "Who?" I ask.

Another pause, longer this time. "I'm not at liberty to say at this stage."

"I need to go. I'll be in touch," I say, and hang up.

I snatch my notebook up and scribble: *Aldrich, Regional Environmental Management Office. Wants property sold quickly. Has a buyer?*

If I interpreted that conversation correctly, it sounds like the government wants me out of this house. And they want me out fast.

Chapter Three

I spend the rest of the morning cleaning out the ground floor. I work through it room by room with a kind of detached focus, following the mantra I repeat to myself when I do any chore I wish I could avoid: *Go slow, don't stop*. The faster I clear out the house, the faster I can get the hell out of here.

I keep my hands occupied, my notebook open, and I don't let myself stand in any one spot for more than a minute. I fill four bags for the thrift store, then throw away three cans of soup with expired best-by dates and place the rest in a box to drop off at the food pantry. I empty out the drawers full of organized rubber bands and takeout menus into the trash.

I leave the master bedroom for last.

This has always been how I do things. Let the rest of the work settle around you until the most difficult thing is all that is left and you have no choice but to face it. I have been doing this my whole professional life, and I have also been doing it in a different way, I realize, in all the years I did not come back here. I crinkle my nose at that thought.

My mother's bedroom smells of her, and for the first time since I arrived back at Ridgeway Lane, I feel a lump in my throat.

The bed is made, which I don't remember her doing often, but it seems to fit in this perfectly organized house. There's a glass on the nightstand, water evaporated, the residue dried in a faint ring. A novel,

face-down, spine creased. Handcream. A lamp. And beside the lamp, half-tucked under the spine of the novel: a folded piece of paper.

I pick it up without thinking much about it, intending to stick it into the open book, which my mom will never finish. I figure it's probably a receipt, or a reminder she wrote to herself and then started using as a bookmark. But I pause when I notice how old the paper is, the yellowing edges, the deep creases where it's been folded, and I know what it is before I unfold it.

When I do, I see a black-and-white photograph of a smiling second grader, dark brown curls pulled up on top of her head and secured with a yellow bow. Beneath the image, in big black letters, are the words *MISSING – MARA OSEI, AGE 9. Last seen Ridgeway Lane, October 14th. Wearing red overalls, white shirt, and a yellow hair bow.*

I sit on the edge of the bed. I haven't seen this flyer in years, but the memory of it is burned into my subconscious. Mara's picture once hung on every lamppost, every bulletin board in town, and, I'm sure, every police station within a 100-mile radius. I was nine, and I couldn't understand the hysteria and worry of all the adults around me. I didn't know people could go missing and never be found again, and I never thought that would happen to my best friend.

I didn't know she was gone at first. That's the thing I've always needed people to understand, like that fact is enough to cleanse me from any blame or guilt. We were playing at the end of the street, by the tree line, like we did almost every day. I had no reason to believe that that day would change everything.

She had made me mad—I don't remember how—but I had gotten angry, and I turned away, intending to go home. It was nothing, just a girlhood tantrum, as common as scraped knees and tangled hair at nine years old.

But I turned back, probably to stick my tongue out or call her a name, and she was gone.

All of the sudden, she wasn't in the street. She wasn't in the house. Then my mother was on the phone and then there were other mothers on their doorsteps. Then it was getting dark and she still wasn't there, and somewhere around that point I realized something was very, very wrong.

I remember the street filling up with people. Flashlights after dark. I remember being made to go inside and standing at my bedroom window watching the beams move between the houses. I remember my mother's voice downstairs – a very specific register, low and controlled – and understanding from the sound of it alone that something had changed in the world and was not going to change back. The police came. Then more police. The word *missing* moved through the street like it carried on the wind.

I always wondered if I should have done something different. If I hadn't gotten angry, if I hadn't turned my back... would everything have changed?

I fold the flyer once along its original crease and set it on the nightstand.

My eyes move to the drawer in the nightstand. It's small, the wooden handle worn smooth from years of daily use. I reach for it and it doesn't open – just resists. Locked.

I think of the contents of my own nightstand drawer, how there's nothing in there worth locking up, and how I'd be even less likely to lock a nightstand drawer if I lived alone, on a street where no one else lived.

On a hunch, I look underneath the nightstand, and there, taped to the wood on the underside of the drawer is a small brass key on a loop of red yarn.

The key slides easily into the lock, and my first instinct upon opening the drawer was that I was right: it was an innocent-looking assortment of contents to lock up. A bottle of aspirin, half-empty. A handful of crumpled tissues. A pen, some reading glasses, a nickel.

It takes me a moment to realize that this is the first place in the house that isn't meticulously organized. This, *this*, feels more like my mother.

I shove aside the crumple of tissues and peer into the back corner of the drawer — there's something else back there. Something wrapped in tissue paper so carefully that the folds are still crisp. But I can see through the tissue paper, and my stomach lurches like it's been punched.

It can't be.

Hands shaking slightly, I unwrap it, and the tissue falls open like something being presented.

Cheap satin, yellow fading to cream at the center, the elastic long since loosened into a loop that barely holds its shape. A child's bow, the kind that came in multipacks, the kind that was never special on its own.

Please no, is all I can think.

I don't pick it up right away. I look at it where it sits in the folded tissue paper, offered. Waiting. The bedroom is very quiet. Late afternoon light shines through the curtains, low and angled, that particular autumn gold.

It's the bow I saw in a photograph just minutes ago, on Mara's MISSING flyer. It's the bow Mara wore almost every day.

She was wearing it the last time I saw her, the day she disappeared from our street.

There's no reason it should be in my mother's house, in her nightstand, inches away from where she slept.

After weeks of searching, the unspoken conclusion was that Mara would never be found. Whether she was taken by someone or her body

was eaten by wild animals in the woods, it seemed that everyone, almost collectively, accepted that she wasn't coming home.

That was when people started moving away.

Everyone else eventually left this street, except my mother. She chose to stay on the last street where Mara Osei was seen alive. In the last house left on that street. For almost twenty years after the incident, alone. And she kept Mara's bow in the drawer beside her bed.

The bow was never found. No trace of Mara ever was. That was the whole terrible point of it — she was simply gone, as completely as if she'd been erased. And yet here it is, in a nightstand drawer, on a street my mother refused to leave, wrapped in tissue paper with the folds still crisp.

But why? a voice in the back of my brain insists on asking, and the unwelcome answer comes almost immediately, inevitable yet impossible to believe.

She knew something.

About Mara's disappearance. Of course she did. I don't know what she knew, but I can feel that it's true, sure as the heavy feeling in my gut.

She knew something, and she stayed on this street long after receiving notices it wasn't safe, and she had this bow that belongs to a little girl who was never found.