
Death Match

Lincoln Child

CHAPTER ONE

It was the first time Maureen Bowman had ever heard the baby cry.

She hadn't noticed right away. In fact, it had taken five, perhaps ten minutes to register. She'd almost finished with the breakfast dishes when she stopped to listen, suds dripping from her yellow-gloved hands. No mistake: crying, and from the direction of the Thorpe house.

Maureen rinsed the last dish, wrapped the damp towel around it, and turned it over thoughtfully in her hands. Normally, the cry of a baby would go unnoticed in her neighborhood. It was one of those suburban sounds, like the tinkle of the ice cream truck or the bark of a dog, that passed just beneath the radar of conscious perception.

So why had she noticed? She dropped the plate into the drying rack.

Because the Thorpe baby never cried. In the balmy summer days, with the windows thrown wide, she'd often heard it cooing, gurgling, laughing. Sometimes, she'd heard the infant vocalizing to the sounds of classical music, her voice mingling in the breeze with the scent of pi-on pines.

Maureen wiped her hands on the towel, folded it carefully, then glanced up from the counter. But it was September now; the first day it really felt like autumn. In the distance, the purple flanks of the San Francisco peaks were wreathed in snow. She could see them, through a window shut tight against the chill.

She shrugged, turned, and walked away from the sink. All babies cried, sooner or later; you'd worry if they didn't. Besides, it was none of her business; she had plenty of things to take care of without messing in her neighbors' lives. It was Friday, always the busiest day of the week. Choir rehearsal for herself, ballet for Courtney, karate for Jason. And it was Jason's birthday; he'd demanded beef fondue and chocolate cake. That meant another trip to the new supermarket on Route 66. With a sigh, Maureen pulled a list from beneath a refrigerator magnet, grabbed a pencil from the phone stand, and began scrawling items.

Then she stopped. With the windows all closed, the Thorpe baby must really be cranking if she could hear . . .

Maureen forced the thought from her mind. The infant girl had barked her shin or something. Maybe she was becoming colicky, it wasn't too late for



that. In any case, the Thorpes were adults; they could deal with it. The Thorpes could deal with anything.

This last thought had a bitter undertone, and Maureen was quick to remind herself this was unfair. The Thorpes had different interests, ran in different circles; that was all.

Lewis and Lindsay Thorpe had moved to Flagstaff just over a year before. In a neighborhood full of empty nesters and retirees, they stood out as a young, attractive couple, and Maureen had been quick to invite them to dinner. They'd been charming guests, friendly and witty and very polite. The conversation had been easy, unforced. But the invitation had never been returned. Lindsay Thorpe was in her third trimester at the time; Maureen liked to believe that was the reason. And now, with a new baby, back full-time at work . . . it was all perfectly understandable.

She walked slowly across the kitchen, past the breakfast table, to the sliding glass door. From here, she had a better view of the Thorpes'. They'd been home the night before, she knew; she'd seen Lewis's car driving past around dinnertime. But now, as she peered out, all seemed quiet.

Except for the baby. God, the little thing had leather lungs . . .

Maureen stepped closer to the glass, craning her neck. That's when she saw the Thorpes' cars. Both of them, twin Audi A8s, the black one Lewis's and the silver one Lindsay's, parked in the breezeway.

Both home, on a Friday? This was seriously weird. Maureen pressed her nose up against the glass.

Then she stepped back. Now listen, you're being exactly the kind of nosy neighbor you promised you'd never be. There could be any number of explanations. The little girl was sick, the parents were home to tend to her. Maybe grandparents were arriving. Or they were getting ready to go on vacation. Or . . .

The child's cries had begun to take on a hoarse, ragged quality. And now, without thinking, Maureen put her hand on the glass door and slid it open.

Wait, I can't just go over there. It'll be nothing. I'll embarrass them, make myself look like a fool.

She looked over at the counter. The night before, she'd baked an enormous quantity of tollhouse cookies for Jason's birthday. She'd bring some of those over; that was a reasonable, neighborly thing to do.

Quickly, she grabbed a paper plate - thought better of it - replaced it with a piece of her good china, arranged a dozen cookies on it, and covered them with plastic wrap. She scooped up the plate, made for the door.

Then she hesitated. Lindsay, she remembered, was a gourmet chef. A few Saturdays before, when they'd met at their mailboxes, the woman had



apologized for being unable to chat because she had a burnt-almond ganache boiling on the stove. What would they think of a homely plate of tollhouse cookies?

You're thinking about this way, way too much. Just go on over there.

What was it, exactly, she found so intimidating about the Thorpes? The fact they didn't seem to need her friendship? They were well educated, but Maureen had her own cum laude degree in English. They had lots of money, but so did half the neighborhood. Maybe it was how perfect they seemed together, how ideally suited to each other. It was almost uncanny. That one time they'd come over, Maureen had noticed how they unconsciously held hands; how they frequently completed each other's sentences; how they'd shared countless glances that, though brief, seemed pregnant with meaning. 'Disgustingly happy' was how Maureen's husband termed them, but Maureen didn't think it disgusting at all. In fact, she'd found herself feeling envious.

Steadying her grip on the plate of cookies, she walked to the door, pulled back the screen, and stepped outside.

It was a beautiful, crisp morning, the smell of cedar strong in the thin air. Birds were piping in the branches overhead, and from down the hill, in the direction of town, she could hear the mournful call of the Southwest Chief as it pulled into the train station.

Out here, the crying was much louder.

Maureen strode purposefully across the lawn of colored lava and stepped over the border of railroad ties. This was the first time she'd actually set foot on the Thorpes' property. It felt strange, somehow. The backyard was enclosed, but between the boards of the fence she could make out the Japanese garden Lewis had told them about. He was fascinated by Japanese culture, and had translated several of the great haiku poets; he'd mentioned some names Maureen had never heard of. What she could see of the garden looked tranquil. Serene. At dinner that night, Lewis had told a story about the Zen master who'd asked an apprentice to tidy his garden. The apprentice had spent all day at it, removing every last fallen leaf, sweeping and polishing the stone paths until they gleamed, raking the sand into regular lines. At last, the Zen master had emerged to scrutinize the work. 'Perfect?' the apprentice asked as he displayed the meticulous garden. But the master shook his head. Then he gathered up a handful of pebbles and scattered them across the spotless sand. 'Now it is perfect,' he replied. Maureen remembered how Lewis's eyes had sparkled with amusement as he told the story.

She hurried forward, the crying strong in her ears.

Ahead was the Thorpes' kitchen door. Maureen stepped up to it, carefully arranged a bright smile on her face, and pulled open the screen. She began to knock, but with the pressure of her first rap the door swung inward. She took a step.

'Hello?' she said. 'Lindsay? Lewis?'

Here, in the house, the wailing was almost physically painful. She hadn't known an infant could cry so loud. Wherever the parents were, they certainly couldn't hear her over the baby. How could they be ignoring it? Was it possible they were showering? Or engaged in some kinky sex act? Abruptly, she felt self-conscious, and glanced around. The kitchen was beautiful: professional-grade appliances, glossy black counters. But it was empty.

The kitchen led directly into a breakfast nook, gilded by morning light. And there was the child: up ahead, in the archway between the breakfast nook and some other space that, from what she could see, looked like a living room. The infant was strapped tightly into her high chair, facing the living room. The little face was mottled from crying, and the cheeks were stained with mucus and tears.

Maureen rushed forward. 'Oh, you poor thing.' Balancing the cookies awkwardly, she fished for a tissue, cleaned the child's face. 'There, there.'

But the crying did not ease. The baby was pounding her little fists, staring fixedly ahead, inconsolable.

It took quite some time to wipe the red face clean, and by the time she was done Maureen's ears were ringing with the noise. It wasn't until she was pushing the tissue back into the pocket of her jeans that she thought to follow the child's line of sight into the living room.

And when she did, the cry of the child, the crash of china as she dropped the cookies, were instantly drowned by the sound of her screams.