

IN THE SHADOW OF
THE WONDER WHEEL
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Prologue

Willard Thompson climbed the porch steps and checked the exterior locks on the outside of his front door. He pulled at his boarded-up windows: secure. It didn't hurt to be extra careful. He headed down the alley to the side door, looked around, then turned his key in each of his three locks to let himself into the dark apartment. Quickly he latched the door behind him before turning on the overhead light. The bottle of scotch on the kitchen counter called to him, and he poured a generous amount into a large tumbler. The phone rang. With a deep sigh, he lowered the glass and lifted the receiver.

“Yeah?” he said. He didn't have to look at the caller ID to know who it was. It could only be one of two people calling: the guy who ordered him to do the abortion, or the guy who bought babies.

This was the first. He lifted the notepad and took down the information: obstetrician, location. Then he took down the name, Mallory McGill.

What did the name matter? What did anything matter?

“Are you listening,” the voice asked.

“Yeah. I got it,” he said.

“She thinks she's having a normal delivery. And oh, she's almost full term.”

Those words, “Almost full term,” made him smile. A live baby fetched a good bit of change.

Tuesday, July 13

Chapter 1

“Wake up. Wake up, Ms. McGill.” Then more loudly, “Ms. McGill, I know you can hear me. I know it.”

“Detective, can’t you wait with your questions? This girl’s lost a lot of blood.”

Teri Cardello turned toward the nurse, her eyes still on the girl. “Sorry, nurse. But this girl can hear me. She’s not fooling me.”

“Teri, let me try.” Her partner leaned closer to the bed and said more quietly, “Ms. McGill, I’m Detective Rothman, Sam Rothman. And this is my partner, Teri Cardello. We’re here to help you. Can you hear me?”

The young woman raised her fingers slightly. She opened her eyes and squinted against the morning light that flooded the room. She tried to raise her arm to shield them but couldn’t. Agitated, she tried harder to move.

“Honey, stay still,” the nurse said, adjusting the intravenous line. “Your arm’s pinned down.”

The girl turned toward the beeping sounds of the monitor beside the bed. She lifted her head slightly. Her grey eyes darted around the room. Her head fell back to the pillow. “Where am I?”

The nurse gently brushed an unruly tangle of pale yellow hair, matted with dry blood, from Mallory’s ashen face.

“You’re in the hospital. Coney Island Hospital.”

“My baby. She came?”

Cardello moved closer. “A better question,” she said, doing little to hide the loathing in her voice, “is what did you do with it?”

“What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“Your baby.”

Mallory’s eyes opened wide. Her hands shot to her stomach, wrenching the line from her arm. Blood spurted where the needle had been.

“My baby. Where is my baby?” She thrashed about trying to free herself from the bedding tucked around her. Her arms ripped at the sheets that held her.

“Easy honey. Easy. We’ll find your baby,” the nurse said, pinning her patient’s shoulders down.

Mallory wrestled with the sheets. “Please. Please.”

The nurse reinserted the IV and taped the needle firmly in place. She adjusted the pressure on the tubing, and the glucose, saline, and antibiotic solutions dripped slowly into the line, through the needle, and into the arm of the terrified girl.

“Can’t you see you’re upsetting this young woman?”

“It can’t be helped. The baby,” Cardello demanded moving toward the bed again. “What did you do with your baby?”

The nurse stepped aside.

Rothman moved closer to Cardello. “Ms. McGill,” he said more gently, “if there’s anything you can tell us. Anything at all...”

“It will go much easier for you if you tell us everything,” Cardello interrupted. “Believe me.”

The young woman eyed one detective and then the other.

“Teri, give her a chance.” Rothman said.

Cardello turned away. She grabbed a pair of rubber gloves from the box on the night stand, slid her hands into them, and opened the locker at the foot of the bed. She stuffed Mallory’s brightly colored dress and her white bra into a brown paper bag. Then she put each of her sandals into separate bags.

“What are you doing? I don’t understand.”

“Evidence. We have to take your things,” Rothman said softly.

“Evidence? For what? What happened?” Mallory thrashed about. “I just want my baby.”

“I’ll bet,” Cardello said under her breath.

The physician arrived just then. He looked from the detectives to the distraught woman flailing about in the rumpled bed. “Nurse, get me five milligrams of Valium. Fast.”

“Doctor, we need to find that baby.”

“Look, I don’t know about the baby. This girl was brought to the ER early this morning, hemorrhaging from the vaginal area. We removed her placenta, and stitched up her cervix. She’s stabilized now.”

“Anything else?”

“A couple of bruises on her buttocks.”

“Any foreign substances?”

“No sign of drugs in her toxicology report.”

Detective Rothman turned his attention back to Mallory. "Ms. McGill, you have to help us. Your baby may still be alive."

Cardello slammed the locker door shut and, evidence bags in hand, stomped out of the room.

She was at the elevator, banging the button over and over, when Rothman caught up to her. He placed his hand over hers. "That won't make it come any faster, Teri."

The color climbed up and over her high cheekbones as her fury grew. Her olive skin turned crimson. "Maybe it's still alive?" she shrieked.

A passing orderly slowed to see what the commotion was about. Cardello lowered her voice. "Alive? You've got to be kidding. She threw that baby into the creek as sure as, as sure as.... I had to get out of there. Couldn't stand looking at her. Her act didn't fool me."

It was Cardello who usually said, "Let's wait until the evidence is in," but ten years working with her had taught Rothman that nothing made her angrier than a child being victimized, and when it was an infant... well, her rage had to come out. Until she cooled down, and her rational judgment kicked in, trying to reason with her would be useless.

Still, he said quietly, "You've got to stop taking cases like this so personally."

"How should I take it? Honest, decent women try every method known to have a child; adoption, in vitro fertilization, they go through every cent they have, and this—this piece of work—throws her baby into the creek?"

"We don't know that for sure. Maybe something happened—against her will."

"Give me a break, Sam. If you're referring to the case of the baby cut from a pregnant woman's uterus by some nut job, this one's nothing like that. This woman had a vaginal birth."

The shades were closed when Mallory woke again later in the day. A broad-shouldered man sat in the shadows beside the bed.

"Keith, Keith, you're here."

"No, Mallory. It's Brad. Keith's gone. Remember?"

"Oh yes, Keith's gone... but my baby. Brad, where is she?"

Brad reached for Mallory's hand.

"I think you need to tell us that." Detective Cardello said.

Brad and Mallory turned their heads to see two figures standing in the hallway.

“Are you Brad Dawson?”

Brad nodded.

“We found your card in Ms. McGill’s pocket.”

“Thank you for calling me.”

“Would you mind stepping into the hall for a minute?”

Brad turned back to Mallory, smiled, and patted her hand reassuringly.

“I’ll be right back,” he whispered.

“Exactly what is your relationship with Ms. McGill?”

“Why do you want to know that?”

“Your relationship?”

“She was my brother’s girlfriend. She was pregnant with his baby.”

“Was pregnant?”

“Well, isn’t that why she’s here—in the maternity ward? She must have had the baby.” Dawson caught the glance the two detectives exchanged. “Just what’s going on,” he asked.

“We’ll be asking the questions,” Detective Cardello said. “She has the right to a legal defense.”

“I’m her legal defense.”

And you are...?”

“An attorney.”

“How very convenient that she had your card with her.”

“I told you, she was my brother’s girlfriend. Now you tell me what’s going on.”

“The police found Ms. McGill near Coney Island Creek. Passed out. Blood all around—on her hands. No sign of the baby. No one else around.”

“Oh my god.” Brad reached for the wall to support himself. “No. That can’t be. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“A bloody trail to the water... That’s all they found. They’re preparing to send divers down at dawn.”

Brad returned to Mallory’s room and pulled the chair closer to the bed. “Mallory,” he said taking her hand in his, “you need to tell me what happened.”

“Brad, I don’t *know* what happened.”

“What do you remember? Did you do something?”

“Do what?”

His voice caught, “Kill your baby?”

“Brad, you can’t believe that I...”

“Mallory, you know I’m here for you. I’ll help you in any way I can, but the evidence... it will be easier if you tell them what happened before they find... the baby’s body.”

“I don’t know. I can’t remember anything. Just pain. But my baby—” a look of terror spread across her face, “—she can’t be dead.”

Brad took her hand in his just as Detective Cardello came into the room. “Don’t say anything more now,” he whispered.

“Ms. McGill, make sure that you remain in the area. We’ll want to talk to you again after the divers finish their search. Is that clear?”

Mallory turned her head away.

“Ms. McGill?”

“I’ll take responsibility for Ms. McGill. She’ll come home with me,” Brad said.

“No. I have to find my baby.” Mallory pulled her hand free of Brad’s. She shook the bed railing. “Let me out of here. I can’t stay here. My baby needs me.”

The nurse came in. “Here, here honey. This will relax you.”

“No. No. Don’t...”