

Prologue

Concealing his intentions behind a smile, he knelt beside her bathtub where she reclined in serenity, this woman he'd once loved. Her hair floated in a sienna cloud around her still handsome features; hair that had been glorious, even luxuriant before the chemo destroyed it. Her submerged figure was a sad reminder of the passion they shared for half a lifetime.

His pulse thickened, not with desire, but instead with regret, and something darker.

When she'd invited him in, she said she had something to tell him. He'd expected to hear the sad details of her medical fate, a regretful leave-taking, a sorrowful farewell. How wrong he'd been. And how stunned by her tangled revelation. Her dire words and their implied threat felt like an immense weight crushing him, cutting off his very air.

Leaving him no options but this.

Her white shoulders were slippery with bath oil. He stroked her still fine skin, then tightened his fingers just enough to get a firmer grip without leaving marks.

Now he leaned over her, forcing her under, his sleeves and wristwatch plunging into the bathwater. Beneath the churning surface, her eyes sprang open, perhaps in shock.

The water surged and sloshed as he held her down and down and down against her feeble resistance. But even as he leaned over her, his arms rigid and unrelenting, a thought wormed its way beneath his grim determination: had he been manipulated into doing this?

Just before her body's autonomous final shudder under his grasp, she had locked her gaze upon his, and smiled. *Smiled!*

It was only in retrospect that the meaning of that smile became clear.

It was triumph.

PART I: THE ABDUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

Two men were parked across the street from the apartment building. They'd arrived some time earlier and settled in for the evening. Roger Rayles, skinny and ripped and tattooed, with eyes the color of chipped ice, was methodically working his way through a bag of pistachios. Howie Teeger, soft and round, fitfully read a paperback, but was too distracted to get through many pages. They spoke little as they watched the windows of one of the units, and waited.

Cars passed now and then.

They had their collection of equipment: the gloves, the duct tape, the handcuffs, the blankets. And they had their orders: Take the boy. Take the woman. Bring them to the cabin and wait for further instructions.

After a time, the sparse traffic ended. Now all that stood between them and their prey were the apartment lights. Not that darkness was a prerequisite to their line of work. It was simply its natural color.

CHAPTER TWO

A hulking shadow filled the bedroom doorway, a frightening man-shape in the bad-dream darkness. It loomed closer until the boy sat up in bed and screamed. The man leaped at the boy, wrenched his arm and covered his mouth with sticky tape. The boy's bladder released and his urine soaked the bed. The man's face was obscured by a black gauzelike covering. He swore and yanked the boy up and half-dragged him to the darkened living room where another faceless man was handcuffing the woman's hands and feet.

"Put the kid on the sofa next to her." To the woman he said, "You. Calm him down and we won't put tape on your mouth. If anyone squeaks, it'll be their last. Got it?"

The woman was shivering. "Please don't hurt him. Gabriel is developmentally dis-- He looks like a teen but mentally he's only like a four year old. He doesn't always do what I tell him. Sometimes he just freaks. Like when he's frightened. He doesn't understand."

"But you understand. Make him shut up."

The other man, shorter and stockier, said, "I'll find his pills." He went down the hall.

Gabriel twisted and snorted, his mouth glued shut by the tape. He arched his back and kicked his feet.

The woman leaned closer. "Shh, shh, be a good boy, Gabe, be good, honey, just be quiet and they won't hurt us."

The man clicked the metal cuffs on the boy's wrists and ankles. The other man returned with his pills and a cup of water. Taking the tape away, he made Gabriel take a pill and drink the water. He put a new piece of tape on his mouth. "It's freezing out there. I'll get the blankets."

The other one said, "Like I give a shit."

"We're supposed to keep them hidden, remember?"

"Oh yeah."

The stockier man returned with quilts, wrapped their victims and picked the boy up. The other man picked up the woman and they carried them down the back stairs to the parking lot. A car trunk popped open, exposing filthy rags and two long shovels. The men dumped the two of them into the trunk. The woman cried out, "No, please!"

The trunk lid slammed shut. The interior smelled of gasoline. Gabriel wiped his nose on the blanket and snuggled up next to the woman. The shovels rattled and clanked as the car moved down the street.

After a long and twisting ride, the car came to a stop.

The car doors opened and the car rose as the men got out. Talking quietly, their footsteps receded. Then it was quiet, except for the crickets.

The footsteps returned. Keys jingled and the trunk popped open. The men with no faces

loomed above them in the dark. Gabriel shrank back.

“You take the boy,” said the taller, skinnier man.

The other leaned close, grunted and pulled Gabriel out and slung him over his shoulder. As the boy was being carried up a walkway towards a cabin, he suddenly stiffened.

“God damn son of a bitch!” the man howled. “Fuckin’ retard pissed on me!”

The stench of urine was powerful. Gabriel’s pajamas were soaked. The man hauled him up the walk and through the front door of the cabin. He leaned down and dumped him on the bare floor. “You stay there,” he growled. He peeled off his coat and held it away. “God *damn* it!”

The other man entered with the woman over his shoulder. He put her on the sofa and laughed. “Take it out back and hose it off, Howie. But make it fast. We’ve got things to do.”

While the one called Howie went out to wash his coat, the other man, the bossy one, brought out a camera on a tripod. He set it up and pressed buttons.

He came over and pulled at the woman until she was sitting up.

“What do you want with us?” Her voice shook.

“Shut up.”

Howie returned. The bossy one said, “Set the kid up on the sofa next to her.”

Howie leaned over the boy. “Don’t you piss on me again or I’ll break your goddam neck, understand? Fuckin’ retard.”

Gabriel shrank back as the man grabbed him.

The other man operated the videocamera for a time, until he was satisfied with the result.

PART II: THE CALL

CHAPTER THREE

Zaag squinted at the clay head through his cigarette smoke. The thing was lifeless. He stepped back, studying its form. Digging a fingernail into it, he carved another broken line from the nostril down past the outer edge of the lip. He scowled. The expression still wasn't right. He still hadn't captured the bitterness, the failed expectations, the thousand disappointments engraved on the drooping eyelids and sunken cheeks of the actual living model.

He checked the set of black and whites taped to the wall behind his workbench. The photos used shadows as much as light to bring out his character.

In comparison, his sculpture lacked the particularity that had made John so perfect an avatar of failure and despair. The old man had posed shirtless in front of the art class Zaag attended when he had time. He liked working with modeling clay; liked the way it took shape under his fingers and the engraving tools he used. Liked, too, how the process opened up a different room in his own damned head.

Six in the morning. He'd been up nearly two hours. Waking up at four a.m. as he too often did, was annoying. But at least it gave him time to pursue his hobby. It was more therapy than art. In fact his police-assigned therapist had suggested he take up the pastime to help him work off his accumulated poisons. The cynicism, the dark urges and the violence that lay so near the surface. Or at least distract him for a time.

Maybe if he'd taken up sculpting earlier in life, his inner demons might have been soothed enough to put less pressure on his marriage and his family. --On the other hand, his efforts might have merely handed his wife and kids another target to sneer at.

He went down the short hall to the bathroom, took one last drag on his cigarette, dropped it into the toilet, peeled out of his underwear and stepped into the shower.

Lathering up his hair reminded him he was due for a visit to the barber. He was letting himself go. It was sloppy. And speaking of sloppy, he was carrying fifteen or twenty pounds more than he needed. He shouldn't have eaten all that turkey and stuffing at Tulley's, the cop bar in Redwood City. Or washed the meal down with all that beer.

Or come home and hit the whiskey afterwards. That had been particularly stupid. But being alone on family holidays sometimes made you do stupid things.

He was just reaching for his towel when the ringing of his phone jarred him out of his self-absorption. He dried his graying hair and his genitals before picking up. "Yeah, what."

"Sorry to call so early, but something's come up. You're needed right away. I'll text you the address."

Zaag heard the ping, checked the location. "What's it about?"

“Missing kid. We’ve got half a dozen uniforms on scene. But with Thanksgiving, it’ll take a while to gather the full complement. It could get messy. Nate Krasner’s there. He’ll fill you in.”

“Krasner taking lead?” Zaag was hopeful.

“Sorry, no. He’s already on overtime. He’s been on duty since noon yesterday, working other cases, so he’s toast. And he’s got next week off, so Hansen wants you to lead on this.”

Zaag exhaled. Hansen wasn’t exactly his biggest fan. Not after his last screwup. A case of this kind would bring all kinds of media attention, Hansen would likely use the opportunity to hang him out to dry.

And bring his semi-distinguished career to an end.