

1

A naked bulb hangs from a frayed cord tied to a wooden rafter. The dull, yellow light keeps most of the small room, its water rotted walls, grime encrusted corners, and stained concrete floor, in shadows.

There is no furniture, so the little girl sits very still on the cold floor and tries not to shiver. She barely holds back tears and does not make a sound. Her fright-filled green eyes watch two pairs of other eyes, narrow and menacing, watching her in return.

As she stares at the creatures guarding the door, she thinks of her bedroom at home filled with dolls and colorful stuffed animals. One in particular she loves is a black and brown dog that reminds her of her puppy, Snuffles. She wishes she could be with Snuffles, or at least with her stuffed animals.

Her dad took Snuffles when he went away.

Her dad...

She doesn't like to remember the time before Dad left: the shouts, the slaps, the cries in the night.

She is scared because the room is dark and she doesn't know where she is. The mean animals by the door growl and snarl whenever she moves or utters a sound. She hopes her mom will come for her...hopes her mom can find her.

She doesn't understand what happened, but the events replay in her mind.

** * **

The weather was warm for November and Mom said they both needed a day of play. After a Happy Meal at McDonald's, they drove to the park where she wandered around the new wooden playground. She bounced from one swing to another, plunged down the slides, ran through the obstacle course, and teetered back and forth on the colorful animals mounted on giant springs. Mom sat on a bench reading a book.

Half way up a wall of tires, she realized Mom had disappeared. At first, she didn't notice the big man. He wore a zippered black jacket, black jeans, and his arms and legs bulged huge. His mean face was covered with a lot of bumps and scars. Before she could scream, the man grabbed her and held a cloth over her mouth. When she breathed, she smelled something sweet and sickly. She tried to cough, but instead fell asleep.

When she awoke, she found herself in a spacious room, with bright lights, a camera, a pile of clothing on a chair, and a box filled with toys and other strange looking items.

The big man who had grabbed her stood near the box. Another man stood behind the camera, while a third lurked in the gloomy shadows. A large sheet stretched across some of the floor, one end tacked to part of the wall.

The cameraman spoke in a soft voice and told her she was a good girl, a pretty girl. He said a lot of people wanted to see pictures of her. If she acted nice and followed directions, she could wear new clothes and make-up. She didn't understand. Where was Mom? Her heart thudded hard in her chest and her stomach ached in fear. The cameraman led her over to the box and showed her what he wanted her to wear. He kept telling her how pretty she looked and held up some of the outfits and helped her with the make-up. She did like the dresses with the frill and lace, but had to undress in front of the three men each time she changed clothes. She felt embarrassed even though the cameraman kept reassuring her. When she asked about her mom, the man said, "This is for your mother. She wants to have a bunch of pictures of you." On the sheet, the man posed her in various positions: standing, sitting, kneeling, or lying down. Sometimes she held dolls or Beanie Babies. For another set of pictures, she grasped a tube with an electrical cord and other strange objects.

The camera clicked and flashed and whirred. Hardly any words passed between the men, just whispered or gestured directions from the one in the shadows. The big man stood silent, staring. His scars shaded by the spotlights made him look like a monster.

She didn't like the pictures. She didn't like the way the cameraman posed her. It felt ucky and bad. When he forced her to lie with her legs apart, she said she wanted to go home and wanted her mom. The cameraman offered her candy and promised she could keep one of the dolls. When she started crying, the man in the shadows became angry and stopped the pictures.

After the cameraman left, she put on her own clothes. The two other men talked quietly so she couldn't hear, then they argued.

The big man became angry. "What the hell we supposed to do with her until Monday night?" "Quiet, you fool," the other hissed. Their voices lowered again and she couldn't understand any more words. She thought she recognized the dark man's voice, but too afraid to say anything, stayed silent. Why would he be here? After a few minutes, the big man went outside and

returned with two large growling dogs and directed the girl to a smaller room.

She backed away and wedged herself into a corner.

The big man knelt in front of her and leaned very close.

"Don't move or make any noise," he whispered, his breath smelling awful. "If you do, you will make these animals very mad. When they get mad, they bite. So keep quiet, or else!"

Then he left her alone.

She didn't like the dogs. They were not like Snuffles at all with their huge heads, gigantic mouths, and sharp teeth.

** * **

The girl sits very still in the cold room. She hugs the doll and tries not to cry.

2

A beautiful angel over the weekend, Mother Nature became a downright bitch come Monday morning. Knifing winds, depressing iron gray clouds, and decaying leaves blew. No snow yet, but the old gal sure threatened to shake the dandruff off her gruesome head.

My name is Mallory Petersen and I hate Monday mornings. Being the owner of a private detective agency as well as Petersen's Black Belt Academy, I don't necessarily have normal weekends. The last one, however, I considered special, as I participated in something I truly enjoy. Friday afternoon I left my secretary, Darren, in charge of the office (which is his role most of the time anyway), and drove to Chicago to participate in a taekwondo tournament.

Saturday morning, I earned a second place trophy in the forms competition in the women's Fourth Degree Black Belt, 17-29 year old division, a second place trophy in the weapons competition, and a first place in sparring. The rest of the day I judged other rings of competitors including the four, five, and six year olds. Those "Tiny Tigers" are such darlings. Disciplined to sit straight and to be respectful, to say "Sir" and "Ma'am," courteous enough not to interrupt, they try so hard to show off what they've learned from their instructors. They are wonderful to work with and it's a delight to see their faces when they receive their trophies and special certificates.

After the tournament, I enjoyed a hearty meal at a neighborhood Mexican joint sharing taekwondo stories with some of my fellow black belts, drove the three hundred plus miles back to Des Moines, slept in on Sunday, and relaxed all afternoon and evening watching stupid television shows and reading the latest Archer Mayor

novel.

Alas, Monday morning arrived too soon.

It's not that I didn't want to go to work. On the contrary, I love what I do. If I didn't, I'd do...well, something else, I suppose. Anyway, my muscles still ached after Saturday's tournament and I've always hated mornings in general, especially Mondays. As a child, I'd constantly sleep in as long as Mom would let me. All through my four years of high school, I usually hustled in during opening announcements to the disapproving stare and a snide comment from the principal. In college, my roommate kept inventing devious methods of waking me. I only held a little grudge...I threw her clothes in front of the men's dormitory during the night.

So, I hauled my tired, but twenty-eight year old, well toned, (and what the hell, I'll say it) damn sexy body from under the cozy covers and into the chilled bathroom. I stifled a squeal as my bare butt met cold porcelain. After enjoying a lukewarm shower followed by a well-balanced breakfast of slightly fermented chocolate milk, stale raisin bran, burnt toast, and overcooked eggs, I donned my Sam Spade trench coat and matching fedora. I gave Mother Nature a hearty raspberry, and drove to the office.

* * *

Darren, my secretary with the unpronounceable surname, had already taken his place behind his desk. He usually beats me into the office, though I haven't yet been able to figure out how he accomplishes the feat. He lives in suburban Saylorville, which is at least twenty miles from downtown, is enrolled in several college classes, yet somehow is planted in his chair when I arrive. I have to admit he is a faithful, loyal, and dedicated employee. Although we don't have a romantic relationship, I once thought he carried a secret crush for me until he mentioned a girlfriend. I felt a little disappointed, but it's another story not worth getting into right now.

As I entered the office, he looked at me with a reserved, silent smile and puppy dog eyes. Across from him, a weeping woman about five years my senior sat quivering in the lobby chair. She wore a plain khaki colored blouse, faded jeans, and clutched several tissues. She looked well into the process of shaking herself to pieces with anxiety.

I greeted Darren and he introduced Cheryl McGee. He told me he'd found her shivering against the wind at the front door. He offered hot tea and assured her I'd arrive

momentarily. I mentally kicked myself for unknowingly keeping a client waiting with my morning lethargy. I guided her into my office and despite her sobbing she stood dumbfounded at the doorway. *Sigh!* Every one of my clients reacts the same way. The entire building used to be an art gallery with the second floor looking like a warehouse for a stoned Citizen Kane. The gallery moved exclusively to the first floor, the kitsch upstairs removed, leaving the cathedral ceiling and the overkill decorative gilt and sculpture. Someone once commented the room reminded him of Draco's office in the James Bond movie, Moonraker. The hardwood floor stretches for about a mile before you reach my desk, chair, coat rack, small file cabinet, client chairs, and Dr. Pepper stocked mini-fridge. I waited patiently while Cheryl regained her bearings and slowly shuffled across the floor, gazing around, unsure whether she hadn't stepped into another dimension. While she seated herself, I hung my coat and hat on the hall tree and took my place behind the desk. Ms. McGee (I noticed the pale circle on her ring finger), finally looking a bit more composed, settled her sad eyes on me, swiped at her stray brassy-colored bangs, and made an all too familiar opening remark.

"This place is a little weird."

I smiled and sailed on. "How can I help you Ms. McGee?"

My question brought back her distress. Her eyes glistened with tears, but she managed to speak through her choked up voice. "It's my—my daughter."

"Yes, ma'am?" I softened my tone and slid the tissue box closer.

"Her name is Cindy."

"Yes, ma'am."

"She's been kidnapped."

Although not my first experience with this situation, I mentally cringed. I hate when kids are taken. Who doesn't? Cheryl McGee proceeded to tell her story. She and her eight-year-old daughter had visited Union Park two days previous. While Cindy amused herself on the playground equipment, Cheryl contented herself with a book. After about thirty minutes, she went to use the nearby restroom. The girl was gone when Cheryl came out of the building. After a fruitless search of the entire playground and surrounding area, she approached a couple walking nearby and, by now desperate, pleaded for help. They called the police and the investigation began. After a day and a half of

no phone calls demanding ransom and no positive results from the police, she decided to come to me.

A short tale, quick and to the point. I asked her the whereabouts of the girl's father and she stiffened for a second. I didn't understand why a reasonable question should startle her. She recovered and explained Charles' departure from their lives. She tried to sugar coat the explanation, but the signs suggested domestic abuse. After the divorce, she kept the house, but sold it when the bills started to pile up and the combination of her meager salary and Charlie's infrequent alimony and child support checks couldn't cover everything. She and Cindy lived in an apartment complex near Union Park.

"We barely make it," Cheryl said. "I mean, I don't have a lot of money even after selling the house, so I can't pay you much, but Cindy is all I have in this world and..."

She started to ramble and I needed to keep her in control. "Let's talk about money later," I replied. "I want to start over and ask some questions. The police have probably asked these before, but I need a complete picture."

"Okay." She sniffed and wiped her eyes.

"In the past couple weeks, or even months, have you noticed any strangers in the neighborhood?"

"No. No, I don't think so."

"Anyone paying unusual attention to your apartment?"

"No."

"Nobody driving by numerous times without any purpose, slowing down as they pass?"

"No."

"Notice anybody watching your daughter when she's outside?"

"She doesn't go outside," she said and wiped her nose.

"I mean, we live in an apartment building and she doesn't play outside unless I'm with her. Anyway, it's getting too cold to go out much."

"Where does Cindy attend school?"

"Pierce Elementary. Over on Dixon Street."

"Has she mentioned strangers hanging around the school?"

"No."

"Have the teachers noticed anyone?"

"No. I mean, they haven't said anything to me."

"Has anyone else mentioned any strangers? Other parents or neighbors, perhaps?"

"No," she repeated, frustrated. "Nobody said anything."

I wrote a note to check with the school.

"How does she go to school? Do you drive her?"

"I take her to school and she rides the bus home."

"Are you at the apartment when she arrives?"

"She goes next door until I get home from work."

"Next door?"

"To Mrs. Hillcrest's. She's a widow. She watches Cindy every afternoon."

"Trustworthy?"

"Oh my, yes," Cheryl said, sounding relieved she could rely on someone. "I mean, she allows Cindy to come over every so often to bake cookies, make noodles, that kind of thing."

"How about the other neighbors?"

"What about them?"

"How well do you know them?"

"Well, I'm not one to socialize. I mean, I don't host any parties and neither does anyone else in the building."

I kept a concerned expression on my face, but if she said the words 'I mean' again, I thought I might lose it. / *mean, really!*

I jotted more notes. "Have you received any strange phone calls or non-phone calls? Hang ups, I mean."

"No."