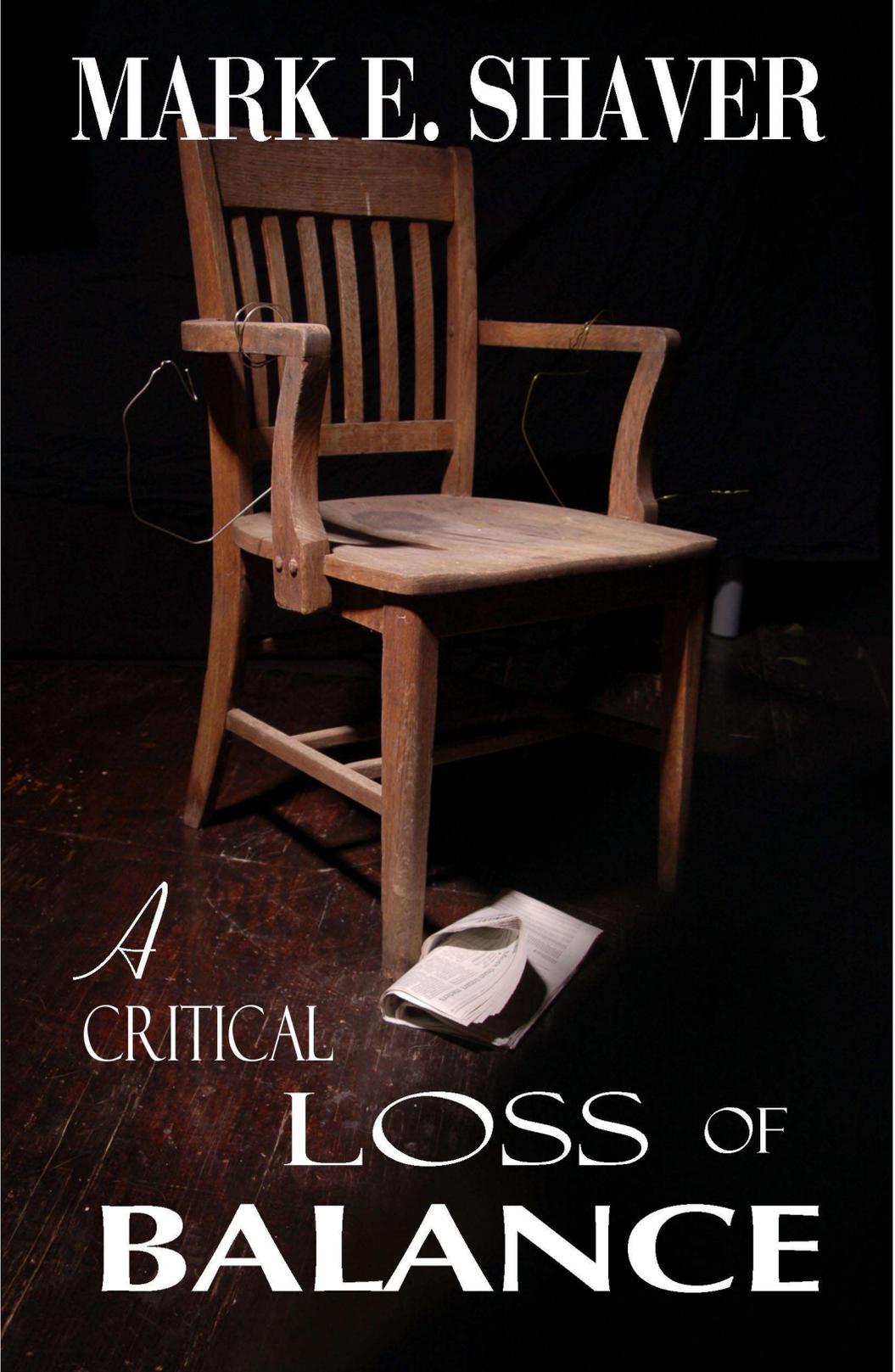


MARK E. SHAVER

A photograph of a wooden chair with a slatted back and armrests, set against a dark background. A newspaper is lying on the floor in front of the chair. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the wood and the paper.

*A*  
CRITICAL  
LOSS OF  
**BALANCE**

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, businesses and incidents are used fictitiously and are purely the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments or locales is entirely coincidental.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It's been said that one should write about what one knows. If this were to be taken literally I would, by virtue of my past writings, and especially in light of this book, be a criminal. I have no first hand knowledge of any of the organized crime or bank robbery that I have written about in the past, or the sort of kidnappings that take place in this book. I do however, know how I would react were I forced into the situations that I have written about. It doesn't require the experience of a criminal to do that; only a vivid imagination, and to that I plead guilty. The people I most credit this to are my parents. They provided me with a loving, nurturing environment as I grew up and enough changes of scenery to keep my life interesting. For that I am eternally grateful.

I must also extend a very special thank you to two very dear friends; Gilbert and Faye Stech, owners and operators of Stech Auction Service and Auction Barn Realty nestled away in the quiet, rural community of Weimar, Texas. The chair pictured on the cover of this book is courtesy of them.

Armed with the chair, Frank Blumburg drew on his mastery of the lens to create the perfect cover photograph. His talents and vision are greatly appreciated.

And finally to my wife, Brenda, and my son, Matthew, go my undying gratitude for enduring the hours of my absence while writing this book and managing a career at the same time. Their commitment to me, and to reviewing my words as many time as I asked to ensure that I sound my best, is a debt that I will happily spend the rest of my life repaying.

## PREFACE

Within all of us lies a myriad of needs. These needs vary from the obvious; love, nourishment, passion, acceptance, to those which are not so readily evident. Of those, perhaps the most critical, and certainly most misunderstood, is balance; that delicate combination of night and day, of love and hate, of pleasure and pain, of give and take, and most profoundly, of right and wrong.

The degree to which we deal with the inequities of day-to-day life is largely dependent upon how great a portion of our inner being this sense of balance occupies. It is shaped, though in some cases, dictated upon, by our values, our beliefs, and more importantly, our emotions.

Emotion can have both a positive and a negative effect on balance. It can redefine balance by moving the needle, as it were, to a point either to the left or to the right of center. And as that needle moves, so do our perceptions, interpretations, and ultimately our actions, accordingly.

Many times satisfaction remains absent even though balance has been achieved. When this occurs, the criteria by which balance is decided must be re-examined, and in some cases, adjusted. Most of the time there are a set of unwritten parameters for this adjustment, a list of 'do's and don'ts' as it were, that we all subconsciously subscribe to. When we adjust outside of these established parameters, the rules of play change dramatically and become much fewer in number.

It is the eyes that typically tell that these lines have been crossed. This distinction however, is only evident to others who have crossed those lines themselves.

Hence, those who walk with their eyes scanning the sidewalk, or those who avoid eye contact all together are retroactively suspects. Once one is considered as possibly having crossed the line, one's past will usually confirm the notion. If this is true, there will have been some event that skewed the criteria and, by way of compensation, adjusted the scale.

Many such people walk among us every day. Few though, actually act on their amended codes of conduct. Some however, do.

This is the story of one such man.

For Marjorie Shaver  
Whose love and compassion were truly without bounds

# A CRITICAL LOSS OF BALANCE

## CHAPTER ONE

The soiled wooden chair sat empty near the back wall of the dark warehouse. Black paint smeared deliberately, though carelessly, across the window panes blocked out the sun, but allowed just enough light in to reveal that this is a place no one would ever willingly be. Rusted wire attached to the arms of the chair give but a glimpse of its purpose, though a glimpse was more than enough to know what this chair was for.

The sound of metal grinding against metal pierced the silence as the rollers were drug along the steel track supporting the large door as it opened. The blinding glow of a van's headlights grew brighter as it entered the building. With the engine still running, the van's doors opened, all three of them, and a young girl, maybe nine or ten years old, was dragged out of the van, across the dirty concrete floor and forced into the chair. One by one her hands were forced down onto the arms of the chair as the wire bound her wrists. Her ankles were secured with similar wire attached to the chair's legs. She struggled and cried out for her mother but no one could hear her.

"I want to go home," she whimpered.

"Shut up," was the only response she heard.

A length of rope was tied around her waist securing her to the back of the chair. She winced as it was tightened. A black cloth bag was then slipped over her head as a newspaper was carefully positioned in her lap, the day's headlines plainly visible.

Two men, both wearing woolen face masks, backed away from the chair as a third focused a digital camera on the girl and the newspaper in her lap.

"Make sure you're on the high resolution setting," a voice warned from the darkness.

"This isn't the first time I've done this," came a quick but angry response. "Quit telling me what to do."

"Shut up; all of you," a threatening voice echoed from behind them. The silhouette of a man next to the van checked his watch as he looked on impatiently.

A flash momentarily illuminated the abandoned warehouse, capturing a stunning image of the young girl restrained in the chair. The picture had been taken and the proof of her kidnapping established. The three men joined the fourth in the van as it slowly backed out of the door. The sounds of the door closing echoed over the girl's screams, her begging not to be left alone in the darkness of the cold building. The door slammed shut, and with it, her screams faded into silence.

The persistent beeping of Milo Abrahams' cell phone caused him to impatiently pull it from his pocket as he continued an early morning conference call with his corporate attorneys on his office

phone. He touched the screen with his thumb and quickly read the subject line of the picture mail he had just received.

*Is this what your daughter was wearing when she left for school this morning?* Milo looked at the words then quickly said, "I'll have to call you back," after which he abruptly hung up the phone. He pushed another button and the photo of the young girl in the warehouse popped up. He looked at it in horror, recognizing his daughter from her clothes. His phone beeped again, signaling an email message. He brought it up and whispered it audibly to himself as he read. His expression changed from one of concern to one of panic at the words he'd been sent.

*We have your daughter. What happens to her next is up to you. We know your net worth is approaching forty five million dollars, not counting your estate in Northern California and a six thousand acre ranch in Texas. Despite this knowledge, we are asking only one hundred and fifty three thousand eight hundred and twenty three dollars for the safe return of your daughter. The money will be delivered by you and you alone in one hour to a location we will specify upon your acceptance of this proposal. Do not involve the police. That is a complication neither of us can afford and one that will have a tragic outcome for your daughter. Once we've received the money and your daughter is safely in your arms, then you may call the police. We're sure they'll want to know of this crime, even though it, like all the others, will never be solved. If you agree to the terms of this proposal, reply to this email with one word only: 'Yes'. If you do not, your daughter will fetch ten times the price we're asking when we sell her to some associates of ours that trade in the type of human cargo that no one cares to speak of. You have one minute to respond.*

Milo's hands were shaking as he fumbled with the letters. His reply was of course, yes. Almost immediately a reply came back.

*Very good. Be at the corner of Wilson and Upland Street in one hour. There's a coffee shop on the corner with a parking lot in the rear. At the back of the lot there will be a black delivery truck. The back doors of the truck will be unlocked. Get into the back of the delivery truck and follow the instructions you will find there. And remember, we'll be watching your every move. At the first sign of the police or involvement by anyone other than yourself, the deal is off and you will never hear from us, or your daughter, again.*

Milo thought for a moment, trying desperately to focus. There was forty thousand dollars in the company's safe and another twenty two thousand at his home in the floor safe in his closet. That left roughly eighty eight thousand in cash he had to come up with. He tapped his fingers nervously on his desk before picking up the phone. As it rang, he checked his watch. The phone was answered on the third ring.

"First Federal Bank; how may I direct your call?"

"Yes, this is Milo Abrahams. I need to speak with Tom Christopher please. It's very important." There was a pause while the receptionist at the bank rang the manager's office.

"Milo, how are you this morning?"

“I’m fine Tom, but I need a favor. I’ve got an opportunity to pick up a piece of land that Kate and I have been wanting for a long time. The thing is I have to act fast, like within the hour.”

“I don’t see a problem,” Tom quickly replied.

“There’s another stipulation, Tom. I need the money, forty three thousand dollars, in cash. It’s the only way the deal will go through. Do you see any problems?”

“That’s a lot of cash. We can do it, but it will take about twenty minutes. Are you sure you want to carry that much cash with you? A cashier’s check is as good as cash you know.”

“Sorry Tom, it has to be cash. And I don’t have twenty minutes. I’ll be there in ten. Can you have it ready?”

“Sure Milo, we’ll have it ready.”

“Thanks Tom. I owe you one; a big one.”

“Maybe you’d like one of the bank’s security officers to go with you, you know, just in case?”

“No thanks,” Milo quickly answered. “I’ll be fine. It’ll be in a brief case. No one will be the wiser.”

“If you’re sure,” Tom answered, “I’ll have it ready in ten minutes.”

Milo hung up the phone and immediately picked it back up and gave the same story to a second bank his company did business with.

Within forty five minutes he had the one hundred and fifty three thousand eight hundred and twenty three dollars in cash in two brief cases that sat on the car seat next to him. He drove cautiously down Wilson until he came to the corner of Upton. Off to his left was the coffee shop that the kidnapers had told him of. As he rounded the corner, he saw the black package delivery truck parked in the rear of the parking lot. It was a typical step van type truck marked with the name of a local delivery company. He eased his Jag up behind it and stopped then turned off the engine. There was no one in sight. He grabbed the two brief cases and stepped out of the car, leaving the driver’s side door open. After a brief look around he began walking toward the rear of the truck. When he reached it, he sat the cases down and lifted the back door open. It squeaked loudly as it rolled up. Reaching down, he picked up the cases and climbed up into the back of the truck.

Sitting on a small, wooden table in the back of the truck was a laptop computer. The computer was open and turned on. There was a web cam mounted on the top of the screen. An instant message screen popped up.

*Open the cases up and set them on the table so the camera can see them. Then pick up the stacks of bills and fan them so we can see that you’re not trying to cheat us.*

Milo did as he was instructed. One by one he opened the cases and began fanning the stacks of cash. A small window at the bottom of the computer screen showed him what his daughter’s kidnapers were seeing through the web cam. It took several minutes to fan each stack of bills, but he did it nonetheless. When he was finished, another instant message popped up on the screen.

*Leave the cases under the table and step out of the van. Walk around to the driver's side door, open it, and get in.*

Milo closed the cases and snapped the clasps, stacking them one on top of the other under the small table in the back of the truck before stepping out. He walked around to the driver's side door and pulled it open. Grabbing the side of the steering wheel, he climbed up into the driver's seat. There was a piece of paper dangling from the sun visor with an arrow pointing up towards a note wedged between the visor and the roof of the truck. He pulled the visor down and the paper dropped into his lap. "*Lean the passenger seat forward,*" it read. Milo reached across and pushed the back of the seat, tipping it towards the windshield. His eyes widened as he saw his daughter, bound with duct tape and wearing a black cloth bag over her head, wedged into the small space under the seat. He reached for her and pulled her to him. Not knowing it was her father, she fought valiantly to keep him away.

"Jillie, it's me," he said, trying to calm her.

Once Milo pulled the bag from her head, her expression changed from one of panic to one of indescribable relief. He pulled at the tape covering her mouth and quickly removed it. Then he reached behind her back and tore the tape binding her hands. She wrapped her arms tightly around him.

"Jillie are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

"I was so scared," she answered. "They made me sit in a chair for a long time. There wasn't anybody there. It was so cold and scary."

"It's alright, sunshine. You're safe now," he said as Jillie hugged him tighter than he ever remembered. "Let's get you out of here."

Milo carried her out of the delivery truck and back to his car. He put her carefully into the passenger seat then walked around the car and slid in behind the wheel. Looking out the windshield he could see into the back of the van. The money was gone, as was the computer that sat on the table.

Milo reached in his pocket and pulled out his phone. He hit the numbers nine, one, one as he pulled out of the parking lot and into an empty parking space across the street. It rang twice.

"Yes, this is Milo Abrahams. I want to report a kidnapping."

Within ten minutes police cars lined the street in front of the coffee shop and the parking lot had been cordoned off with yellow police tape. An ambulance sat with its lights flashing and its rear doors open in the parking lot. Jillie sat on a stretcher while the paramedics treated the cuts on her wrists from the wire that had secured her to the chair.

"This makes nine in less than two months," Detective Mike Wheeler announced as he scribbled some notes onto his pad. "I wish you had called us sooner."

"They told me there would be a consequence for doing that; a very dire one." Milo answered.

"They told you that if you called the police they'd sell your daughter into slavery in some third world country; right?"

“Pretty much, yeah,” Milo agreed.

“And you believed them?”

Milo looked at him over the top of his glasses. “If they were holding your ten year old daughter, would you?”

“I get your point,” Mike agreed. “Sorry. I guess I’d have done the same thing.”

“It’s okay”, Milo shrugged, “just find the guys that did this so it doesn’t happen to anyone else’s daughter.”

“We’re working on it,” Mike answered. “For two months now we’ve been working on it. These guys are very good at what they do, but sooner or later everybody makes a mistake.”

He flipped the notebook closed and turned towards the intersection. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he looked up at the utility poles, focusing his eyes on the traffic cameras mounted on them. He flipped open his phone and called Metro. “If we’re lucky, those traffic cams might have seen something.”

A technician at traffic control answered on the third ring. “Yeah, this is Detective Mike Wheeler. We’re investigating a crime on the corner of Wilson and Upton. Can you look at the tape from the traffic cameras and tell me what you see?”

There was a pause of no more than twenty seconds before the tech responded, “Nothing.”

“What do you mean nothing?” Mike angrily asked. “Aren’t the damned things working?”

“Oh they’re working, but there is some sort of foreign substance on the lenses of all four cameras at that intersection. I have no idea what it is but its bright purple and we can’t see through it.”

“Hold on,” Mike said as he walked to his car and opened the trunk. He took out a pair of binoculars and looked up at one of the cameras. “It’s paint,” he announced.

“That’s crazy. How could someone climb all the way up to four different cameras in the same intersection without being noticed?” the tech asked.

“They didn’t,” Mike answered, “they used a paint ball gun.” With that, Mike hung up the phone. He glanced to his left to see that Milo was still standing next to him.

“Can I take my daughter home now?” he asked impatiently.

“She’ll be taken by ambulance to the ER to be checked out; standard procedure,” the detective answered. “You can take her home from there.”

Managed chaos, marginally contained, but a way of life for nine and a half hours out of each day. This is the way Victor Collins characterized what it was that he did for a living. Victor ran the admissions floor of one of the busiest emergency rooms in the state. The hospital was one of three in the inner city, and the one closest to where Jillie was released.

The clientele here were mostly victims of, or participants in, a crime, with the occasional heart attack and traffic injury, or today, kidnapping, thrown in for good measure. Because of the fairly consistent patient make-up, the emotions running rampant throughout the hospital were a pretty even mix of sorrow and anger.

On any given day there were twice as many policemen on the floor waiting to arrest emergency room patients as there are doctors waiting to treat them. In the twenty-six years Victor has worked in this hospital, he has seen a gradual transformation in the number of victims and the severity of their injuries. The number of victims of violent crimes had risen dramatically as had the apparent malice with which their injuries had been inflicted. But more troubling than anything else was the age of the most prevalent criminals. Many of them couldn't even be treated without their parent's consent.

Many of the victims were younger as well. Most of them, sadly, were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. These days, the price for such a transgression is great.

After all these years, the faces of the children and the fear and vulnerability in their eyes still got under Victor's skin. For the most part, he checked his emotions at the door each day before walking onto the floor. But the sight of a child crying and bleeding, and having no idea what happened, still evoked an unstoppable flood of sorrow which was usually followed by a near uncontrollable rage. Victor worked very hard to keep these feelings well below the surface. There are times though, when it's just not possible. Fortunately those times have grown fewer in number over the years.

Today would begin as most days would, uneventfully at first, though only temporarily so, at least until Victor passed through the doors into the war zone. But for all its pain and difficulty, Victor enjoyed his job. He was very good at it.

It was six forty five, as it always is, when Victor stepped from the drive up onto the sidewalk. He was a gentle looking man about five foot eight, with light brown and somewhat thinning hair. His build was trim as he exercised regularly. His exposure to the ravages of life and death at the hospital motivated him to stay in shape. His attire consisted of a coat and tie, though the coat usually spent the majority of the day hung on the back of his chair and the tie was always loosened by eight-thirty. He found that people react with greater ease to someone less formal and more human. He adapted not only his look, but also his personality and mannerisms to this belief. It made him more compassionate and made the people he dealt with feel less threatened.

As he approached the doors, he looked through the glass into the main waiting area and did a quick head count; seventeen. Before he could take his eyes away, the glass reflected a bright red flash. He turned to see an ambulance pulling into the circle drive and up to the emergency room doors. He stood to one side as a stretcher was quickly pushed up the sidewalk.

Victor looked down at a middle aged man lying very still. His eyes were fixed and glassy. A blood soaked bandage was held tightly against his chest.

"What happened to him?" Victor asked the ambulance driver.

"Somebody decided to start his day with a bang," the driver answered sarcastically as he rushed

past him and through the doors.

*Everybody's a comedian*, Victor thought to himself.

It was a mad house already and it wasn't even 7:00 am yet. Victor weaved his way through the swarm of the visitors and patients in the waiting area as he made his way to the admissions desk. The 'island' as they called it was a circular shaped counter lined with computer terminals and stacks of forms. Within the circle were several desks, one of which belonged to Victor.

There were three women working within the island this morning. Randi Windslow, the younger of the three had an unusually serious look about her. It was almost as if she were about to burst into tears. This was very much out of character for her as she was always the one who kept everyone else laughing. Those who did not laugh with her were usually too busy admiring her figure. She was twenty two years old, single and often blamed for men inflicting wounds upon themselves just for the opportunity to come to the ER and see her.

The other two, Barb and Ester Morrison were sisters, both in their early forties and both single as well. Vic never understood why neither of them married. They were both attractive and very personable. Ester had blonde hair though Barb's hair was red. Despite their looks, they rarely dated. There was always gossip and speculation around the ER but Victor never gave it much thought.

The three women stood huddled near the center of the island. Their look was more of disdain than sorrow. Something was obviously wrong. As Victor approached, the three stopped talking.

"Morning ladies," he said as he passed by them to his desk.

He pulled out his chair and sat down looking with disbelief at the stack of papers that only last night consisted of no more than two or three sheets. This morning it stood a proud three inches tall. As he reached for the top sheet, a cup of coffee was gently placed on his desk in front of him. Victor looked at it curiously for a moment then up at the person who had put it there.

"I made it just the way you like it; two sugars and extra cream." Ester smiled an all-to-familiar smile and Victor knew this coffee would not come without a price.

"Alright, what do you want?"

"What makes you think I want something?" Ester replied in her own defense.

"How many times have I asked one of you to get me a cup of coffee, and how many times have you told me you're admissions personnel, not waitresses?"

There was a pause in the conversation while Ester thought of her response and Victor took a sip of the coffee.

"Okay, there is something."

"I knew it," he muttered.

"But it's only because you're so much better at it than we are."

"Better at what?"

“Better at giving people bad news.”

Victor was beginning to understand what they were trying to ask.

“About an hour ago they brought a kid in here. He couldn't have been more than ten or eleven. He had been hit on the side of his head with the butt of a shotgun. Apparently someone broke into his apartment after his mom left for work. A neighbor heard him scream and found him unconscious on his bedroom floor.”

“So you want me to call his mother and tell her that her son is in the hospital, is that it?”

“No. The neighbor is bringing her from work. They should be here anytime.”

“Then what do you want from me?” Victor asked, taking another sip of coffee.

Ester handed him a clipboard. “The doctor that treated him is upstairs getting prepped for emergency surgery otherwise he'd do this himself.”

Victor looked down at the clipboard. His eyes scanned down to the last line of the doctor's notes; *Time of death 5:57 A.M.* It was clear now what it was that was being asked of him.

“So he's dead and his mother thinks he just has a bump on the head.” Victor handed the clipboard back to Ester.

“The only other person that could do this as well as the attending physician is you. And since the doctor isn't available, we were hoping you would do it. So what do you say?”

Victor drew in a deep breath. “Alright, alright, let me know when she gets here and I'll talk to her.”

Victor really hated starting his day off this way. Then he thought about this young boy's mother. Her day was starting off much worse.

“Coming through,” bellowed a voice from the door.

Victor turned to look as a young woman was wheeled in. Even from across the room he could see that her face was badly bruised and bleeding. Randi grabbed a clipboard and followed them. From behind the thin curtain separating the work spaces Victor could hear the doctor and the ambulance driver as they spoke.

“What have we got?” Dr. Talbott asked. Chris Talbott was, at thirty one, the youngest doctor on the floor in the emergency room. Although his skills were among the best Victor had ever seen, his appearance epitomized the word average. He was the kind of guy that would not just blend in with the crowd, he would disappear into it. Were it not for his skills as a doctor, more that likely no one would ever notice him.

“Her husband beat her up. He was still at it when we got there.” The ambulance driver spoke with a noticeable amount of anger in his voice. “I had to pull him off of her twice. And I don't mind telling you, I popped him a good one when he tried to pull her off the stretcher.”

Victor didn't ever recall meeting this man. He must have been new.

The doors opened loudly once again and he turned to see two women, one with a tissue in one hand and holding on to the arm of another woman who looked to be her friend.

*I bet I know who they are*, Victor thought to himself. He turned to Ester who was already looking back at him. She nodded without saying anything. Victor got up and walked out from behind the island as the two women approached.

“Where's my son?”

“Mrs. Milam, my name is Victor Collins. Come with me and I'll talk to you about your son.”

The three walked a few steps down the hall, and then left through a door into a small meeting room. Victor closed the door behind them.

“Please, sit down.” He motioned with his hand at the chairs surrounding a conference table. Mrs. Milam and her neighbor took the two chairs closest to the end of the table. Victor took the chair at the end.

“Tell me about my boy. How is he?” The woman's voice began to tremble. She knew she hadn't been brought to this room to receive good news.

Victor drew in a deep breath. “Mrs. Milam, your son was struck on the side of his head with what appears to be the butt of a gun. It left an impression on the side his face. The blow knocked him unconscious.” Victor leaned closer towards the two ladies. “Mrs. Milam, do you know what an aneurysm is?”

The woman shook her head nervously, her eyes wide with anxiety.

“An aneurysm is the widening of a blood vessel. This widening causes the wall of the vessel to become thin. Your son apparently had an aneurysm in his brain. There's no way anyone could have known about it. It had more than likely been there since he was born. The blow he received to his head caused the aneurysm to rupture. At that point massive hemorrhaging occurred. The doctors did everything they could, but I'm afraid he was already gone when they brought him in. I'm so sorry.”

Mrs. Milam sat with her eyes fixed on the wall behind Victor's head. It was as if she was trying to digest what she had just been told, but was simply unable to. Her friend wrapped her arms tightly around her, but it was clear she had become numb.

Victor reached over and took her hand. “If there's anything we can do...”

“Thank you,” she answered before he had a chance to finish.

He looked over at her friend. She nodded as if to thank him as well. A knock sounded at the door as Victor got up from his chair. He opened the door to a minister holding a Bible in his left hand.

“I'm looking for Mrs. Milam.”

Victor stood to one side allowing him to see the two women at the conference table. When Mrs. Milam saw him she burst into tears. The man went quickly to her and sat down in the chair Victor had just left. He watched for a moment as Mrs. Milam sobbed as a child in the minister's arms. Victor

again looked over at her friend.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

The woman closed her eyes and nodded slightly. Victor left the room, quietly pulling the door closed behind him.

He turned and found himself face to face with Barb and Ester.

“Thanks for doing that,” Barb said, “We really appreciate it.”

Victor looked at them with somewhat of a blank expression on his face. “Hell of a way to start the day, isn’t it?”

He headed back towards his desk, stopping for a drink at a water fountain in the corridor. As he was wiping a small drop of water from his chin, he heard someone call his name.

“Hey Vic!”

He turned to see who it was, catching sight of a black uniform as he continued the walk back to his desk.

“Kerry, how you doing?”

Kerry Hudson was one of the city’s police officers. He had been on the police force ever since he got out of the service back in eighty-nine. He and Victor met at a CPR class twelve years ago. They had been friends ever since.

Kerry was one of those ‘bigger than life’ kinds of guys. He stood six foot two and weighed in at two forty. He and Victor worked out together at the gym and even ran in some marathons against each other. Despite his looks, he was a gentle man, but a man with a well defined sense of right and wrong. That was probably the strongest tie between him and Victor.

Kerry walked over toward Victor with his hand extended and a smile on his face.

“Just bringing you another customer.”

“Good guy or bad guy?” Victor asked, looking at him through one eye.

“Bad guy; or at least he thought he was.”

“What did he do?”

“He boosted a lady's purse. By the time I got there some construction workers had him on the ground. When I tried to cuff him, the crazy son of a bitch went for my gun.”

“So what did you do to him?” Vic asked with a smirk on his face.

“I defended myself. We’re allowed to do that you know.”

Victor stood staring at him until he finally answered the question.

“They’re putting his arm in a cast. I don't think I hit him hard enough to break his jaw, and that bump on his head should be gone in a couple of days.”

Victor slapped him on the back. "I like your style," he laughed as he headed back to his desk. "You're good for business."

"We still on for tonight?" Kerry hollered as he made his way to the doors.

Victor raised his hand indicating they were. It was Thursday and Thursday night was poker night at Kerry's house. It had been a weekly thing for five years now. It was he, Kerry, Sid Gramm, who worked in supply at the hospital, Jack Long, an ambulance driver and Harvey Weller, a desk sergeant on the night shift in the same precinct with Kerry.

Before Kerry had made it to the doors, they burst open yet again and a stretcher was wheeled in. On it was Jillie, with Milo walking along side holding her hand.

"What have you got?" Kerry asked as Mike passed by him in the doorway.

"Another kidnapping," he admitted.

"Damn," Kerry muttered, "these guys are snatching up a half dozen kids a month. This makes what, nine of them so far?"

Randi approached them with her clipboard and followed them down the hall. Victor sat down at his desk and looked with disappointment at his cold cup of coffee. The extra cream he loved so much had risen to the top and now floated almost mockingly, as if to say, *this sure would have been a good cup of coffee, Vic.*

He picked up the cup, looked longingly into it for a second or two, then headed to the men's room to dump it out. The day had indeed begun.

## CHAPTER TWO

Cliff and Faye Elliott were as typical a middle class family as you'd ever expect to find. The morning routine in the Elliott household ran pretty true to form every morning, as it was this morning. It was relatively calm compared to that of many families with young children. Faye Elliott always got things started in the kitchen well before her husband, Cliff, or their nine year old daughter, Elizabeth (who would answer only to Lizzy) made it downstairs. Faye's life was coveted by some, yet mocked by others. She was not what could be called a working mom, though she did contribute to the family's income with some part-time free-lance illustrating and painting which she did from their home. But she was happy, feeling she had the best of both worlds. Her happiness showed, in both her appearance and her demeanor. She wore a perpetual look of contentment which was almost always accentuated with her smile, the crowning achievement to her near perfect looks.

At five foot four, she maneuvered her way around the kitchen as if she had cooked in it all her life. Her shoulder length blond hair was tied back this morning as today was the day she had chosen to devote solely to housework. Her tee shirt boasted a marathon she had participated in some months ago. She didn't win, but winning was not her intention. It was finishing, and that she did. The shirt was long, but comfortable with the blue jeans that she wore on house-cleaning days.

The sound of the front door as it closed broke Faye's concentration. She turned to see Cliff walking towards the kitchen with the morning paper in his hand. He walked over to her and gave her a kiss on the cheek, then, without saying a word, sat down at the table and unfolded the newspaper.

Cliff was a construction superintendent for a local home builder. He never was the shirt and tie kind of guy. On those rare occasions when he was forced to wear them, he looked as if he would explode. His best days were spent in a casual pair of pants and shirt, as this day would be.

Faye sat a cup of coffee in front of him on the table.

"Thanks honey." He winked at her as he turned the page of the newspaper.

Cliff stood a couple of inches taller than his wife, but more than a few inches shorter than most of the men that worked for him. His build was in proportion to his height. Since he did a good deal of walking and climbing during the course of each day, he remained in fairly good physical condition.

He reached for the cup and took a sip. Before he could return the cup to the table, his concentration was broken by another part of Faye's morning routine.

"Lizzy hurry up, you're going to be late for school." Faye went through this routine at least twice a week with Lizzy. Going to school was not one of her favorite things to do. She was at that brief but difficult point in her life where she was just beginning to realize that boys weren't as awful as she once thought them to be. The boys, however, had not reached this milestone yet and still considered their female counterparts to have cooties. Maybe all this was typical for a nine year old girl. Faye didn't know. She often tried to think back to when she was that age, but things were so radically different then that any comparison to adolescence today would be pointless.

It would be another ten minutes before Lizzy finally made it to the kitchen. As quietly as she could manage, Lizzy tip-toed over to her chair and eased into it. While standing at the stove with her back to the table, Faye commented, "It's about time."

Cliff peeked at Lizzy over the top of his newspaper. She smiled at him and they bid each other 'good morning' as they did every morning without saying a word. Faye glanced over and caught a glimpse of this morning's headlines as Cliff read an article on page five. The headline read, "Ransom Demands Leaked for Kidnapped Child."

Faye stared at it for a moment before asking, "Who is it this time?"

"Who is who?" Cliff answered without looking up from the paper.

"The kidnapped child on the front page of the paper, who is she?"

Cliff closed the paper and took a sip from his cup. "It's Ann Stevenson, you know, her dad is Curt Stevenson. He owns a bunch of shopping centers. She was kidnapped a couple of days ago."

"How many is a bunch?"

Cliff flipped back to the front page and scanned the article. "Twelve," he answered.

"How much was the ransom?"

Cliff read further down the article then flipped through the pages to page five where the story was continued. "About a hundred and eighty thousand." Cliff shook his head. "It's a shame that having money puts your kids at risk."

"How many kids have been taken?" Faye asked. "This has been going on for weeks."

"According to the paper, little Ann makes eight."

"And they were all returned?"

Cliff smirked. "After a fat ransom was paid. Guess we won't have to worry though. We are neither rich nor high profile, and quite frankly, I'd like to keep it that way, at least until the police catch who ever is doing this."

"I wouldn't mind being rich," Lizzy announced.

"Wouldn't you worry about being kidnapped?" Faye asked, curious to hear her answer.

"Of course not. If we were rich, you could hire a body guard for me, and a chauffeur to drive me to school. Oh, and then I'd need someone to do my homework for me, and a fashion consultant."

By this time, Cliff was once again looking over the top of the paper at Faye. "If anyone dies and leaves us a million dollars, whatever you do, don't tell Lizzy."

"Don't worry," Faye laughed.

Lizzy looked at her parents thinking them to be so out of touch. Maybe they were, but they were that way by choice.

Faye sat a plate of scrambled eggs down in front of both of them. She stopped to refill her coffee cup before returning to the table with her own breakfast. Cliff laid the paper down and began applying a liberal amount of ketchup to his eggs. Lizzy watched him for a moment, sticking her tongue out in disgust.

“House cleaning today?” he asked, screwing the cap back on the ketchup bottle.

“Yeah, I worked all day yesterday on a project so today is housework.”

“Want me to stay home and help you?” Lizzy eagerly asked.

“No. I want you to go to school so you can become very successful, make lots of money and then you can hire a maid to do your housework, and a chauffeur and a body guard.”

“And don’t forget the fashion consultant,” Cliff added.

“What if I just marry a rich guy?”

“If things keep going the way they've been going, by the time you're ready to get married there won't be any rich guys left,” Cliff scoffed.

His comment was aimed at the ever growing set of regulations that were aimed at the construction industry. He was particularly upset about it this morning as the word was out that OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) was going to pay his site a visit sometime today.

Lizzy ate as much as she usually did then left the table. Cliff took a final swallow of coffee and got up to ‘face the feds’ as he put it. The rest of their routine was down and polished and within five minutes of finishing breakfast, Cliff was ready to go and Lizzy and her mom were on their way out the door. Faye always dropped Lizzy off at school since she would have to get up another forty five minutes earlier to catch the bus. Lizzy wasn't terribly fond of riding the school bus, and the part about getting up forty five minutes earlier was simply out of the question.

Faye backed out of the driveway first and headed west towards Lizzy’s school. Cliff headed east to his construction site.

Fifteen minutes later Cliff pulled his pick-up to a stop in front of the construction trailer at the end of a cul-de-sac street. He stepped out and looked across several empty lots to a row of eight houses, all at various stages of construction at the opposite end of the street. A number of crews were already working. Cliff rifled through his keys searching for the one to the trailer. Finding it, he walked up the three steps to the door and unlocked it. He switched on the lights and the heater in an attempt to warm the brisk November air. He headed straight for the coffee maker which he had prepared, as he always did, the night before, and switched it on. Grabbing a folder off his desk he left, pulling the door closed behind him.

He headed up the street towards the eight houses under construction. A brisk north wind pushed at him as he walked. Cliff always warned his sub-contractors when OSHA was coming, even of the threat. As he approached the first house, he began searching for violations. It didn't take him long to find them.

“Hey Max,” he called.

Max Foster was the owner of the company that did the exterior trim work on Cliff’s houses. Today the crews were finishing up the trim on the outside of three of them and starting two others. Max and his crew did exceptional work at a reasonable price, but most importantly, they got the job done on time.

“What’s up boss?” Max answered. Max was probably forty. Nobody knew for sure and he wasn’t telling. He was somewhat overweight and usually had a tooth pick clenched between his teeth. He looked like the kind of guy that you wouldn’t want to mess with. And as far as anybody knew, his looks were not deceiving.

“We’re going to have company today,” Cliff answered.

“Corporate?”

“No, OSHA.”

“Son of a bitch,” Max grumbled as he took the tooth pick from his mouth and threw it on the ground. “Those worthless pencil pushers were just here a few months ago.”

“That was two years ago,” Cliff reminded him. “Time flies when you’re having fun.”

Max turned to a man who was reading a set of blue prints on the tailgate of his pick-up truck out on the street. “John,” he hollered. The man looked up as Max spoke. “OSHA’s coming. Do the drill, on the double.”

The man quickly rolled up the prints and put them back in his truck on the passenger seat. Then he reached behind the seat and removed a large box filled with hard hats. He struggled to get it out as it had been wedged behind the seat for quite some time. When he did, the box tipped and a half dozen or so of the shiny white hardhats spilled out onto the ground. John quickly up-righted the box and began to pick up the hats, but he was too late. A small convoy of cars with US government license plates rounded the corner and came to a stop right in front of his truck. “Busted!” Max said aloud to himself.

Faye rounded the corner onto the four lane street that led to Lizzy’s school. Traffic was somewhat light for this time of the morning. There were four traffic signals to navigate before the turn into the school’s circular drive. Faye had caught the first one red which usually meant she’d get the other three green. As she sat waiting for the light to change, a dirty, blue van pulled up behind them. Faye glanced in the mirror as the van came to a stop very close to the back of her car.

As she watched, the sliding door on the passenger side of the van opened and three men rushed out. Before she realized what was happening, Lizzy’s door was pulled open and a pair of arms reached in and unbuckled her seat belt. At that very same moment, Faye’s door opened and a man reached past her to the gear shift, jamming the car into Park with one hand while holding Faye tightly against the back of her seat by her hair with the other. Faye reached frantically for Lizzy as she was pulled

screaming from the car. Her backpack fell out of her lap and tumbled onto the floor. The moment she was out, a man slid into her seat next to Faye. The man that had shifted the car into Park quickly released his grip on Faye's hair and left. Within seconds, the blue van pulled around her car and turned left before screaming off in to the cold morning air.

Faye's eyes grew even wider as she glared in panic and disbelief at the man wearing a black ski mask sitting next to her in the passenger seat. His cold, dark eyes peered lifelessly through the small holes in the mask. He pulled the door closed then pressed the cold black barrel of his gun angrily into her ribs and uttered one word. "Drive."

"My daughter!" Faye screamed. "Where are you taking her?"

"We're just going to borrow her for a little while so shut up and drive," the man said coldly, pressing the gun harder into Faye's ribs. "Now!" he screamed. "I won't tell you again."

The tires squealed as Faye attempted to turn the corner and follow the blue van. The man in the ski mask grabbed the steering wheel and forced her to stay straight through the intersection. The blue van was no where in sight. Faye was hysterical and began pleading with the man.

"Look if its money you want, we don't have very much. We're not rich. You're making a big mistake here."

The man turned to her. "What makes you think we want money?" he asked.

Faye glanced over at him. "All those children that were kidnapped were from rich families. We're not rich; we don't own much of anything."

Faye watched for his reactions but there were none. "Look, you must have made a mistake," she pleaded. "Let me have my daughter back and I won't even report this to the police. You have my word, just give Lizzy back to me."

Her heart was pounding as she sped down the busy street. The man paid no attention to her. It was as if he'd not even heard what she had just said. Her mind was moving in a thousand different directions, none of which had a happy ending. She had no idea what she should do. Should she purposely cause an accident? Should she cooperate and hope for the best? She didn't even know where they were going. She glanced gingerly over at him again. His cold stare quickly became angered again as they made eye contact.

"What are you looking at?" he yelled.

"What do you want from me?" Faye yelled back, her voice shaking. "If this is all about the car, take it. Just let me pull over and I'll get out. Just take it and give me Lizzy back."

The man said nothing, all the while pressing the barrel of the gun even harder into Faye's ribs.

"Look," she pleaded, "tell me what you want. Just tell me and I'll get it for you, no matter what it is. All I want is my daughter back. Take the car if you want it, take my purse, anything."

"Shut up!" the man screamed. "If I only wanted the car I'd have killed you by now."

At that point Faye knew there would be no easy way out of this. She considered herself as good as dead if she didn't do something, and fast. But rational thought does not come easy at the end of a gun. Faye took a deep breath then glanced over at the man a second time. His eyes had become fixed on her knees and were working their way up to her thighs. A smile, more of lust than anger, crept across his face though it remained hidden by the black woolen ski mask. Faye knew what was about to happen. If she was going to do something, anything, it had to be now.

With her left hand, she slowly reached for the door handle. The man's eyes had stopped to admire the way her tight blue jeans hugged her thighs. She looked at the traffic ahead then back at him.

“Do you like what you see?” she asked in desperation. “Just give me my daughter back and I’ll do anything you want.”

“Forget the kid,” the man jeered. “She ain’t part of this no more.”

“Part of what?” Faye asked, frantic for something, anything that would get Lizzy back.

“You’ll see.”

A red light at the end of the next block had created a gap in the oncoming traffic. This was her chance. Faye knew that the man was not going to let her go, much less be any help in getting Lizzy back. So she waited for just the right moment. When it arrived, she pulled up on the door handle and pushed it open. Her captor was caught completely off guard. But for all of Faye's courage and determination, she had forgotten to unbuckle her seat belt. She lunged at the open door but was unable to escape. The shoulder strap gave but the lap belt held her firmly in place.

The man reached across the seat and grabbed her by the hair, pulling her back towards him. He reached down and unbuckled the seat belt. Still holding Faye by her hair, he pulled her across his lap and slid behind the wheel himself. He switched hands, now gripping the gun in his right hand. Faye realized she was unrestrained and again went for the door handle, but before she could pull it up, she felt the butt of the gun land sharply against her forehead, and everything went black.

She came to a few seconds later to a warm, stinging sensation in her left eye caused by the blood that had trickled into it from the gash on her forehead. She reached to wipe it away. Her head began to throb with every move she made.

“You try anything like that again and you’ll never see your kid. I’ll put a bullet in your head right here. You got that?” The man pressed the gun against the side of Faye's head.

She didn't answer, but he knew she understood. As he lowered the gun, the barrel gently, but deliberately, traced a line down the side of her face to her neck, then further down, delicately outlining her chest. His eyes glanced back and forth between the street and Faye’s limp body in the seat next to him. Despite her pain, she knew he was looking at her and she knew what she had to do.

The gun was still gripped tightly in the man's hand, though it was now resting on the seat but still pointed at her. Her vision was blurred so she relied on the vibration of the car to determine how fast they were going. She felt the car begin to slow and knew the light ahead must be red. Then she felt the gun pressing into her ribs again. The man was anticipating another escape attempt. She simply

sat there relaxed, trying to give the appearance that she had given up. When the car began to move, he again lowered the gun back down to the seat. This was her chance.

Faye grabbed the door handle with both hands and pulled up with all her might. The door sprang open and she thrust herself out. Lizzy's backpack tumbled out as well, spilling books and papers out onto the street. Cradling her head with her arms and hands she expected the worst. But before she hit the street, she felt his hand grabbing her ankle. She struggled, kicking wildly at him. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the gun drop to the floor. The man lost his grip on her ankle trying to retrieve the gun, and she spilled out onto the street.

Faye thought she would never stop tumbling. She tried as best she could to protect her head, but each time she rolled, her head hit the street until one final blow against the curb brought her body to rest. Blood streamed down her forehead and dripped off of her cheek as she lay motionless in the street.

The car behind her slammed on his brakes, skidding to a stop in the middle of the lane. A man got out, dialing 911 on his cell phone, and ran to Faye as she lay motionless against the curb. Several people at a near by bus stop rushed to her as well. The man gave the operator his location then snapped the phone closed as he knelt down next to Faye. He gently took her hand.

"Can you hear me?" he desperately asked. "Help is on the way, just be still."

Faye's eyes closed tightly then opened a little. "My daughter," she moaned.

The man leaned down closer to her. "Was your daughter in the car?" he asked.

"No," Faye softly spoke, "they took her...in a blue van." Faye's eyes closed as she lost consciousness.

The man quickly reached into his pocket and called 911 again. As he was dialing, he heard a loud crash behind him. He looked up to see a dump truck had struck the back of his car and propelled it past them into the oncoming lane. Traffic in that lane frantically dodged the car until it was struck again by an eighteen wheeler. The man gave the 911 operator the additional information regarding the kidnapping. As he slipped the phone back into his pocket, he stared longingly at what was left of his car.

Snapping back to reality, he focused his attention back to Faye and again took her hand in his. He watched as her eyes began to twitch like they had before. She was drifting in and out of consciousness.

"My name's Arthur," the man said softly. "Try to lay still. Help is on the way."

"My daughter," Faye whispered.

Arthur looked down at her with concern.

"She was kidnapped. I've got to find her. Will you help me find her?" Faye's eyes drifted closed once again.

"I'll help you find her," Arthur said, even though Faye couldn't hear him. "Don't you worry,

I'll help you find her."

Within minutes the police and an ambulance had arrived and Faye was carefully placed on a gurney while an officer was taking a statement from the Good Samaritan.

"Tell me again what she said so I'm sure I have it right," the officer asked.

"She was drifting in and out of consciousness," he explained. "When she came to, she started calling out for her daughter. I asked her if her daughter was in the car and she told me the girl had been kidnapped. She told me that twice. She said they took her away in a blue van. Those are the last words she spoke before you guys showed up."

"Thanks, this is a real help."

"Glad to do it."

"I take it that's your car over there," the officer asked.

"It used to be," the man answered. "I can't believe it. That's the second car I've lost in a year and a half."

"What happened to the other one?" the officer asked out of curiosity.

"Explosion in a parking garage," the man casually answered.

"Oh, one more thing," the officer asked. "Give me your last name again. I want to make sure everything is right on the report."

"Jensen," the Good Samaritan answered, "Arthur Jensen."

## CHAPTER THREE

“This ladder is stronger and safer than anything you can buy in the stores,” Max argued as OSHA inspector Ennis Malley began writing his fourth citation. “I ought to know. I built it with my own two hands. The ones you buy don't last any time doing this kind of work.”

“It's not OSHA approved,” the agent said so calmly that it was almost sarcastic.

“Then approve it!” Max yelled. “Do something productive for once in your life.”

“Why don't you be quiet?” Ennis suggested. “You're just making things worse for yourself.”

“Are you threatening me?” Max asked angrily, taking a step towards the agent. “Are you telling me that because I'm speaking my mind I'm going to get more fines than if I just sit here like a pussy and take it? Is that what you're telling me?” His bright red face mirrored his anger.

Cliff, fearing that Max was about to take a swing at the man, intervened, positioning himself between Max and Ennis.

“Why are you coming down so hard on us?” Cliff asked. “We've never had a job related fatality here since the company has been in business. Hell, we've only ever had one reportable injury and that was because one of your guys stepped on a nail last time you were here.”

“That board should never have been laying where someone could step on it,” Agent Malley argued.

“Your agent should have watched where he was walking. This is a construction site not a school yard. This company has the best safety record of any builder in the city.”

“Maybe that's it,” Max jeered. “Maybe we're bad for his business.” Max looked back over at the agent. “Is that it? If you can't find enough things wrong, you just create a few? Isn't that entrapment or something?”

“You watch too much television,” Agent Malley answered.

“Yeah, well maybe you don't watch enough. I guess we make you look bad to your superiors when you can't find anything wrong, don't we, boy?”

Hearing the word boy, the agent momentarily lost his cool and took a step toward Max, who was most grateful to reciprocate. For a brief second, Cliff thought the two were going to start swinging at one another. Once again he stepped between them, fearing Max would beat the almighty crap out of agent Malley who was eight inches shorter and at least seventy pounds lighter than Max.

“Alright, that's enough, both of you.” Cliff was growing short tempered playing referee in this would be free for all. “Max, go back to the trailer and get yourself a cup of coffee. And you,” Cliff looked over at the agent who seemed rather surprised that Cliff had taken charge and become so assertive, “if you want a shot at kicking his ass, meet him somewhere off of my job site. You got that?”

“Yeah,” Max jeered as he walked towards the trailer, “and make sure you bring your organ

donor card with you.”

The agent stared at Cliff with a look that could have been anger but was most likely relief, then walked towards the next house on the street. Cliff took a few moments to compose himself before walking away from the house that had been the cause of the altercation, to the house next door, to see what the agents were finding in there. As he approached the driveway, he heard the door to the construction trailer burst open. Max bounded down the stairs and onto the street running faster than Cliff had ever seen him move before.

*Damn*, Cliff thought to himself. *He's coming back for a piece of that agent's ass.*

“Cliff!” he shouted, his voice almost in a panic. “Get in the truck, quick.”

“What?” Cliff yelled, totally dumbfounded. “We’re right in the middle of an inspection.”

“Screw the inspection. You’re wife’s been carjacked. She’s at the emergency room right now. Get in the truck.”

Max ran to his pick up truck and pulled the door open. Cliff took a second to absorb what Max had just told him then dropped his clipboard and a blue print he had been carrying on the ground and ran towards the passenger side door. Max reached across the seat and opened it. As it opened he hollered to John, his foreman, “Take over, and don't let them rob me blind.”

Cliff slammed the truck door and the tires squealed as the two men raced down the street and out of the subdivision. Having a moment to think, Cliff turned to Max.

“How do you know this?”

Max looked over at him. “The phone rang in the trailer while I was getting some coffee. I almost didn’t answer it ‘cause I was so pissed off. It was the hospital. They got your number from Faye’s phone. They called it ICE. What the hell is that?”

“In Case of Emergency, so what the hell happened?” Cliff asked in frustration.

“I don’t know,” Max shrugged. “All they said is she’d been carjacked and she was in the emergency room. I told them you’d be there in a few minutes.”

“Well, did they say how she was?”

“I asked them that, too. All they said was that a doctor was with her now. I’m sure she’s going to be okay, though.”

“I wish I was as sure as you,” Cliff added. “I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

“You’re not going to be without her,” Max assured him. “The only one that’s going to be without something is the guy that did this if I ever get my hands on him.”

“Oh yeah, what’s he going to be without?”

“A pulse,” Max coldly answered.

Victor was on the phone to the mother of a school boy who had gotten popped on the head by a fly ball during baseball practice. The boy was fine except for a headache and a bruise the size of a plumb on his forehead that would most certainly attract the sympathy (and attention) of more than a few girls in his class. As he hung up the phone, he saw two men approaching the island. One appeared noticeably distraught and the other, a much larger man, walked a step behind.

“My name is Elliott, Cliff Elliott. They told me my wife, Faye was here. How is she?” he asked, his voice shaking.

Ester was closest to him. She began leafing through the admissions. She couldn’t find anything with Faye’s name on it. Randi, seeing her searching through the book, called to her from across the island.

“Who are you looking for?”

“Elliott.” Ester answered, still paging through the book.

“On the clipboard, to your left; we don't have all the information on her. She's still unconscious.”

Cliff looked over at Randi. She knew right away who he was. She could tell from the look in his eyes and walked quickly over to him.

“Mr. Elliott?” she asked.

“Yeah that’s me, how's my wife?”

“Come with me. I'll take you to her.” Randi stepped around the counter and headed down the corridor. Cliff walked alongside her.

“I'll wait here for you,” Max called as the two walked quickly down the hall then disappeared around a corner. Max watched them until they were out of sight then slowly wandered over to a row of chairs next to the plate glass windows and sat down.

Randi reached down and grabbed two surgical masks from a cart as she and Cliff passed by. She handed one to Cliff as they came to a stop outside a door.

“Just hold it up to your face. You don't have to tie it on.” Then Randi pushed the door open. Cliff held the mask up to his face and followed her into the room.

“Doctor, this is Mr. Elliott.” She stood to one side allowing the doctor a view of him over his shoulder as he worked on Faye.

“What's your wife’s blood type?”

“AB negative.”

“Is she allergic to any medication that you're aware of?”

“Just sulfa; how is she? What's wrong with her?” Cliff was growing impatient.

“She’s lost a lot of blood. She also has a concussion and probably some broken ribs. She’ll

have a dozen or so stitches before we're done, but I don't see anything that should cause any permanent damage.”

“Can I see...?”

“No. Not now. Randi, get him out of here.”

Randi took hold of Cliff's arm. “Come on. Let them work. You and your wife will have the rest of your lives to talk about today.”

Cliff took one long last look at the table and all the medical people surrounding it. All he could see were Faye's feet at the end of the table. One of her shoes was missing. Randi tugged a little at his arm. He turned and walked through the door that she had been holding open for him.

Cliff stepped out into the hall and found himself face to face with a police officer.

“Mr. Elliott?” the officer asked.

“Yeah,” Cliff answered, “what the hell happened here?”

“I'm Officer Kerry Hudson, mid-town police. I'm afraid it's very serious.” The officer looked over at Randi. “Is there somewhere we can go and talk?” he asked.

“Sure,” she answered, “follow me.”

The three walked down the corridor in silence until they reached a small waiting room. Randi held the door open as they walked in.

“What exactly happened to my wife?” Cliff asked as they entered the room. “Was she conscious when she came in?”

“No, she wasn't,” the officer answered. “Someone saw what happened and stopped to help her. He's the one that called for the police and an ambulance. We took a statement from him.”

Kerry paused, doing his best to collect his thoughts. “Mr. Elliott, there's more to this than just your wife,” he began.

Cliff thought for a moment then his eyes grew wide. “Lizzy,” he said frantically. “Had she already dropped Lizzy off at school?”

The officer looked down at the floor, not wanting to tell Cliff what he was about to tell him. “No, Mr. Elliott, she hadn't. I'm afraid your daughter's been kidnapped.”

“What,” Cliff gasped, “this can't be. We're not rich. We're not even well off. Somebody screwed up here and grabbed the wrong kid.”

“That's very possible Mr. Elliott,” Kerry spoke. “But the reality is that she has been kidnapped. A detective is on his way down here to speak with you and bring you up to speed on where we are so far.”

Cliff dropped into one of the chairs that surrounded a small conference table and cupped his face in his hands. Faye and Lizzy were his whole world. He had no idea how he could function

without them.

“Let me tell you what we’re doing right now,” Kerry began. “We’re sweeping ten blocks in every direction from where your daughter was taken. We’re going door to door looking for possible witnesses and reviewing video from security and traffic cameras that might have caught something. We have twenty men working on this. We’ll find your daughter.”

By this time Randi had reached the island. She walked behind the counter and grabbed a file folder attached to a clipboard. As she headed back down the hall, she noticed Max sitting alone in a chair next to the front windows. She walked slowly over to him.

“Are you the man that came here with Cliff Elliott?” she asked.

“Yeah I am,” he answered. “I’m Max. How’s Faye doing?”

“She’s going to be alright, but I think Cliff could use some support. Would you mind coming with me?”

Max eagerly got up and followed Randi out of the waiting area.

“What do you mean ‘support?’” he asked. “I thought you said Faye was going to be okay.”

“She is, but there’s more to this than just her. I think you need to be in there with your friend.”

The two arrived at the door. Max was visibly agitated. “Come on, you can’t just say something like that and walk away. What’s going on?”

Randi hesitated. “There’s an officer inside with Mr. Elliott now. He’ll explain everything. Just go inside, please.” Randi turned and opened the door as Max gently pushed it open.

Cliff saw him and stood up. “Somebody’s kidnapped Lizzy.”

“What!” Max shouted.

Max stepped into the room with Randi following close behind.

“They took her this morning while Faye was taking her to school.”

“What the hell for? You guys aren’t rich. I thought they’ve only been kidnapping rich kids.”

The officer stood up. “As I said Mr. Elliott, a detective has been assigned to your case. He will be here shortly. Here’s my card. If I can do anything at all, please let me know. And again, I’m so sorry for what has happened.”

“Thank you,” Cliff said, taking Kerry’s card.

Randi walked over to Cliff. “I know this is a bad time, but there is some paperwork we have to get filled out. Can you take a few minutes and help me get it done?”

“Of course,” Cliff answered.

“How’s Faye?” Max asked as Cliff wrote Faye’s name for the first of what would be some twelve times.

“I really don't know. They're working on her right now. The doctor said she'll be fine, but I didn't actually see her.”

“What the hell's going on here?” Max asked. “Why would anybody want to kidnap Lizzy?”

“I honestly don't know?” Cliff reluctantly answered. The reality of the situation was beginning to sink in.

Max looked over at Randi. “Did you hear any of what the cops said when the ambulance brought her in?”

Randi fumbled with her words. “Well, sort of, but I didn't hear it all.”

“What did you hear?” Max took a step towards her.

Randi hesitated. “I overheard the man that called the police say that he was following this car when all of a sudden the passenger door opened and a woman fell out.”

“Fell out or was pushed?” Cliff asked impatiently.

“Actually, the man said it looked like she jumped out.”

Cliff and Max looked at each other then back at Randi.

“She must have been trying to get away,” Cliff mumbled.

“It sounds like she was. The man said it looked like whoever was driving had a hold of her leg and was trying to keep her in the car.”

Max's hands quickly formed into fists so tight his knuckles turned white.

“You need to talk to the detective about that,” Randi suggested, and then she turned to Cliff. “Look, all I know is what I overheard and I probably shouldn't have told you that, but I can only imagine what you must be feeling right now, so please, talk to the detective when he gets here. He'll answer all your questions.”

Cliff stared blankly into space for a few moments. “I feel like I should be doing something, but I have no idea what it is.”

Randi quickly answered him. “You should stay right here until the detective gets here. He'll know what you should do.”

“She's right,” Max said, leaning towards Cliff. “Let this thing follow its course and at some point they'll find who ever did this and you'll get Lizzy back and, with a little luck, maybe the cops will turn their backs for half an hour and let me spend some quality time alone with the bastard.”

“Last time I checked, murder is still a crime in this country,” Cliff informed him.

“Who's talking about murder? I'm talking about behavior modification, you know, aversion therapy.”

“Yeah, I know what you're talking about, but beating the living shit out of someone is not considered therapy.”

Max shrugged. "Same results as therapy, just quicker."

"All I care about right now is getting Lizzy back and getting Faye well," Cliff admitted.

"I'll settle for that, too," Max agreed. He looked over at Randi. "Hey, you got any coffee around this place?"

"Sure," Randi smiled, "down that hall, first door on the right. There's a waiting area with a coffee pot and maybe even some donuts if you're lucky."

"Thanks," Max said smiling back at her and wishing he was twenty years younger (and fifty pounds lighter). "You want a cup?" he asked as Cliff wrote Faye's name for the fourth time, and he was only on the second page.

"Yeah, I'll take one, thanks."

"Back in a minute."

Cliff flipped over to the third page as Max left the room. He had only been gone a few moments when the door opened and Vic entered. Cliff looked up as Vic extended his hand.

"Good morning, Mr. Elliott. My name is Victor Collins. I'm in charge of the floor here in the emergency room. Have all of your questions been answered?"

"All of them except how my wife is and what happened to my daughter," Cliff said as he shook Vic's hand.

"The doctors will answer the first question, but I'm afraid it will be up to the police to answer the second. I can assure you your wife is getting the very best care she could possibly receive, so don't worry about that. She's in good hands."

Cliff thought for a second then asked Vic a question. "Were you here when they brought my wife in?"

"Yes, I was."

"Did the police tell you anything?"

"You mean about what happened?"

"Yeah, and I understand there was a man who witnessed the whole thing and called for help. Was he here?"

"No. He didn't come here." Vic hesitated for a moment. "Did the police officer say who the detective was that's been assigned to this case?"

"No he didn't."

"Let me make a call," Vic said as he took a step towards a phone hanging on the wall next to the door.

Cliff watched him from the other side of the table as he spoke briefly to whoever answered the phone. The conversation paused. Cliff could tell that Vic was on hold.

While he waited, Max entered the room balancing two cups of coffee and a couple of donuts all in one hand while he carefully opened the door with the other. He nodded slightly at Vic as he passed by him.

“Hope you like it strong,” he said. “This stuff’s like tar; just the way I like it.”

“Thanks,” Cliff said, taking a sip.

“So what’s going on?” Max asked. “Who’s that guy?”

“He’s in charge of the emergency room. He’s trying to find out which detective has been assigned to Faye’s case.”

As they spoke, Vic hung up the phone and walked back over to the table where Cliff and Max were sitting. Vic extended his hand to Max.

“Hi, I’m Victor Collins.”

“Nice to meet you,” Max replied. “I’m Max.”

“Did you find anything out?” Cliff asked.

“As a matter of fact, I did,” Vic began. “The man that stopped to help your wife was only able to give a vague physical description of the man that was driving your wife’s car based on what he saw through the back window.

“What about the detective?”

“I found that out too,” Vic answered. “His name is Michael Wheeler. I know him very well. If anybody can find these guys and get your daughter back, it’s Mike Wheeler.”