Retribution

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1

The first thing that Paul noticed was that the park was curiously empty for a summer Sunday afternoon. He had thought the park would be filled with kids and their parents enjoying the day. Instead he found the park empty; the swings looked abandoned, the slide looked forlorn. Sam, on the other hand, thought it was great. To Samantha, an empty park just meant that there was more room for her to run around without bumping into anybody.

Paul sat on a bench and read the opening story in a collection of sci-fi short stories that he had bought from Deb's Used Books over in Bloomsdale. He had always liked that little book

store, but he didn't know how much longer Deb Jacobsen would be able to keep it open in the age of Amazon and e-books.

He read while Sam climbed over the jungle gym, her hair flailing in the light breeze as she flitted here and there. Even without any other kids to play with, she seemed to have a great time, her laughter filling the warm afternoon air. She slid down the big red slide three times in a row, squealing with delight as she picked up speed near the bottom. In truth the red slide had always worried Paul; he thought that kids came sliding off the bottom a bit too quick, but his five year-old daughter loved it.

When Sam moved to the monkey bars he put the book down on the bench and watched as she tried to cross from one end of the bars to the other. She made it halfway across before she lost her grip and fell to the ground. She stood up quickly and wiped the dirt from the knees of her pants, staring up at the bars above her.

"Almost made it," Paul said as he stood up. "I was always terrible on the monkey bars."

He walked over to where she stood, leaned down and gave her a kiss on the top of her head.

"You all right, little monkey?" he asked.

Sam laughed.

"If I was a monkey I would have a tail," she said.

She bent her upper body around so that she could see her backside.

"Nope, no tail," she said with a giggle.

"Of course you don't have a tail," Paul said. "We had the doctor remove it before we brought you home from the hospital."

She gave him a look that he was familiar with, a look that said, Dad, you're crazy.

"Will you push me on the swings, Daddy?" she asked.

“Sure thing, chicken wing.”

Paul followed his daughter over to the swings, and she climbed up on one of them as he moved behind her.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm,” she sounded, nodding her head vigorously.

Paul placed both of his hand in the small of her back (*right where he tail used to be*, he thought to himself with an inner smile) and pushed her forward. He stepped out of the way as gravity brought her back, and then gave her another push. After a few more pushes, after she had built up a little steam, he stopped pushing.

“Try to keep yourself going,” he said.

Sam still had trouble swinging herself, and it was a source of frustration for a girl who liked to think that she could do anything.

“Remember to bring your legs in when you’re coming back, and to kick them out as you start to go forward.”

At first she struggled to follow his instructions, and she started to lose momentum. Then she fell into the rhythm of it, and she was successfully swinging under her own power for the first time in her young life.

“I’m doing it, Daddy! I’m swinging!”

Paul laughed as he watched her.

“I see, darling. You’re doing great.”

She continued swinging, her face lit up with happiness at what to her must have seemed a terrific triumph. Paul was happy for her.

Later, while Sam was still swinging back and forth madly, the day started to grow dark as clouds rolled in from the west. Paul could smell rain in the air.

"I think we should get going, honey," he told his daughter.

"Just a little while longer, Daddy."

"It's gonna rain soon, and your mom's not going to like me keeping you out while it's pouring."

"Just five more minutes. Please?"

Paul took another look at the darkening sky.

"Just five minutes, and then we go."

Sam squealed with delight.

Paul's cell buzzed in his pocket. It was the buzz he got whenever he received a text. He took it out and looked at the message. It was from Sarah, his wife.

Get a gallon of milk on ur way home.

Paul put the phone back in his pocket. He looked across the street, at the Quick Shop. Two letters had fallen off the sign, so that it read Q ick S op. A gallon of milk would cost him a dollar more at the convenience store than he would have to pay at the grocery store two blocks away from his house. On the other hand, the parking lot of the store near his house was a bitch; it seemed to take him forever to find a spot to park whenever he went there. So it came down to this: save a dollar, or save the time and frustration of having to find a parking spot. The choice was an easy one.

When Sam's five minute reprieve was up, and in spite of her protests that it had only been two minutes and not five, Paul told her that it was time to head home. She made a face, but got

down from the swing. As they headed to the car Paul picked his book up from the bench where he had left it. They walked together to the small parking lot on the east side of the park.

Two spots over from the spot where Paul had parked his old Subaru there was a dark blue 90's era Ford Taurus. The hood was popped, and a man was peering under it with a confused look on his face. Paul felt sorry for the guy; if the Taurus had broken down on him he was going to get caught out in the rain.

"Before we leave we're gonna have to run across the street and get some milk for Mommy," Paul said as he opened the driver's side door of the Subaru and tossed his book onto the seat.

Sam shook her head.

"Yes. Mom says we need milk."

"But Dad, couldn't I swing just a little longer while you get the milk?"

"It'll just take me a minute, Sam. You'll only get to swing back and forth like five times."

She smiled.

"Five times is a lot of times," she said. "Please, please, pleaaaase?"

She pouted out her lower lip, the cute way she had of showing that she would be sad if you told her no.

"Oh, how could I resist that lip? All right. But if it starts raining while I'm across the street, I want you to get in the car. Deal?"

"Deal."

She took his hand and shook it, a serious look on her face letting him know that her word was her bond.

As she turned away Paul had an urge to tell her to wait one second so that he could plant a kiss on one rosy check. Instead he let her go. He turned away from the park and headed for the

Quick Shop, passing the man who was still trying to puzzle out what was wrong under the hood of his Taurus.

"Better call for a tow truck if you down want to get caught in a downpour," Paul said as he passed the man.

The man looked up at him briefly.

"With my luck, the tow truck would blow a tire on the way out here," he said.

The man went back to inspecting the engine compartment of his car as Paul crossed the street and slipped into the Quick Shop. He picked out a gallon of 1% low-fat milk. Sarah had been trying to get him to commit to skim, but he thought it was too thin, and had no taste. They had agreed on 1%, even though Paul still yearned for the whole milk that he had grown up drinking.

There was a line of three people in front of Paul, and as luck would have it (and didn't people only think of luck when it was bad?), the lady at the front of the line thought she had hit the winning numbers on a lotto ticket she had bought a few days before. The olive-skinned man behind the counter scanned the ticket three times, and each time the machine said that the ticket was a loser. The woman wasn't satisfied with this.

A crackle of thunder boomed, and Paul turned to see what was happening outside. The rain had started coming down; it wasn't coming down too hard yet, but he thought it would start to before long. From where he stood in line he couldn't see the parking lot across the street, but he could see most of the park itself, including the swings. Sam was nowhere to be seen.

Good girl, he thought. *You did like I told you and got out of the rain*.

The woman with the lotto ticket finally gave up the fight, leaving the line and walking out of the store while calling back to the cashier that she was going to report him to the authorities for

lotto fraud, which was a charge that Paul wasn't sure existed. The line moved quickly then, and when Paul was paying for the milk he threw in a package of Skittles for Sam. She had never liked chocolate much; she preferred fruity candies, and Skittles were her favorite.

After paying for his purchases (and waving away the receipt), Paul had time to wish that he was wearing a jacket with a hood before he stepped out of the convenience store. He hustled across the street, the bag with the milk and Skittles in it swinging as he ran. When he reached the car he opened the back door and placed the bag on the rear seat, then moved to the front of the car and got in.

"I got you some candy; guess which kind?" he asked.

But when he turned to the seat next to him Sam wasn't there. He looked toward the park, but the rain running down the windshield obscured his view. He got out of the car so that he could actually see the playground. He didn't see Sam anywhere. He looked toward the plastic tunnels that twisted and turned beyond the jungle gym. That was where she must be. He jogged over to the tunnels, trying to remind himself not to get angry with Sam. She was only five years old, after all.

"Sam, come on; we've gotta go," he called

There was no response from within the tunnels. There were two openings in the maze of tunnels. Paul moved to the opening closest to him, leaned down and peered inside. Barely two feet inside the entrance the tunnel twisted sharply to the right, and he couldn't see beyond this bend.

"Sam, it's time to go," he called, his voice echoing along the plastic walls.

He ran around to the other opening and leaned in. This time the tunnel twisted to the left just inside the opening.

“Sam, I’m not playing. Get out of there now!”

He had spoken more sharply than he had intended to, but he couldn’t help it. His heart wasn’t racing, exactly, but it was definitely taking a brisk jog.

“Sam, say something!”

No response.

Paul stood up and surveyed the rest of the park, looking for any other place she could be hiding, but the tunnels were the only place that was hidden from view.

“Sam!” he yelled against the sound of the rain and the occasional rumble of thunder. “Sam, where are you?”

And yes, his heart was racing, and was determined to beat all contenders to the finish line. Paul spun in circles, trying to think of where she could be. A thought struck him then:

Where’s the Taurus?

The blue car hasn’t been in the parking lot when had come back across from the store. Both the car and its hapless driver (the guy with luck so bad that he thought the tow truck would blow a wheel before it got to him) were gone.

Paul ran to the parking lot and stood at the spot where the blue Taurus had been parked. He looked for something, anything, but there was nothing; no cigarette that had been tossed aside, no tire marks, nothing. Just an empty space where a car had been.

Paul took his cell out of his pocket and dialed 911. He had to try three times before he could push the right buttons.

“Nine-one-one emergency,” a calm female voice answered on the first ring. “How can I help you?”

“It’s my daughter. I think…I think she’d been kidnapped.”

“Excuse me sir, could you repeat that? I didn’t catch what you said.”

“My daughter has been kidnapped.”

His voice broke on the last word.

2

The search for Samantha officially lasted for fifteen days. The unofficial search, conducted by volunteers, neighbors and relatives, went on for three weeks after that. The number of people who showed up for the searches through the woods and back alleys, and along Sag Creek, dwindled until it was just family. Even family eventually had excuses for why they couldn’t come.

The police brought Paul in for questioning on four separate occasions, and they had him take a polygraph test on three of them. They claimed that the first two were inconclusive, and he didn’t bother asking for the results of the last. They had him tell the story of everything that had happened on the day of Sam’s disappearance too many times to count, even having him write it out. He had seen enough cop shows to know that they were looking discrepancies in his story, for him to tell the story differently than he had told it before; even the slightest deviation from an earlier telling of the tale could be used as evidence that he was making the whole story up.

It was true that he had been at the Quick Shop that day, because the surveillance footage from inside the store recorded his purchase of the milk and candy. This didn’t necessarily prove, he was told, that he had ever been at the park with his daughter. If she was with him, they asked, then why didn’t she accompany him into the store?

She wanted to swing just a little longer, that was why. She was so happy that she was finally able to swing by herself.

“You should be trying to track the guy with the blue Taurus,” Paul said to them.

Did he notice the license plate number of the vehicle in question? No, he hadn’t. Was there anyone else who could attest to the fact that there had been a man with a blue Taurus in the parking lot that day? No, there wasn’t. Didn’t Paul think that his story sounded a little suspicious? No, he really didn’t so, but they obviously did.

Later, he wouldn’t be able to remember the first time he had noticed Sarah looking at him differently, with an air of suspicion. He could remember the day she left to stay with her sister, though. He also remembered the day she told him that she wanted a divorce.

He couldn’t remember the day he had first started drinking more than he usually did, but he could remember the day roughly two years later when he was nearly hit head-on by a semi-truck when he dozed off and swerved onto the opposing lane. The blare of the truck’s air horn had snapped his eyes open, and he managed to swerve back into his own lane just in time. He had spent ten minutes parked on the side of the road, catching his breath, before he started for home. He drove home that day very slowly, and promised himself that he would never drink again. Eventually he even made good on this promise.

Paul was never arrested or charged in connection with his daughter’s disappearance, even though the detective handling the case could barely hide his animosity toward him. Eventually even the local TV news stations stopped calling him for a comment, moving on like vultures to fresher kill. Sam’s case went cold.

After the house was sold he moved into a small one bedroom apartment. He had managed to keep his job after convincing his boss that he was finally off the sauce. Surprisingly he found that passing by bars was never a really big temptation for him; he had always preferred to drink alone. He went to work, caught a movie every other weekend, and hung around the apartment.

He became a connoisseur of bad reality television, of shows that he could never admit to watching.

Every year on Sam's birthday he bought a chocolate cupcake, just as he had bought for Sam on her birthdays before she was taken from him. Now there was no candle set into the cupcake though, and there were no wishes made. Sometimes he would eat the cupcake, and sometimes he would toss it out the next day.

Then he met Georgia, and those reality shows didn't hold so much appeal for him anymore. He left behind his bachelor life and took the plunge for the second time in his life, and for a little while they experienced happiness together in the little house on a shady lane that they had made their home. There were good times; he would always try to remember that.

But life does not allow for too many happy endings. The walls around the man and his second wife started to show cracks when she decided that she wanted to have a baby. He didn't want to have another child. Neither would back down from what they wanted (or didn't want). The cracks in the walls got larger, and eventually those walls fell down. She moved out, but there was no divorce. He knew that eventually one of them would get around to filing the paperwork, and that it would probably be her.

Once again he found himself living alone in an empty house that was too quiet. The bottle called to him, but he was able to resist the call, even on those nights when it sounded so sweet to his ears. He stayed sober, and again became acquainted with those shows he had left behind, and some new ones as well. Life settled into a glacial rhythm, or rather he did; he often had the impression that he was standing still while the world sped by around him.

And this was his life. It wasn't much, but it was life, and life was so much preferable to the alternative.

Shortly after the tenth anniversary of his daughter's disappearance, Paul left his house to walk to McDonald's for lunch. It was his day off. He knew he should stop eating junk food (his doctor wasn't happy with his cholesterol numbers, and his blood pressure wasn't so great either), but he was hungry, and damn it he was grown, and he could eat whatever he wanted to eat. He thought about leaving the car behind and walking; the McDonald's wasn't too far, and the walk would do him good, burning off some of the calories he was about to consume. He drove instead.

A man walks out of his house to go get some Mickey D's, not realizing how his life is about to change. It was another funny little thing he would think about later.

His lunch was uneventful; he washed it down with a diet coke, figuring that it wouldn't help any to add thirty grams or so of sugar to his meal. He made a trip to the lavatory before leaving, draining his bladder to his great relief, and stopping to wash his hands, a thing he was surprised that a lot of people didn't do. It was something he didn't like to think about, especially after eating a meal that other people had handled with their bare hands.

When he was finished washing his hands Paul headed out to his car, which he had parked in the shade of a tree so he wouldn't have to sit on an unpleasantly hot seat. He got into his car, buckled himself in and started the engine. Before he shifted into reverse to back out, he checked the rearview mirror to make sure that there was nobody behind him. As his eyes moved away from the mirror, and just as he reached to grab the gear selector, he took notice of a car that was parked at the stop light on the street just beyond the grass border of the McDonald's parking lot. More accurately, he took notice of the driver of that car. He had seen that man before.

The light turned green and the car drove off, and for a moment Paul sat where he was, hand frozen on the gear selector, wondering if he really saw what he thought he saw. The car was different, a Chevy. But it had been a decade, and people did get new cars. How sure could he be? He had only seen the man once, and that was many years before. He had only gotten a look at the man at the stoplight for less than fifteen seconds. But he knew; he was certain.

He shifted into reverse, backed out of his space, shifted into drive and rocketed out of the parking lot, cutting off another guy who was trying to pull out into the street, earning an angry honk that blared and died unheard by him. His world had gone quiet except for the sound of his own heartbeat and the sound of the engine as he raced to catch up with the car that had been stopped at the light.

Paul was starting to think that he had lost the other guy, the guy he thought of in his head as Blue Taurus, no matter what kind of car he was driving now. There were more indignant honks as he slalomed between cars, trying to find the Chevy. He wondered if he should try to call 911 as he drove, to tell them that he had the found the man who took his daughter ten years ago. He decided against it for two reasons. The first was that he was worried that he would get into a crack up if he tried to maintain a phone conversation while driving so fast. The other reason was a shadowy one that he didn't fully understand yet.

Then he caught sight of it, a red Chevy up ahead. He checked his rate of speed, slowing down and sending thanks up to whatever gods there were above for keeping him from a bad accident.

He followed the vehicle, trying his best to keep at least a couple of cars between them at all times. He had read in a spy novel that this was a good precaution to take to avoid spooking your prey. Now that he wasn't speeding like a raving lunatic, he thought about making that call to 911

to let them know that he was following the man who the police had never really been convinced existed. But he didn't make the call. That shadowy reason wouldn't allow him to.

So he followed, and tried to avoid being noticed. The red Chevy (with Blue Taurus behind the wheel) didn't speed up suddenly, or make any sharp, unexpected turns, so he thought he was successful on that account. Blue Taurus made no stops except when a traffic light forced him to, and at these moments Paul thought about getting out of his own idling vehicle and running up to the Chevy. He didn't know what he would do then. Maybe pull the guy of the car and slam his head into the street. Then again, he had been eating a little too much of the junk food lately, and he wasn't in the best shape anymore. It was entirely possible that Blur Taurus would be the one doing the head slamming.

Eventually Blue Taurus left behind the busier streets and meandered down several quiet residential neighborhoods where the houses stood close to the street. After a while Paul began to wonder if the man had realized he was being tailed after all, and this was some half-assed way of shaking his pursuer. This fear proved unfounded, however, as Blue Taurus pulled his red Chevy into the driveway of a small white house.

Paul passed the house and continued up the block. When he came to a cross street he turned around and headed back the way he had come. He knew that he was taking a chance; if Blue Taurus had noticed Paul pass by before, and saw him driving by again in the opposite direction, it might be a tip off. Paul decided to take the risk; he wanted to get another look at the guy.

When Paul made his second pass of the house he saw that Blue Taurus had gotten out of his car and was standing near the front door of the house. Paul's breath froze in his throat.

He realized that he had taken his foot off the gas pedal and was slowing down. He pressed down on the pedal gently and drove past. Paul drove home. About halfway home his hands

started to shake. He only made them stop by gripping the wheel as hard as he could. When he pulled into his own driveway and into the garage, he shut off the car and sat there for ten minutes, his mind racing with the beginnings of a dozen different plans, discarding each one in turn as completely outlandish.

He eventually got out of the car and went inside. An image burned brightly in his mind, the memory of what he had seen on that second pass of Blue Taurus's home. The last thing he saw was Blue Taurus bending down and gathering a young girl in his arms, planting a kiss on one plump cheek.

The girl, Paul thought, must be the man's daughter.

4

That evening Paul didn't eat dinner. He made dinner (if putting a Hungry Man in the microwave and pushing a few buttons could be called *making* dinner), but he didn't eat a bite. He sat at the table staring at the wall across from him, his food getting cold on the table in front of him.

Several times he looked at the phone hanging on the wall (sometimes he thought he was the last man in America who still had a landline), telling himself that what he needed to do was call the police. He would tell them that he had found the man who had taken his daughter. He would lead them to the man's house, and they would lead Blue Taurus out of his home in handcuffs. Paul was a realist, and he knew there was virtually no chance that his daughter was still alive, but at least there was a chance that Blue Taurus would tell the cops where to find her. She could get a proper burial. And Blue Taurus? He would spend the rest of his life in prison. Maybe he would even get the needle.

But would the cops arrest the man? Would they believe that, after getting one brief look at a man ten years earlier, Paul's identification of him could be trusted now? They might think it was just wishful thinking, a father still grieving over the loss of his daughter and wanting to believe so badly that he had found the man who took her. And after all, wasn't it true that the detective who originally worked the case suspected that the man with the blue Taurus never existed?

It was all these things, and one other, that stopped him from making that call. That one other reason still hadn't come out fully into the light; it was content to wait in the shadows for just a little while longer.

Paul got up from the table and threw the Hungry Man in the garbage. He thought about watching a little TV before bed, but decided against it. He knew that he wouldn't be able to follow what was happening on any show that night. Instead he jumped in the shower, letting the water get as hot as he could stand it. Then he got into bed. It was a warm night, so he only wore a pair of checkered boxers. He lay in the darkness of his room, the bed sheet kicked down so that it was tangled around his ankles.

The man had said that with his luck the tow truck would break down before it got to him. He kept looking under the hood, but he wasn't actually doing anything; he hadn't removed any caps, hadn't been poking around the engine. The engine hadn't been smoking. Maybe Paul should have noticed that. Anyone could pop the hood of their car and stand around looking down into the engine compartment with a worried look on their face. It didn't mean that there was something actually wrong with their car. Paul should have been suspicious. He should never have let Sam stay behind at the park alone.

No, it wasn't his fault. He was just going across the street for a minute. If it hadn't been for that old hag and her damn lotto ticket…but no, it wasn't her fault either. There was only one person to blame. The man with the blue fucking Taurus.

Paul thought about that day. He wished like hell that he had stopped Sam so could have given her that kiss. But he hadn't. Instead he had bought Sam a pack of Skittles. Her favorite.

It was then that the reason, the one that had been sticking to the shadows of his mind, the one that had kept him from calling the police, decided to boogie on out and make itself clear to him. Paul kicked the sheet free of his ankles and swung his legs over the side of his bed. He got up, standing in the darkness for a moment. Then he left went downstairs and into his study. He went to the desk where he sat every month when it was time to figure out the bills. After turning on the desk lamp he took a seat, opened a drawer and pulled out a legal pad, setting it on the desk and taking a black pen in hand.

Paul sat for a minute looking down at the yellow paper with blue lines. Then he began to write. He wrote slowly, tentatively, at first, but as he continued to write his pace sped up as a jumble of ideas struggled to pull themselves together in his head. What he was writing was the rough draft of a plan.

5

Paul did a little research. He turned on his old PC and spent three hours bathing in its soft blue glow as he surfed the web, looking for the things he thought he would need. It was important that he not go into this thing underprepared; he knew that he couldn't prepare for every eventuality, but he would damn sure try. He made a checklist of things he needed, and the places he hoped to find them. When he finally shut off the computer and got back into bed his head was

thrumming. He didn't think he would be able to get to sleep. He turned out to be wrong about that.

The day after following Blue Taurus to his home, Paul set out with his list, having called in sick to work, the first sick day he had taken in two years. He didn't bother with breakfast; to tell the truth, he wasn't hungry at all. His first stop was at the Lowe's near downtown. He asked a few questions and got a few helpful answers, and left there with a power drill that came with an assortment of carbon steel bits coated with titanium nitride, a pack of heavy-duty drywall screws, two C-clamps, three twelve-foot lashing straps, a pair of safety goggles, and a 2 ft. by 3 ft. sheet of cold-rolled steel. The helpful worker who answered Paul's questions had warned him that cold-rolled steel had a tendency to rust when exposed to the elements, and that if this was a problem for him he should choose galvanized steel instead. Paul went for the cold-rolled. He was already on the hook for $160.49, plus sales tax, and he still had more crap to buy.

Next Paul drove across town to Tom's Music City. Paul walked past rows of guitars on display and walked up to the counter. The counterman was a white guy who sported both Jimi Hendrix hair and thick Buddy Holly glasses. It was a strange look. Paul wondered if this guy was the eponymous Tom. The guy was too busy reading an issue of Maxim to notice Paul's presence until Paul cleared his throat to get the man's attention.

"What do you need?" the man asked.

"Where can I find panels of acoustic foam?"

Jimi Holly nodded toward the back of the store.

"Thanks," Paul said.

Paul made his way to the back of the store and found what he was looking for. He picked out two packs of black Auralstar SonoFoam, one pack larger than the other. The black foam was

expensive, and set him back another hundred dollars. Paul loaded the packs of foam into the trunk with the stuff he had bought at Lowe's.

The last place Paul made a visit to was Walmart. From here he picked up a pack of zip ties, a roll of duct tape, a baby monitor, the biggest potty training toilet he could find, a 120 oz. container of bleach, a few YA novels, a lock kit that he could install himself, and a three-hole 100% acrylic ski mask. He was worried that he might attract attention with this purchase of such an odd assemblage of items (especially the ski mask, as it was high summer), but the cashier didn't bat an eye. He supposed she had seen stranger purchases.

All told his shopping spree had cost him almost four hundred dollars. It was a real hit to his wallet, but it was necessary. Paul drove home and lugged his purchases inside in three trips. He was out of breath after the third trip, another reminder that he had to do away with the TV dinners and fast food. He made a mental note to make a trip to the grocery store when he got a chance, to pick up some food that wouldn't clog up his arteries.

The potty training toilet (it had images of cartoon characters pasted all around it), and most of the other items were left in the living room; it was the items purchased at Lowe's that Paul wanted to deal with first. He carried them down to the basement, first the sheet metal and then the rest.

Under the harsh light of a bank of fluorescents Paul went to work. He cleared off a solid wooden table that had stood in a corner of the basement since he had moved into the house with Georgia. The table was a bit dusty, but it didn't matter much. Paul laid the sheet metal on the table and secured the sheet to the table with a C-clamp at the midway point of each longer side. The drill was taken out of its box, and Paul chose the right bit by comparing them to the size of the drywall screws. After affixing the bit to the drill he searched around for an electrical outlet (it

had been so long since he had used an outlet in the basement that he had forgotten where they were). He plugged the drill in and gave the trigger a short pull; the drill purred to life. The power cord was long enough that he didn't have to worry about being able to reach the table with the drill.

After laying the drill on top of the sheet metal Paul donned the safety goggles. He picked up the drill and moved to one corner of the sheet metal. He had never drilled through steel before, and he was nervous. He set the point of the drill bit against the cold steel and depressed the trigger. Holding on tight to keep control of the drill, he quickly made it through the metal. The pitch of the drill changed as the bit started digging into the wooden face of the table beneath the sheet, and Paul let go of the trigger. He compared one of the drywall nails to the hole he had just drilled, and decided it was a good fit. He drilled more holes along the perimeter of the sheet, until he had worked his way all around the table.

When he was finished he stood surveying his work, wiping the sweat away from his brow. He was famished, and he decided that he had done enough for one day. He needed to eat. He tossed the goggles onto the sheet metal, unplugged the drill and climbed upstairs, hitting the light switch before closing the basement door, leaving that space in darkness broken only by whatever weak, dirty light managed to make it through the two basement windows that gave a view of the outdoors at ground level.

6

Bright and early the next morning (after letting his boss know that his summer cold hadn't quite cleared up), Paul put the finishing touches on his preparations around the house. He opened up the packs of acoustic foam, which were made to absorb noise. He took two of the larger

wedges upstairs to what had once been intended for use as a guest bedroom, though the only guest who had ever stayed there was Georgia's deadbeat brother, who had stayed over for three weeks once when he got evicted from an apartment.

After making sure that the bedroom's one window was secured, Paul doubled up the two wedges and fit them into the window frame. Then came the hard part. He nearly threw out his back lugging the sheet metal up from the basement, twisting and turning his body to maneuver the sheet up the narrow staircase. After another trip to the basement to retrieve the power drill and the drywall screws, Paul had all that he needed.

He set the sheet metal on the windowsill and did his best to hold it in place as he drilled screws through the holes he had made in the metal, securing the sheet to the wall. The finishing touch was bringing up the YA books, the baby monitor and the plastic toilet that was meant for parents to potty train their children. He tossed the books on the bed, put the baby monitor on the dresser and placed the toilet in the corner of the room. The last thing he did in that room was install the lock from the kit he had bought at the store. There hadn't been a lock of any kind on the door before; now he could lock the door from the outside. Then he headed back down to the basement. He tried to fit one of the smaller acoustic foam wedges into each of the basement windows, but they were too large. He cut them down to size, and taped them in place so they wouldn't fall out.

There was one item he needed that he didn't have to purchase. It was tucked away in a shoe box that had sat on a shelf in his closet collecting dust since he had moved into the house with Georgia. It had once belonged to his father, and after the old man had kicked off back in '94 it had been handed down to Paul.

Paul brought the shoebox off the shelf in the closet, set it on top of his dresser, lifted off the lid and looked inside. Inside the box rested a Smith & Wesson Model 36 in a leather holster, and a box of .38 Special cartridges. Paul had always meant to spend some time at a firing range, but he had never gotten around to it. He put the lid back on top of the box and took it downstairs with him. He grabbed the ski mask and the package of zip ties and took all of the items out to the car. He put the zip ties and ski mask in the glove compartment; the shoe box he slid under the driver's seat.

Paul drove away from his home and headed for that other man's home. He intended to scope the place out, maybe try to find a way to observe the house without being noticed. And wait for an opportunity.

7

The only good that came out of that first day's stakeout was that he realized one thing that he needed that he hadn't thought of--a good pair of binoculars. He knew he had a pair at home, and it took him an hour of rummaging around in boxes until he found it. The pair of binoculars was made by Bushnell, and if he remembered correctly they had cost a pretty penny once upon a time. Georgia had bought the binoculars for some reason he couldn't recall now.

On his second stakeout day Paul parked in the parking lot of a gas station from which (with the aid if the binoculars) he could watch the end of the street on which Blue Taurus lived. The day before, he had noticed some kids getting dropped off by a school bus at this very street corner. He hadn't seen Blue Taurus's daughter, but it was possible that there was more than one bus that stopped there.

Paul sat sipping a lime Big Freeze and watching. At 3 o'clock a yellow school bus stopped at the corner and dropped off a load of kids. Paul scanned over the kids with the binocs. None of them was the girl he was looking for. When the children had scattered to the winds Paul sat back again and resumed sipping his drink.

At 3:16 another bus pulled up to the same corner as the last. Paul tossed the Big Freeze cup (now empty) into the passenger side footwell and lifted the binoculars to his eyes. As he watched, four children got off the bus. Two were boys, and one was a girl who was much younger than Blue Taurus's daughter. The last kid was a girl, as well, and she looked about the right age, but she was turned away from Paul and he couldn't be certain if it was her or not. The children stood around at the stop for a minute after the bus drove off, chatting with one another.

"Come on, turn around," he whispered to himself.

The two boys were the first to break away, walking off together away from the street on which Blue Taurus lived. The young girls talked for another minute before the younger one waved to the older one and started in the direction of the gas station. Then the smaller girl stopped and turned, calling out to the other girl. The other girl turned, and Paul gave a little yip. It was definitely her; the older girl was Blue Taurus's daughter.

The younger girl finished whatever she had to say and waved again. She continued on her way as Blue Taurus's daughter walked in the opposite direction, following the street that led to her house. Paul stowed the binoculars back in the glove compartment and took out the ski mask, which he placed on his lap. He waited for the younger girl to pass by, and then he backed out of his space and pulled out of the parking lot.

He crossed the street to follow after Blue Taurus's daughter. As he passed her he saw that she was looking down at a pink cell phone as she walked, oblivious to her surroundings. She was

walking on the opposite side of the street, however, so he kept driving. Paul sped up and got further along the street, passing the girl's house, and then parked at the side of the street long enough to put on the ski mask and get the shoe box from under the seat. He took out the revolver and shoved the empty box back beneath the seat, moving quickly. After setting the revolver on the passenger seat he pulled away from the curb and headed back the way he had come.

He passed the girl's house (Blue Taurus's house) again, only this time it passed on his right. As he came upon the girl she was still more interested in her phone than in what was going on around her. Paul slowed as he approached her, and stopped when he was still about fifteen feet away, shifting the car into park. From this distance Paul thought he could peg the girl's age at around twelve. He took the revolver in hand, took one last look around the street to be sure that nobody was watching, then got out of the car. By then the girl was just passing his car; she still hadn't noticed him. He rushed around to the sidewalk, and moved to cut her off by standing directly in her path. When the girl finally looked up she saw a man standing in front of her with his face covered in a black ski mask. The man was holding a gun. She froze.

“”Don't scream, or I'll hurt you,” Paul said, keeping his voice low to avoid being overheard through any of the open windows of the nearby houses. “I don't want to hurt you, but I will. Do you understand?”

The girl looked first at the cold steel which he held against one thigh, pointed at the ground, and then back up at his eyes. She nodded her head slightly. Paul thought she looked a bit dazed; he was worried that she would faint, and that he would have to lift her into the car himself.

“I promise that you won't get hurt if you do exactly what I say. I want you to get into the car.”

The girl stayed where she was for a moment. Then she took a step back.

“Don’t try to run; I’ll catch you,” Paul warned.

She froze again. She tried looking past Paul. He thought that maybe she was looking for help. Maybe she was hoping her father would save her from the bad man.

“Get into the car right now,” Paul commanded forcefully yet quietly.

She hesitated still, but then seemed to realize that there was nothing to do but comply. She moved toward the passenger side door. Paul reached toward her and she flinched away.

“I just need you to give me the phone,” he said.

She looked at the phone in her hands, seemed to think about whether she wanted to give it to him, and then held it out. Paul grabbed it and tossed in away.

“Go on; get in,” he said.

She did what he told her. Paul leaned down into the open door.

“I’m going to go around and get in on the other side. Don’t try anything funny.”

The girl said nothing. Her eyes were wide; she looked like she still hadn’t fully accepted that this was all real and not part of some terrible waking dream.

Paul closed her door and started around the car. As he came around the back a terrible thought occurred to him: the keys were still in the ignition, and the car was running. If the girl locked the doors he would be locked out of the car. Then she could honk the horn until she got the whole neighborhood’s attention. Even at her age, she could probably manage to drive away, leaving him stranded with a ski mask on and a gun in his hand. Paul hurried to the driver’s side door, and breathed a sigh of relief when it opened.

Paul got into the car and shut his door. He shifted the revolver from his right hand to his left, and with his one free hand he shifted into drive and gripped the steering wheel as he pulled away

from the curb. He looked to his right and saw that the girl was looking at him, but she looked away quickly.

“I’m not going to hurt you, and I’m not some kind of pervert or anything,” he assured her. “In a way, this has nothing to do with you. You’re just…collateral damage.”

The girl didn’t respond. She just kept looking straight ahead.

“Listen,” Paul said. “I have to take off this mask. I want you to close your eyes.”

The girl did so. Paul set the pistol on his lap and took the wheel in his left hand. With his other hand he pulled off the mask and held it near the girl.

“Keep your eyes closed. I want you to reach up and take this mask.”

She reached, and her hand searched around until she felt the mask.

“Can you feel the eye holes?” Paul asked.

She felt the mask, turning it in her hands until she found them.

“Yes,” she said.

“Good. Now, I want you to put the mask on, but with the holes on the back of your head.”

She complied after a slight hesitation. She was scared, and in a way that was a good thing; Paul figured it would make it that much harder for her to rebel against him. He stopped on the side of a residential street long enough to take one of the zip ties out of the glove compartment and bind the girl’s hands behind her.

“Now crouch down in your seat a little,” he said. “I don’t want people to see you while we’re driving. It’ll draw attention.”

The girl scrunched herself up.

“A little bit more.”

She sunk down lower in her seat.

“All right; that’s good,” Paul said.

He took the pistol from his lap, reached down and set it on the floorboards. The rest of the drive was a quiet one. When he got home Paul hit the button on the garage door opener and pulled into the shadowy interior of the garage. When the door had closed completely he shut off the engine and took the keys out of the ignition, then got out of the car. He went around the car and helped the girl out.

He led her inside the house. In the kitchen he cut the ties off of her wrists. She reached to take of the mask.

“No, leave it on. I don’t want you to see my face.”

He took her up to the second floor. He took her into the guest bedroom, which now had a sheet of cold-rolled steel over its window. He switched on the light.

“Close your eyes while I take the mask off of you,” Paul said to the girl.

He waited a moment.

“Are they closed?” he asked.

“Yes.”

She spoke so faintly he barely heard her. He took the mask off of her and stuffed it into his pocket.

“I want you to keep your eyes closed until I leave the room. There’s a bed for you to sleep on, and some books to read if you get bored. There’s a baby monitor on the dresser. It’s turned off right now. If you need to use the bathroom just turn it and talk into it. If I’m home I’ll hear it, and I’ll come let you out to use the toilet. If you keep calling me and I don’t come, it means I’m out. You can either hold it, or use the little toilet in the corner. I would prefer if you held it as long as you could, though.”

Silence hung around them for moment.

“Do you have any questions?” Paul asked.

“When can I go home?” she spoke even more quietly tan before.

“I…I don’t know yet. I’m sorry about this; I really am.”

Paul hurried out of the room, closing and locking the door behind him. He stood outside the door for a minute, wondering if he had made a mistake. Then he walked away from the door, and went downstairs. Mistake or not, he would see this thing through.

8

Paul watched as the man fought to hold back tears while being interviewed by Channel 7 News. He felt some satisfaction at knowing that he had been the one to wound the man so deeply. It had been five days since Paul had abducted Blue Taurus’s daughter. It wasn’t until two days after the abduction that there was a piece about it in the papers. The girl’s name was Laurie Fontana. It wasn’t until he read it in the paper that Paul realized he had never bothered to ask her what her name was. The girl had barely said a word to him since her arrival in his home. When she had to use the toilet she called him using the baby monitor, and that was about the extent of their communication.

Paul had had to return to work, but in his absence the girl only had to use the potty training toilet twice, and both times only to urinate. The first time she had seemed slightly embarrassed when Paul had to clean the plastic toilet after her. The second time she didn’t seem to care much. Perhaps she had remembered that he had kidnapped her off the street, and she didn’t need to worry about burdening him with an unpleasant duty. He left her food enough for the day when he knew that he was going to be out for any length of time.

Blue Taurus finally had a name now: Walter Fontana, father of Laurie, and husband of Grace. Grace Fontana was six months pregnant with their second child, a boy. The story in the paper had included a picture of the worried parents. They were sitting together on a couch and holding hands, staring at the camera with a look that seemed to beg for anyone who knew anything that could help them find their daughter to come forward. The only witness to the abduction was reported to have seen a red Dodge Charger speeding down the street, with the girl in the passenger seat banging on the window as if she were trying to break it. Paul didn't drive a red Dodge Charger. He drove a silver 2008 Toyota Corolla.

This confused him at first, until he remembered reading about cases involving supposed witnesses who turned out to have witnessed nothing at all. There were a variety of reasons why these people did what they did, the primary one being the need to feel important and listened to. He recalled the hunt for the Beltway Sniper, when many witnesses reported seeing a white van fleeing from the scenes of the attacks. People were told to be on the lookout for a white van that looked in any way suspicious. But there was no white van; the killers turned out to be driving around in a blue Chevy Caprice.

Luck was something you rarely noticed until it worked against you. That's why even the luckiest bastards could still whine about what rotten luck they had. But in this case, Paul had to send thanks up to whatever powers dispensed luck, both good and bad, for this little break. The cops had no description of the abductor (other than the assumption that the abductor was a man), and they were looking for a red Charger instead of a silver Corolla. He just hoped that the false witness stuck to their story.

The paper didn't mention what Walter Fontana's occupation was. To Paul the man looked quite plain, even dull. He reminded Paul of a history teacher he had in high school. Maybe that's

what he was--a teacher. His neighbors probably thought he was a good man, maybe the quiet type. Paul knew what he really was.

And now, five days after the girl had been taken, Walter Fontana--the man formerly known as Blue Taurus--was on Paul's TV screen with tears threatening to spill from his eyes. His wife is dabbing at her own eyes with a tissue. They tell the viewers what a wonderful and sweet girl Laurie is, and how they knew that no one could possibly want to hurt such a girl. They plead with her captor to just let her go.

"Please give us back our daughter," Walter Fontana says, his voice breaking on the last word.

Paul decides to let the fucker dangle for a little while longer.

9

Three days after the TV interview Paul decided it was time to make his big move. The girl--who now had a radio to listen to, to pass the time--had never been his real target. She was just the knife he needed to twist in her father's heart just for a little while. What he really wanted was Blue Taurus; what he really wanted was Walter Fontana.

Paul drove by the man's house, which wasn't far from the spot where he had taken Laurie. He thought there might be news vans hanging around, or maybe a police car standing watch on the block. There were no news van, however, and if there was a police car it was either unmarked or well hidden.

Paul continued past the house. There was no place along Walter's street at which he could park without attracting attention, so once against he parked at the gas station at the end of the block. He went inside and bought himself a bag of barbecue potato chips and a Big Freeze

(cherry this time), then sat in the car munching on the chips for a while. He figured that if Walter Fontana left his house to make a trip somewhere, there was an even chance that he would come this way.

Paul waited for an hour and a half, far longer than he would have liked to. There was always a chance than someone would get curious about the guy sitting out in the parking lot like he was waiting for something. Paul got out of the car and tossed his long-empty bag of chips and Big Freeze cup into a trash can, then left the lot.

He drove down Walter's street again. As he passed the house he saw that everything was as he had seen it last; the windows were obscured by curtains, there was no one moving about that he could see. He went home, deciding that he would have to start his stakeout earlier the next day. That evening he made spaghetti, which was his favorite. He took a big plate up to Laurie Fontana. Later, when he went back up to retrieve the plate, he saw that she had only eaten a few forkfuls. She was lying on the bed with her back turned to him, and she took no notice of him as he grabbed the plate and slipped out of the room.

10

The next day Paul woke up bright and early, just as the sun was coming up. He made sure he had all that he needed in the event that he was presented with an opportunity to grab Walter Fontana. He had his pistol and zip ties; there was no need for a mask. He left Laurie a peanut butter and jelly sandwich wrapped in cellophane and a juice box, which he placed on top of the dresser in her room before leaving the house. She was still asleep.

Again he parked at the gas station, making sure to take the space at the furthest end of the lot, where the person working behind the register would be the least likely to notice him. He sat and waited, watching the street from which Fontana would come (if he came that way).

After an hour Paul had to run in to take a leak, hoping that Fontana didn't pass by while he was inside. After coming back to the car he didn't have to wait long. Barely five more minutes had passed before he saw Fontana's red Chevy. Paul fumbled with the keys for a moment before he was able to start the engine. He managed to start the car, and he sped out of the gas station lot to follow after the Chevy.

Paul caught up with the other man quickly, and again did his best to tail his quarry without being noticed. There was one moment when Paul thought that he had lost the man in traffic; when he found the Chevy again he breathed a sigh of relief.

He followed Fontana for about twenty minutes until the Chevy pulled into the parking lot of a small restaurant. Paul took a space between where the Chevy had parked and the front door of the place. There were three other cars in the lot, all empty. The windows of the restaurant itself were darkly tinted.

Fontana got out of his car and started toward the door, which he could reach only by passing in front of Paul's Toyota. Paul had the S&W ready on his lap. As the man started to pass, Paul called out to him:

"Hey, Buddy, can you help me out really quick?"

Fontana stopped and looked at Paul. Paul was curious whether there would be any recognition in the man's eyes; all he saw, however, were a pair of red-rimmed eyes that looked haunted and hollow.

"What's that?" Fontana asked.

“I was looking for Randall Road, but I think I might have passed it. I have these directions here; I was wondering if you could take a look at them and tell me where I went wrong.”

Paul started rooting around in one pocket, feigning that he was trying to find a paper with the directions written on it. Fontana looked like he was trying to decide whether he wanted to take a minute out of his day to stop and help some guy find out how lost he was. Then he walked over to the open driver’s side window, leaning down.

“Let me see the directions,” he said.

Instead of a paper with directions on it Fontana had a revolver pointed at him. His eyes went wide, and he started to back away from the window.

“If you want to see your daughter alive again, you’re gonna have to come with me,” Paul said.

Fontana froze in place, looking at Paul with a confused look on his face.

“I have you’re little girl, Walter,” Paul said. “Yow have two choices now. You either get in the car, and I take you to her. Or you try to run. If you run I’ll shoot you in the back, and then I’ll kill your daughter. I’ll make sure to tell her that it’s your fault she has to die.”

Walter Fontana looked toward the restaurant, perhaps hoping that help would come from that direction.

“What’s it gonna be?” Paul asked. “I don’t have all day.”

“I…I’ll come with you.”

“Okay, then. Walk around the front of the car and get in the passenger seat. If you try anything, I will empty this gun into you.

The man did as he had been told. When he got into the car Paul instructed him to look inside the glove compartment, where the man found a package of zip ties.

“Tale one of them out of the package,” Paul said, the revolver pointing at the other man but held low so nobody would see it if they passed by.

Fontana did it.

“Now loop one end around your right wrist.”

Again Fontana complied.

“Okay, now turn away from me and put both hands behind your back,” Paul commanded.

When Fontana did so Paul reached down and set the revolver on the floor, then hurriedly worked to bind the man’s wrists together by wrapping the loose end of the zip tie to Fontana’s left wrist and cinching it tight.

“Okay, now face forward,” Paul said as he picked up the gun.

“Why are you doing this?” Fontana asked.

Paul looked at the man’s face, searching it.

“You really don’t remember me, do you?” Paul asked.

“No, I don’t.”

Paul nodded his head.

“You will. You will.”

“Where’s my daughter?”

“I’m taking you to her.”

“If you hurt her, I’ll kill you, motherfucker.”

Paul started pulling out of the parking space.

“I’m sure you would,” Paul said. “Or you would try to, anyway. Fathers love their daughters. I haven’t done anything to Laurie, Walter.”

“How do I know that you’re telling the truth?”

“You’re just gonna have to take my word for it, I guess,” Paul said as he pulled out into the street.

As they drove Paul repeated what he said after Walter Fontana had threatened him:

“Fathers love their daughters.”

11

Paul leaned against the wall, trying to catch his breath. He looked down at his shirt; there was a bloodstain on it. It wasn’t his blood. Walter Fontana had fought when Paul tried to secure him to the table with the lashing straps. Now Fontana was lying on the same table that Paul had used to cut the sheet metal; he was properly secured, with one strap running across his upper arms and chest, one across is lower arms and stomach, and one across his legs. Fontana had a small gash on his forehead, and he was trying to talk through the rag that Paul had stuffed in his mouth.

“Shut up, you stupid son of a bitch,” Paul said.

The man continued trying to speak, his voice muffled and unintelligible, until he started to gag.

“See; that’s what you get,” Paul said. “Look at you now.”

Fontana continued to gag. Paul moved to the table and took the rag out of the man’s mouth. Fontana had a coughing fit. Paul tossed the rag on the ground, kicking it away with his foot. Fontana managed to get his coughing under control.

“Where’s Laurie?” Fontana asked. “You said you would take me to my daughter.”

“Shut up.”

“I want to see my daughter!”

Paul thought for a second.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

As Paul headed up the stairs Fontana yelled after him. Paul shut the basement door, and the captive man’s voice was cut off. Paul went up to the second floor and used his key to unlock the guest bedroom. When he entered the room Laurie was sitting cross-legged on the bed, listening to the radio. She looked up at him. Paul went over to the dresser, grabbed one of the books, and brought it to her on the bed. He reached down and shut off the radio, and handed the girl the book.

“Listen,” he said. “When I walk out of here I want you to start reading. Start at the beginning of a chapter--it doesn’t matter which one--and read out loud until you finish the chapter. Out loud, understand?

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Paul made sure to turn the baby monitor on before he left the room. After he locked the door he put his ear up to the door, and he heard Laurie’s muffled voice as she started to read. He went down to the first floor and grabbed the receiver off the kitchen counter, taking it downstairs with him. As he came down the stairs Fontana started hurling abuse at him. Paul came up to the table and delivered a blow to the side of the man’s head.

“Shut up and listen,” Paul demanded.

Paul turned on the receiver unit, and Laurie’s voice came out of it as she continued reading the book.

“Laurie. Laurie! Where are you, baby? Laurie!”

“She can’t hear you,” Paul said. “This thing only works one way.”

Fontana struggled against the straps.

“Fuck!” he yelled. “Let me go. I’ll tear you apart, you cocksucker!”

Paul turned off the receiver and set it on the floor.

“Be quiet. It’s my turn to talk.”

Fontana started to say something else, and Paul gave him another blow to the head. The man shut up.

Paul leaned over the bound man.

“Look at me,” Paul said.

Fontana looked up at him.

“Think really hard. Where have you seen me before?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think,” Paul said. “It was ten years ago. We only saw each other once.”

“If we only saw each other one time, and it was ten years ago, why in the hell should I remember you?”

“I remember you. I’ve never forgotten your face.”

“Good for you.”

Paul slapped the man hard.

“You were driving a blue Ford Taurus. Do you remember that?”

“A blue what? I’ve never owned a Ford Taurus.”

“I don’t know if you owned it, but you were driving it.”

“What is this about?” Fontana asked. “What, did some asshole in a blue Taurus cut you off on the highway ten years ago, and you’ve been obsessed with it ever since?”

Paul laughed.

“You’re good. Really good. I’m sure you’re good at convincing everybody that you’re a good man. A family man. But I know what you really are.”

“What am I?”

“You had a blue Taurus,” Paul said, ignoring the question. “You were looking under the hood, acting like there was something wrong with it. I told you that you should call for a tow truck, and you said that your luck was so bad that the tow truck would get a flat tire before it got to you. Does any of this ring a bell?”

“No.”

“Fuck you. I know you. I remember you. There’s no point in lying now. There’s no way out for you, but your can still save your daughter.”

Fontana’s eyes narrowed at that.

“Is that a threat? Are you saying that you’ll hurt my daughter of I don’t tell you what you want to hear?”

“Just don’t lie. Don’t fuckin’ lie to me.”

Paul moved away from the table; when he came back he was dragging a tool box along the floor. He rooted around inside the box and took out a pair of pliers.

“What did you do with my daughter?” Paul asked.

“I don’t do anything. I don’t know who you are, and I don’t know your daughter, man.”

Paul set the pliers down on the edge of the table long enough to rip the man’s shirt open, then he used the pliers to pinch a patch of skin on Fontana’s chest, twisting it. Fontana screamed out in pain. Paul eased off, releasing the bit of ski from the teeth of the pliers.

“Tell the truth,” Paul said. “You were driving a blue Taurus. You took my daughter.”

“Please don’t do this. I’m sorry for whatever happened to you and your family, but it had nothing to do with me.”

Paul reached over with the pliers again.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait!”

Paul paused.

“I know that you think you recognize me, but I’m telling you, you’ve got the wrong guy. You said it’s been ten years. That’s a long time, man. Especially if you only saw a guy one time. Maybe your memory isn’t as good as you thought it was.”

Paul used the pliers again, and again Fontana screamed. After Paul released him the man let out a pathetic whining sound.

“Please stop,” Fontana pleaded through sobs. “Please.”

“Tell me what you did, and this will all stop. Your daughter can go home. Maybe even you can.”

This was a lie; Paul had no intention of letting the man go.

“I can’t tell you that I did something that I didn’t do,” Fontana said. “I swear to God that I never hurt anybody. I never took anybody’s kid. I’m just a guy. I go to work, I don’t bother anybody. If you knew me you would know that I could never hurt a kid. I just want to take my daughter home. My wife is pregnant. I’m gonna have a son.”

Paul put the pliers back in the tool box. He took out a hammer, holding it up for the other man to see.

“I’m going to bust you up with this thing if you don’t start telling me the truth. Do you hear me?”

“Don’t. You’ve got the wrong guy. Don’t, no don’t, wait!”

Paul landed five blows along the man's legs. Fontana's wails were terrible. Tears streamed from his eyes.

"Please. Please, no more."

"Tell me the truth," Paul said. "That's all."

"I told you the truth already, and you hit me with a fucking hammer."

"You saw that my daughter was alone and you took her. Say it."

"I can't say that. I don't know what you're talking about."

Paul used the hammer to smash Fontana's left hand several times.

"Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!" Paul yelled with each blow.

But Walter Fontana wouldn't tell him. He insisted that he wasn't the man who had taken Paul's daughter. After the pliers and the hammers, after the WD40 sprayed into his mouth, even after the jabs to the arms with a screwdriver, he still denied that he was Blue Taurus. Paul was out of breath, sweaty and tired, frustrated at his inability to break the man. Paul hovered over Fontana, who was bleeding from several places.

"I'm tired of this shit," Paul said. "You're gonna admit what you did."

"Fuck you, you psycho motherfucker."

Fontana's voice was hoarse, choked.

Somewhere inside of Paul, buried deep in his mind beneath the hate and the rage, there was a growing doubt. What if this wasn't the man with the blue Taurus? After ten years of wanting to know what had happened to Sam, wasn't it possible that his mind had made a false connection?

No. He couldn't allow himself to think that. It was too late for doubts.

"All right," Paul said. "Let's see what you have to say after this."

Paul got the receiver to the baby monitor and set it on the table, turning it on. He walked away from the table and hurried up the stairs. From where he lay on the table, bleeding and broken, Walter Fontana listened to dead air coming from the baby monitor. Then he heard the sound of a lock being turned, of a door opening. He heard Laurie's voice start to speak, but then it was silenced.

"Laurie! Leave my daughter alone, you sick fuck!"

He remembered Paul telling him that the monitor only worked one way, but he yelled anyway.

The silence coming from the monitor spun out, lasting one minute, and then two. Fontana figured that Paul must have turned the receiver's the companion device off. Then the silence was shattered by the sound of Laurie's screams.

"Nooo! Laurie! Oh, God, please stop this!"

The screams lasted for just under a minute, and then the silence returned. Not long after that Paul retuned to the basement. He found Walter Fontana weeping.

"Is my daughter okay?" Fontana asked.

Paul said nothing.

"Is my daughter alive?" Fontana asked. "Please tell me she's alive."

"Is my daughter alive?" Paul asked in return.

"Christ, I don't know anything about your daughter."

Paul was quiet for a moment.

"Laurie is still alive," he said. "But if you don't tell me the truth right now, I'm gonna go back up there, and you can listen to your daughter die."

"No, no, no, no, no," Fontana's said, his voice choked with tears. "Fuck you. Let her go."

“Last chance.”

“Okay. Okay, I’ll tell you. I did it. I took your daughter. I’m so sorry. I swear to God I’m sorry.”

“You were driving a blue Taurus?”

“Yes. It was my brother’s car. I borrowed it.”

“And you saw my daughter alone?”

“Yes. I saw her alone, and I took her. I don’t know why I did it. I didn’t touch her, I swear. I didn’t do any pervert shit.”

“Did you kill her?”

“Yes.”

“How did you kill her?”

“I…I put a pillow over her face. It was quick. She didn’t suffer. I promise.”

Now they were both crying.

“What did you do with her after?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Tell me!”

Paul smashed his fist into the man’s face.

“Tell me what you did with her body!”

“I buried her in the woods, godammit!”

Paul collapsed to the ground, sobbing.

“I’m sorry. I saw her leaving the school, and I took her. I’m sorry.”

Paul stopped sobbing.

“What did you say?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

Paul stood up.

“Why did you say you saw her leaving school?”

Fontana hesitated. He looked scared, like a boy who had broken his mother’s favorite vase and now had to face her.

“That’s where she was taken, right? From school?”

“No. She was taken from the park.”

“Yeah, that’s what I meant. I took her from the park.”

Paul thought about it.

“What color was her hair?” he asked.

Fontana shot a look at Paul’s dark hair.

“Her hair was black.”

Paul shook his head. Sam had her mother’s blond hair.

“Oh, God,” Paul said. “Oh, my God.”

He knew. He had made a mistake. All that he had done…

“It wasn’t you,” Paul whispered.

Fontana looked confused, unsure of what was expected of him.

“It wasn’t you,” Paul said, louder this time.

“I tried telling you that,” Fontana said.

Paul reeled. He tried to fight a monster, and became a monster himself. It was like a storyline from an episode of *the Twilight Zone*.

“I’m…I don’t know what to…”

Paul didn't know what to say, or how to say it. Instead of saying anything, he moved to the strap that ran across Walter Fontana's legs and unlatched it, tossing it over the far side of the table.

"Thank God," Fontana said. "I want to see my daughter. Please let me see Laurie."

Paul started unlatching the second strap, the one running across Fontana's lower arms and belly, but it wouldn't budge. He bent down to get a closer look.

"I'm sorry about what happened to Sam," Fontana said. "I hope you find what you're looking for one day. I really do."

Paul tried to figure out why the latch holding the two ends of the strap together wouldn't come free. Then he froze.

"You said my daughter's name," Paul said.

"What?"

Paul stood up straight and looked down at the man.

"You said her name. Sam."

"Yeah, I did. Please, get these things off of me. I want to see my daughter."

"You said her name."

"Why do you keep saying that?" Fontana asked.

"Because I never told you her name."

Fontana paused.

"Yes, you did. You told me that her name was Samantha, but you called her Sam."

"I never told you her name," Paul repeated.

For a moment the two men stared at each other, one standing and one lying on his back. Then Fontana, in spite of the pain and the fear and the terror that he had been through, flashed a smile.

"Fuck you, asshole," he said.

He laughed.

"I'm such a stupid fuck," Fontana said. "I was this close, man. I was home free."

Paul went and got the screwdriver. When Fontana saw it he struggled to break free of his remaining straps. All he managed to do was flail his broken legs, sending jets of pain shooting through his body. He stopped struggling.

"I'm going to take your eyes out with this thing," Paul said. "And then I'm gonna rape your daughter with it."

Fontana spit at him, and the glob of saliva landed on Paul's shirt; he took no notice of it.

"If you tell me the truth, the real truth, right now, I'll let your daughter go and I'll kill you quickly."

Fontana looked into Paul's eyes and saw that Paul meant what he said. At least the part about what he would do if Fontana told any more lies or half-truths.

"Okay," Fontana said. "No more lies. Just the truth."

"What did you do?"

"It was my brother's car. That part is true. I saw the two of you playing at the park. I thought Sam looked…beautiful. I pulled into the parking lot and popped the hood, then stood around pretending like something was wrong with the car. I didn't know if I would actually get an opportunity to grab her, but then you left her alone."

That last part cut Paul like a knife.

“I waited for you to go inside that store, and then I called Sam over to me. I told her that I had something to show her. She was so trusting. When she got close enough I grabbed her and threw her into the car. I got out of there in a hurry.”

“What did you do then?”

“I took her to this clearing in the woods that I know about. My wife was at home with Laurie; Laurie was just two then. I couldn’t go there, so I went to the woods, and I…you know. She cried. I told her that everything was going to be all right. She said that she wanted to go home, and I told her that I would take her home when we were done playing.”

“You raped my little girl.”

It wasn’t a question.

“How did you kill her?” Paul asked.

“I choked her with my hands. I watched her die. Her face…the fear, it was beautiful. If you’ve never seen it, you’ll never understand. In that moment I was God.”

Paul had to fight himself to keep from planting the screwdriver into Fontana’s head.

“What did you do then?” he asked. “Did you bury her in the woods like you said?”

“No. I threw her in the river.”

“Which river?”

“The Juniper River. It runs through the woods near the clearing. That’s where I put all of them.”

“All of who?”

“All the girls. There have been so many of them.”

“Sam wasn’t the only one?”

“No.”

“Oh, God. How many have there been.”

Fontana had to think about it, and that fact alone turned Paul’s stomach.

“Sixteen that I can remember,” Fontana said. “Sixteen girls. And I enjoyed every one of them.”

When he said this Paul could see a look in the man’s eyes like hunger.

“I want to be a good person,” Fontana said. “I really do. I’m just not.”

There was a pause in which Paul took in everything that he had just been told.

“Now let my daughter go. I know you’re not like me. You are a good man. Do whatever you want to me, but let Laurie go. None of this is her fault.”

Paul looked the man in the eyes.

“I’m gonna kill your fucking daughter,” he said.

Then he used the screw driver. Walter Fontana did not die a quick death.

12

“Why did you want me to scream like I was being hurt?”

“What was that?”

Paul was dazed, and he hadn’t understood the question.

“”When you came up to the room and told me that you needed me to scream like I was being hurt real bad. Why did you want me to do that?”

Paul looked across at the girl. She was buckled into her seat, and had a blindfold over her eyes. The blindfold was really one of Georgia’s old sleeping masks that Paul had found. Her hands were unbound. There was no need for her to run; she was being set free.

“It doesn’t matter now,” he said.

He pulled into a familiar parking lot in front of a gas station.

“Listen to me,” he said. “When you get out of the car, you have to keep the blindfold on your face for two whole minutes.”

“I know. You already told me.”

“Well, I’m telling you again. Are you gonna do what I said?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll wait two minutes.”

“Okay. When you’re done counting you can take it off and walk home.”

He unbuckled her seat belt, then reached over and opened her door for her.

“Go ahead and step out,” he said.

She did that. When he reached to close the door again, Paul paused.

“Laurie,” he said.

“Yes?”

She turned toward the sound of his voice.

“I’m really sorry about everything.”

She didn’t say anything back. There was really nothing to say. Paul shut the door and pulled away from the gas station. He hurried away, not trusting that the girl would be able to wait for two minutes to take off the mask. He didn’t want her to get a look at his car; he wanted the cops to keep on looking for a Dodge Charger.

He knew that he still had work to do; Fontana’s body was still in his basement. But there was no rush. He drove home slowly, taking a long route. When he did arrive back home he pulled into his garage and hit the button on the garage door opener to shut the door. He shut the engine off and sat in the dark silence of the garage for a while. He cried in the darkness. When

the tears would flow no more, he got out of the car and went inside the house his daughter had never seen.