



**DAY 1:**  
**An Outbuilding in the California Mountains**

He touched her breast.

He hadn't meant to. Not that way. Not gently, as if there were a connection or affection between them. It wasn't as if there was suddenly sympathy for her, or second thoughts about the situation. To touch her so tenderly – a fluttering of the fingers, a sweep of his palm - was not in the plan and that, quite simply, was why he was surprised. But he really couldn't find fault with himself. There must have been something about the fall of the light or the turn of her body that made him do such a thing.

Taking a deep breath he closed his eyes so that he wouldn't be distracted by her breasts or her face or her long, long legs. For someone like him, it would not be unheard of to be moved by the frail, failing light filtering through the cracks in the mortar, pushing through the hole high in the wall. It was a desperately beautiful light, heroically shining as the dark crept up to capture it, overcome it, extinguish it.

There were smells, too. They were assaultive, musty smells that reminded him of a woman after sex. Then there were the scents of moist dirt and decaying leaves mixed with those of fresh pine and clean air. There was the smell of her: indefinable, erotic, unique.

Breathing deep, turning his blind eyes upward, fighting the urge to open them, he acknowledged the absence of sound. The sounds of civilization were white noise to him, but in this remote place his heart raced at the thump of a falling pinecone, the shifting of the air, the breathing and twitching of unseen animals, the flight of bugs and birds.

God, this was intimate: sights, smells, silence. His head fell back against the rough concrete. He understood now what had happened, why he had crossed the line. Oh, but wasn't his brilliant objectivity both a blessing and a curse? He saw life for what it was and people for who they truly were. He was so far superior in intellect and insight – and hadn't that just messed him up at a critical juncture in his friggin' life because of her-

He stopped right there.

No wandering thoughts. No anger. He was better than that. It had taken years to master his hatred and he would not throw his success away on this pitiful excuse for a woman. He closed his eyes tighter, banishing the bad and empty words that were simply the excrement of exhaustion. He breathed through his nose, lowered his heart rate, returned to his natural, thoughtful state before realizing that he had neglected to acknowledge her blouse. It was important to be thorough and sure of his conclusions so he opened his eyes, pushed off the wall and balanced himself on his haunches. He pressed his fingers onto the cool, hard-packed earth.

Ah, yes. He saw it now. The dart. The tailor's trick of construction intended to draw attention to a woman's breast. The widest part hugged the graceful mound, the tip pointed right at the nipple. There wasn't more than one man in a thousand who would notice such a thing much less understand its true purpose. That dart, so absurdly basic, was a subliminal invitation to familiarity. Confident and in control again, he touched her purposefully. He didn't grasp or grope yet she moved like she didn't like it.

That pissed him off just a little so he squeezed her hard and hoped it hurt. He would never know if it did and that was more the pity. He liked the symmetry of cause and effect. Certainly that's what had brought them to this place. She was the cause of his torture and she would have to deal with the effect of her actions.

Disgusted that he had wasted precious time, he pushed himself up and kicked at her foot. She didn't move. She was no better than a piece of meat. He worked fast, pushing her on her side. He cradled her finely shaped skull. When it was properly positioned, he dropped it on the hard ground.

Leaning over, he grabbed the stake above her head with both hands and pulled as hard as he could. It didn't move. No surprise. The hole was deep, the concrete was set, the wood was too thick to break, too wide at the top for the rope to slip off. His hard work had

paid off: the bag of concrete dragged three miles uphill, the water carted from the creek two miles in the other direction, the patient whittling of the wood itself. He had battled the thin air and the crushing September heat that rested atop the mountains and smothered the city below. Now that it was done, though, he realized how much he hated this place. There was a spiritual residue here that fanned his spark of uncertainty. He shivered. He hoped God wasn't watching.

Gone. Banished. Think on it no more.

Sin, immorality, cruelty were not words he would consider. He had chosen this place precisely because it was ugly and horrid. No one had a better purpose for it than him. Pulling his lips together he put his knee into her stomach, pulled her wrists together and yanked her arms upward. They slipped through his grasp.

"Good grief," he muttered.

Practice had gone smoothly, but the reality was that limp arms and smooth, slender wrists slipped away before he could get the rope tight enough to hold her. She groaned and that made him afraid. Beads of sweat became rivulets. His shirt was soaked. He would throw that shirt away. He would cut it up and throw it away. That's what he would have to do. Maybe he would burn it.

Working faster, he leaned his whole body against her and pushed her arms up, not caring if the rope cut her or anything. Task completed, he collapsed against the wall and mentally checked off the list that had been so long in the making.

Engage.

Subdue.

Transport.

Immobilize.

Punish.

Only one remained unchecked. It would come soon enough and with it, satisfaction, retribution and redemption. He didn't know which would be sweeter.

A water bottle was placed near enough for her to drink from if she didn't panic. Food – such as it was – was within biting distance. Bodily functions? Well, wouldn't she just have to deal with that as best she could. Humiliation was something she needed to understand. Humiliation and degradation.

He was starting to smile, when suddenly she threw herself on her back and her arms twisted horribly. He pulled himself into a ball, covering his head with his hands. When no blows fell, when she didn't rise up like some terrifying Hydra, he lowered his hands and chuckled nervously. He hated surprises. Surprises made him act like a coward, and he was no coward. And he was no liar, as God was his witness.

Composed, he looked again and saw it was only the drugs working, not her waking. Catching his breath, he stood up. It was time to go. He paused at the door and entertained the idea of letting her go. Impossible. What was done was done. Justice would finally be served.

With all his might, he pushed open the metal door, stepped out and put his shoulder into it as he engaged the make-shift lock. He wiped his brow with a handkerchief and composed himself. Next time all this would be easier. Next time he would bring water for himself. Next time, he would bring the woman in the cement hut something, too.

He would bring her a friend.

### **Josie's House, Hermosa Beach**

Max slept on the tiled entry near the front door while Hannah Sheraton marked off the hours by the sound of his dog dreams; timing his snuffling and whining like labor pains.

Eight o'clock.

Nine.

Ten.

Eleven o'clock.

At midnight, Hannah went for her meds but it was the razor in the medicine chest that caught her attention. She touched it, cocking her head, narrowing her eye. It would be so easy to break it open, take the blade and slice away her fear and anxiety. Another scar would be a small price to pay for relief. Her fingers hovered over it just before she snatched the pills and slammed the door. She wouldn't disappoint Josie.

At one a.m. Hannah stepped over the old dog, eased outside, counted off twenty paces and stopped exactly one step from the gate. She stood arrow-straight with her feet

together and her knees locked. Whippet thin, lush chested, graceful and gorgeous as only a sixteen-year-old girl could be, Hannah paused. A breeze came off the ocean and fussed with her long black curls but did nothing to cut the heat. She scanned one side of the tiny walk-street where Josie's house anchored the corner and then scanned back the other direction to the beach. The neighbor's houses were dark.

Suddenly, her ears pricked and her heart beat faster. Someone was coming, walking on the Strand that paralleled the beach. That person wore hard shoes. Their steps sounded forlorn. The person stumbled once. Alert in the silence, Hannah waited. The steps started again and Hannah saw it was a man walking and an unhappy one at that. The moon was bright enough to see that his hands were stuffed into the pockets of his pants. He was hunched over like Sisyphus eternally, wearily, fruitlessly pushing that rock of his. Hannah's shoulders fell as he went by, disappearing into the early morning dark without ever looking her way. Her nerves prickled under her skin and her gut roiled with disappointment. She wanted that to be Josie walking home to her. Her head nearly split in two with wanting that.

At two a.m. Hannah turned on her heel, went back up the walk, took the key from inside, locked the front door, jiggled the knob four times, moved away. Then she did it all again. Dissatisfied still, she forced herself to leave.

Quickly, silently, she went down her walk-street, turned north on the Strand and hurried toward the big pink apartment building half a mile away. The breeze kicked up to a wind as if the beach itself was suddenly as unsettled as she. Narrowing her eyes against the sudden dusting of sand, she caught her hair in her fist. It was sticky with the salty mist.

Hannah hurried past Scotty's restaurant. The wall facing the beach was made of glass. Inside a neon beer sign glowed yellow. If a thing could look lonely, it did. On her left she passed the statue of the surfer perpetually crouched under the curl of a bronze wave, forever beached at the foot of the pier. If the artist had a soul, he would have at least faced the surfer so he could see the ocean. Hannah shivered as she glanced past the statue to the pier itself. It looked like the road to hell, reaching into the sea, swallowed by the black water.

To her right was Pier Plaza. The walking man had tired and now sat outside Hennessey's at a table bolted to the concrete. Whatever pain kept him up so late it was his

alone. He wouldn't let it loose on her the way men liked to do. This was Hermosa Beach, after all. This was the safest place on the face of the earth. That's what Josie said. But Josie wasn't here, so the truth of that was suspect.

Breathing hard, unaware that she had been running, Hannah reached her destination and slid into the shadow of the awning over the front door. She pressed her fist against her chest as if this would keep her thumping heart inside. If anyone saw her they would think she was still sick instead of just afraid. That was normal. Everyone was afraid of something, even if they didn't admit it.

Letting a long breath curl through her lips, her numbers tumbled out with it. She touched her fist to her chest five times, ten, fifteen and twenty, whispering the number that went with each one. Ritual complete, Hannah opened the outside door of Archer's apartment building and ducked in.

Quickly, lightly, she went up the first flight.

Heart pounding, numbers rattling inside her head, she made the second landing.

She caught her breath. There was one more flight to go.

Breath gone, she made it to the third floor with barely a sound.

A shudder ran down her spine then branched out to wind 'round her waist and clutch at her stomach. Her chin jerked up and then down again. Slowly Hannah opened her palm and looked at the key. She never thought she would touch this key much less use it. Not that she'd been forbidden to be here, it had just worked out that way. The man and the girl had not easily taken to one another but they had staked out acceptable territory in Josie's life. Tonight, there was no choice. Hannah had to cross the boundary.

Putting the key in the lock, she turned it slowly, sure that the tumblers sounded like the crack of a gunshot. It was only her imagination. Inside, Archer slept on. That was a good thing, since Hannah didn't want to wake him; she only wanted to see if Josie slept beside him.

The door swung silently. She stepped inside. A full moon illuminated the deck and half the living room. Hannah closed her hand around the key, her fist went behind her back and then her back went against the door.

Her courage was small, so she moved fast when she found the kernel of it. She went past the couch; past the chair; past the bookshelf with the rosary hanging from the neck of

a beer bottle. She stopped just to the side of the bedroom door, peered around the corner and looked at the bed.

Her heart fell.

The covers were piled too high for her to see who was underneath them. Biting her bottom lip, knowing she couldn't turn back now, Hannah inched into the room. No harm done if she was quiet; a quick look and she would be satisfied.

Three. . .

Four. . .

Five steps...

Suddenly, an arm was at her throat, a gun was at her head, and Hannah was pulled back against a man's half-naked body.

[BUY EXPERT WITNESS NOW!](#)