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Zoo

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Graham Marks

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Chapter 1

La Jolla, San Diego, CA; Wednesday February 26th, 5.05 p.m.

Mike Henrikson stood looking at the wrecked dark green '97 Volvo sedan. The front was completely trashed, radiator grille total history, driver's side fender pushed way back into the engine compartment, hood folded back like it was a starched cotton sheet to reveal wires and pipes and the stuff only mechanics really understood. The windshield was all busted up, too, and both airbags had gone off, the propellant leaving a faintly acrid smell in the air.

'Jeez, Tony. Just how damn fast was he going up this hill?'

'He wasn't speeding, Mike . . . the other vehicle, the white Ford van? That lady I was talking to said it shot out of the alley over there like a bat outta hell.' Henrikson's partner, Tony Matric, shoved some of the larger pieces of plastic debris off the road into the gutter. 'You can see the skid marks where the guy popped the clutch.'

'She said "bat outta hell"?'

Tony looked over at his partner, standing by the open driver's door, grinning at him. Didn't matter what the circumstances, the man was always looking to make jokes. Said it was the only thing kept him sane. And there was no arguing

that being a cop was one easy way to get driven crazy.

'Sure did. Got a mouth on her, that lady.' Tony looked back at the Volvo. 'This car might be old, but it was in pretty damn good condition, before the incident. They must've just had it serviced, too – that air filter looks like it's brand new.'

'So this white van comes straight out of the alley, smashes into the front of the Volvo, and then this one Asian guy and one white guy get out and, in broad daylight, calmly haul this kid's ass out, put him in back and drive off.'

'Long and the short of it? Yeah.'

'What's his name?'

'The kid?' Tony flipped open his notebook. 'Stewart . . . Cameron Stewart. Friends call him Cam, apparently. He's like seventeen, only kid, father owns some hi-tech company or other, mother doesn't work.'

'You got all this from that one lady?'

'Yeah.'

'She CIA or something?'

'Retired.' Tony put his notebook away, looked at his watch and then looked over his shoulder. 'Time to get started, Mike . . . see what the parents have to say?'

'Sure . . . tell the uniforms to tape this all off, including the alley, and let's go meet the folks.'

The second hand tick-tocked across the old-fashioned Roman numeral XII and as it did so the minute hand clunked past the IV of the 'antiqued' cherrywood wall clock, oddly loud in the quiet. They'd been waiting now for almost a quarter of an hour, left to cool their heels in this room that looked like it had been ordered from some upscale catalog, delivered and then never used.

The leather furniture was so polished you'd think it'd crack if you sat on it, so neither Tony or Mike did. Instead, Tony stood looking out of the picture window at the Scene of Crime Officers crawling all over the car, while Mike paced up and down the Navajo-style rug, chewing a hangnail and muttering to himself. Somewhere in the house they could both hear voices, possibly someone crying. Not unusual, under the circumstances.

Tony got bored with staring at people actually doing something useful and wandered over to examine the group of framed photos on top of the white baby grand piano.

'This must be him.' He picked up a picture of a blond, blue-eyed kid, smiling and radiating confidence, poise and self-belief. 'Looks like a straight-A kinda guy.'

Mike stopped pacing and gestured around the room. 'What you'd expect, right? Money breeds –'

Tony never did find out what Mike thought money bred because the double doors opened and the maid who'd let them in poked her head through the gap.

'Mr. Stewart will be with you now.'

Putting the frame back on the piano, Tony turned around just as Gordon Stewart strode into the room. He looked freshly polished, iron-gray hair swept back off his high forehead, aggressively aftershaved and dressed in a charcoal suit, highly mirrored black shoes, cream silk shirt and a plain gray tie that had to have been chosen to match his hair.

'Officers, apologies for keeping you waiting, but my wife . . . she, ah, she's very emotional, as you might imagine.'

And you look like you've just walked out of Hair and Make-up on a TV set, Tony couldn't help thinking. *All set to sell something.*

'No problem, sir,' Mike nodded. 'Sorry we have to do this right now, but . . .'

'I understand, and so does my wife – shall we go through?'

Eleanor Stewart had obviously repaired whatever damage her emotions had done to her face, and was perched on a heavy brocade couch. She was all cashmere, pearls and diamonds, smoking a long, slim cigarette and with a thin, brittle smile etched on her face. Behind her and to her left, the maid stood like a statue.

'I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, gentlemen,' she leaned forward and stubbed out the cigarette, 'but it's not every day your son gets kidnapped outside your own home. Would you like some coffee?'

'No thank you, ma'am.' Mike glanced down at his watch, just to remind everyone that time was of the essence here.

'Well, if you don't mind, I will – Consuela?' The maid turned on her heels and left the room. 'Please, do sit down.'

Mike slammed the door of the car, sat back and stared at the Stewart house, built into the hillside at the end of a small cul-de-sac, with its perfectly manicured flowerbeds, trimmed hedges and 'just so' drapes in every window.

Tony turned the keys in the ignition. 'What d'you think?'

'I think I'm glad I didn't grow up in a house where every damn room could've been out of a magazine, is what I think. It was almost like we were breathing filtered air in that place, too.'

'What I mean is, why kidnap *their* son? Me, I didn't get the feeling they were *that* kind of rich. You know, they're

well-off, but not like mega.' Tony left the car in neutral, pulled out his wallet and extracted the business card Gordon Stewart had given him as they left the house. 'What the hell's "Communications Infrastructure", anyway?'

'Dunno . . .' Mike turned and looked at where the wrecked Volvo had been, a dark stain on the tarmac where something had ruptured and spilt gunk on the road – all that was left now the car had been towed. 'But that's not what's bothering me.'

'So what is?'

'This is supposed to be a kidnap, right, but who makes a kidnap so public – does the whole thing in broad daylight and right outside the vic's house? It's like they were trying to guarantee maximum publicity . . . like they actually *wanted* people to see them do it.'

Chapter 2

Queen Anne Hill; Wednesday February 26th, 9.25 p.m.

Cam felt like shit. He had the mother of all headaches, every muscle and bone ached, his mouth felt like he'd recently eaten talcum powder and the last thing he remembered was some big white Ford van appearing out of nowhere and ramming into his car. The rest was a complete blank.

Now he was awake, kind of, but he'd no idea where he was or what had happened to him since the crash. What he did know for sure was that the crash had been no accident. It'd been a set-up, and this place he was in sure as hell wasn't a clinic or a hospital.

Coming to in this darkened room, Cam had been disoriented, still suffering, though he didn't know it, from the combined after-effects of a sedative injection on top of a hefty dose of chloroform. When he'd heard the door open and two people walk in, even if he'd wanted to he couldn't have moved or opened his eyes, which meant the men had assumed he was still knocked out and had talked openly in front of him like he wasn't even there.

'How long will it be before he wakes up?' one of them, the one who sounded older, more in charge, had said.

'The doc told me he'd given him enough stuff so's he'd be out for five, six hours – so any time now,' the second guy had said, sounding like he had some kind of foreign accent that Cam couldn't pin down: American, but not quite.

'He is okay, isn't he, still alive?'

Cam had felt a hand grip his wrist, then fingers take his pulse. 'Heart's beating steady like a drum – you want to check?'

'No . . . just so long as he doesn't croak on us – and make sure the door's secured, someone outside all the time from now on, okay? I didn't go to all this trouble to have him lifted and flown up here for a screw-up now.'

'Why'd we have to do it, lift the kid so out in the open? Was there some way that this would give Stewart the message it was you?'

'He'll know it's me, and I wanted it like that so the cops would get involved, put more pressure on him to make the right decision.' The older man had laughed, a humorless, derisive snort. 'He'll be kicking himself he wasn't more careful with his most valuable asset.'

'You been in touch with him yet?'

'Look, I'll do my job, you make sure you do yours, okay?' the older man had said as he walked out the room.

The second man had stayed where he was for a minute or so. Cam could hear his breathing, controlled, almost like a machine, and assumed he was just standing there, looking at him, which made him feel really spooked. Then he had heard a hard slap-slap-slap sound, a moment later realizing it must've been the man punching his own palm.

'Asshole!' The word had been almost spat out in an acid

hiss and Cam had flinched, half opening his eyes to see the back of the man as he had stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

He had heard footsteps stomping away, stop and come back. Then came the sound of a key being jammed in a lock and turned, securing the door like the older man, the boss, had ordered.

Someone definitely wasn't happy.

Cam sat up on the bed, leaning back against the wall. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness and, helped by the light spilling under the door, he was now able to make out rough details of the room he was in. There wasn't much to see: apart from the bed, he could make out a small desk and chair, some kind of built-in closet, a couple of pictures on the wall and, he assumed, windows behind the drawn drapes.

There was a lamp on the desk. It was a few feet away, nearer than the light switch by the door. Soon, he was sure, he'd feel okay enough to stand up, walk over and turn it on. That would be an achievement.

He had no idea what time it was, or what day, as they'd taken his watch and there was no clock in the room. He couldn't see any light coming from behind the drapes, so it was night, probably, but which night? And where?

Not to mention the real biggie: why him?

Why had *he* been kidnapped, drugged and 'flown up' to somewhere? What made him worth all the effort? He knew he came from a reasonably privileged background, though nothing outrageous by southern Californian standards and certainly not what he'd consider 'ransom rich', so what made him a target?

He'd never thought about kidnapping much before, the subject only ever entering his field of vision when it'd featured on some TV newscast he happened to have seen; but now that he did think about it, kidnap stories usually only made the news when there'd been a screw-up and the victim's body got dumped. Sometimes, he remembered, they were killed even though the ransom had been paid. Nice thought.

Some time later it occurred to him that maybe this was all a case of mistaken identity and they'd picked the wrong guy up off the street . . . although, he then thought, that was likely to be even more of a guarantee that he'd end up dead. Wrong guy, no value. Another nice thought.

Whichever way you looked at it, the situation was not great. And trying to work out what to do was tough when you couldn't get your head straight. Then, as the fog cleared, he suddenly recalled a snippet of conversation where his father's name had been mentioned by the two guys in the room. '*Was there some way that this would give Stewart the message it was you?*' the younger one had said.

No doubt about it, really, they'd got the right person.

He thought about getting up, but still felt very lightheaded. He'd only just got over the catastrophic viral infection that had laid him out like he'd been punched by Mike Tyson – and had completely nixed him from going on the football team tour. He'd gone from awesome running back and Most Valued Player to Pale Shadow of Former Self almost overnight, and had been sick for what seemed like forever, while all his buddies were off having a great time, not due back for another week.

The doc had said that if he hadn't been as fit as he was the effects of the virus would've been even worse, which

Cam had thought could only have meant death as he'd truly felt like he was dying. Now he just felt crap. He swung his legs off the bed and made himself stand up. This was not the time, he figured, to sit around and wait to see what happened next.

Chapter 3

Queen Anne Hill; Thursday February 27th, 1.19 a.m.

It wasn't much of a plan, and if he was being completely honest it didn't have that much of a chance of working, but it was better than doing nothing. The whole idea sank or swam on getting whoever was on guard the other side of the door to let him out. Cam had been over the whole room and knew there was no way he could break out – the door was locked, no handle on the inside, and the windows were security barred with an expanding steel gate.

There was also a tiny webcam-style video camera up next to the ceiling in the corner over the door. He'd discovered that was what it was when, not long after he'd walked over to the window, he had heard someone saying 'He's awake!' and then, not long after, came the sound of footsteps running up the corridor. Moments later he was being looked at and inspected like some kind of pedigree dog by a short, balding man who smelled of Chinese food and had a badly pockmarked face.

A younger guy, about his height but built like the types Cam had seen outside of every club he'd ever been to, had stood blocking the open doorway. He was staring into the

middle distance, looking blank, thinking he was cool; they were all the same. The small man had just carried on looking and had ignored Cam's questions when he had asked where he was and what was happening to him. When the man had finished what he'd come to do he'd just turned around and walked out, not having said a word.

Cam reckoned it was about fifteen, twenty minutes later that the guard had returned with a tray of food. As he'd walked out, Cam had managed to catch sight of his watch, a large lump of stainless steel with a chunky strap, and saw that it was about 1.50 a.m.

It was later, after he'd finished his food, that Cam worked out what he could try and do. Based on the absolute fact that staying in the room was going to get him nowhere but deeper in trouble, and breaking out was just not going to happen, the only logical alternative was to be let out. Which, on the face of it, was a highly unlikely occurrence . . . except if he wanted to go to the bathroom. They surely would let him out for that. Wouldn't they?

He decided to wait to find out. The longer he left it, he figured, the more bored and tired the guard would be – and maybe the more genuine he'd sound when he asked to be let out.

Cam left it till he felt like he was about to wet himself.

'Hey, man!' Cam rapped on the door. 'You out there, man?'

Nothing.

'I gotta go . . . you know, like *really* gotta go?' Cam thought maybe he could hear someone moving.

He waited. Still nothing.

'Can you hear me?'

'I'm not deaf.' The guard sounded like he was half asleep. 'What's your damn problem?'

'I *need* to go to the bathroom. Now.'

Pause.

'Do you know what time it is?'

'Know what? I don't. You guys took my watch – and my shoes.'

'Jeez, it's nearly four in the morning . . .'

'So? I can't wait, man, I'm desperate . . . come on, you gotta let me go.'

Cam heard the man sigh, then there was the soft clinking of keys and the sound of a lock turning.

'It's down the hall,' the guard said, pointing. 'Make it quick, and don't try anything smart. You'll just get hurt, right?'

'Right.' Cam, shoeless, padded out of the room.

'Second on the left.' The guard was directly behind him, sounding only slightly more awake. 'And leave the door open.'

So, no climbing out of a window, then. One idea down. Cam opened the door, reached around to his left, feeling for the light switch, and turned it on. A vision of gleaming white marble, chrome and glass confronted him – two sinks, a bath, a shower cubicle, and '. . . where's the toilet?'

'Behind the door . . . and like I said, leave it open.'

'Okay, okay.' Cam walked into the room, his mind racing. He had as long as it took him to take a leak to come up with something, and that was it, he'd be back in a locked room, waiting. He took his time, glancing over his shoulder as he unzipped his pants. He couldn't see the guard in any of the mirrors. Eyes darting left and right, he looked around to see if there was anything – *anything* – he could use.

Nothing. Just a toilet roll, a plastic, long-handled brush . . . maybe he could rip the seat off the john and hit the guy?

And then he saw the can of air freshener on the floor, tucked behind the metallized plastic brush-holder.

Without stopping what he was doing, Cam managed to bend over, pick it up and tuck it under his arm. The narrow can felt full. It felt somehow like a weapon. And, for the first time since he'd woken up, he felt like he had a chance.

'Jeez,' said the man, still behind the door, 'you really did need that, di'n't you.'

'No kidding.' Cam finished, zipped up and then reached over and pushed down the flush. Covered by the sound of the water, he snapped off the plastic cap and put it on top of the tank. Then, holding the can upside down in his right hand, he hoped, like he'd never hoped before, that the guard wouldn't spot it as he walked out the bathroom. He took a deep breath and made his move.

'Okay, back in your kennel, guy.' The guard slipped in behind Cam as he came out into the corridor.

Cam swung his right hand in front of him to hide the aerosol, making like he was scratching his upper arm with his left hand. And just as he reached the room he was being kept in, Cam spun around, shoved the can in the guard's face and pressed the button.

The nozzle was no more than an inch, two inches max, away from the man, and a dense, perfumed cloud of air freshener erupted directly into his eyes, nose and mouth. Completely taken by surprise, the guard instinctively inhaled sharply when Cam whirled around, which meant he breathed in far more of the chemical soup than he otherwise might have. That, combined with the coating his eyes got, meant he could neither see nor breathe. To put the

cherry on the cake, as the guard gagged and frantically wiped at his burning eyes, Cam kicked him between the legs. Solid.

Standing, watching the writhing heap on the ground, Cam couldn't believe what he'd just done. He suddenly realized there was a pounding drumbeat in his ears and that he was taking short, sharp breaths through his nose, the cloying smell of air freshener stinging his nostrils. He'd stopped spraying when the man had hit the floor, but was still gripping the can in his hand, like it was frozen there.

With the massive burst of adrenaline that had just been delivered into his system beginning to kick in, Cam was in full 'fight or flight' mode and jumpy as a flea-ridden cat. Pacing up and down, the rational part of his brain made him stop and think, made him carefully take stock of where he was, take in the empty corridor, the desk the guard had been sitting at – the one with the small black and white TV with the grainy picture of the bedroom on it – and made him wonder what the hell he was going to do next.

Okay. Where was he at?

He was free, kind of, or at least out of the room for the moment. But he was still trapped inside the house. It looked like the security system in the place wasn't that sophisticated, like the camera wasn't hooked up to screens anywhere else, or someone would've seen what had just gone down and he'd have had company. Cam shot a glance at the guard, not really taking in that he'd stopped moving.

Right, first things first – get him out of sight.

Bending down to grab the man under his arms and pull him into the bedroom, Cam finally noticed he didn't seem to be breathing. He got down closer, any moment expecting the man to have been playing possum and lunge at him,

but he didn't. Instead, almost masked by the air freshener, he smelled slightly of vomit. Cam fumbled at the man's wrist, trying to find a pulse, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't.

He was dead.

Flat on his back gone.

Cam rocked on his heels, stunned. He'd just meant to put the guy out of action temporarily, not deep six him. That hadn't been in the plan, killing anyone, even though the thought had occurred to him that his captors might end up getting rid of *him* for good.

He stood up, chewing his lip, his mind a blur, unable to hold onto a thought long enough to take it onto the next stage. Okay, okay, what to do . . . maybe what *not* to do, cos it didn't seem like there was much point in moving the man now. It wasn't like he was going to raise the alarm or anything. Cam looked down at the body and saw a stain spreading out from the man's crotch. Wonderful.

He was about to go – better to be anywhere than right there, right then – when he noticed there was a cell phone in a black leather pouch attached to the man's belt. He knelt down and looked at the screen. Locked. Damn. Then he saw the dull glint of the wrist watch, a Tag, as it turned out; felt like a real one, too. Really useful, and working. Flicking open the clasp, Cam took it off and pocketed it. Feeling like a total thieving bastard, he pulled the man's sneakers off as well.

His feet felt truly weird in the Nikes. They fit, kind of, but even though they were pretty clean he just didn't like the idea of wearing somebody else's shoes. Especially a dead man's shoes. He knew, though, that there was no way he'd

get very far in his socks, so he had no choice.

Pushing away the horrific fact that he'd actually killed someone – he kept telling himself to deal with it later, much later – Cam took a moment to properly figure what to do now. He knew he'd been incredibly lucky so far, and that his luck could run out at any time, so what he really had to do was keep on moving and find a way out. And the only way would appear to be down.

He crept along the thickly carpeted corridor, past the bathroom, to where it turned left. He peered around the corner and saw a wide, balustraded landing with a very grand central staircase leading down to a parquet-floored hall and the double front door. This was no backwoods shack but one big, fancy house he was in.

The lights were on everywhere, but, as far as he could tell, there was no one around. The place was quiet – he found himself thinking 'quiet as a grave' and wished he hadn't, considering what was just up the corridor behind him. Could he just make a dash for it? The jumpy, itchy side of him screamed 'YES!', but a small, calm voice whispered, 'No, take it slow, man, take it slow . . .' He hovered at the edge of the landing, feeling intensely vulnerable and wishing there was some shadow he could hide in while he worked on his next move.

He dug the Tag out of his pocket. It was just after 4.30. He slipped the watch on his wrist and secured the clasp, the metal cool against his skin, the strap just a little too loose. This must be the house at its most asleep, Cam reasoned, and the chances were that even those supposed to be awake would be more than likely dozing. It sounded like a convincing argument, particularly as there was no one else with him to shoot it down, but he knew the longer he

did nothing the less persuasive it would become.

Shaking his head, wishing, wishing, wishing there was something even slightly less risky he could think of doing, Cam made a dash for the staircase. It was the longest half minute of his life.

5 seconds – panic . . . stop halfway across the landing and nearly go back, positive he can hear voices . . . it's nothing . . . move on

10 seconds – reach the staircase, crouch, listen, look, move down a couple of stairs . . . they creak . . . stop again

22 seconds – ten more stairs and he's on the parquet . . . soles of the sneakers squeaking like mice as he walks

28 seconds – hand on the door knob, pushing down . . . open the door v-e-r-y slowly . . . no alarms go off, no lights that weren't on go on, but a cold, wet wind comes in . . . out of the corner of his eye he sees a leather jacket draped over a nearby chair . . . reach over, pick it up, exit

35 seconds – quietly close the door behind him.

And wherever he was, Cam knew it sure as hell wasn't anywhere even remotely near San Diego.