

Angel Snatcher

never take your eyes off the children

A Jake Smith Mystery: Book Five

by

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Chapter 1

I am not evil. I like children—honesty like them.

Over the neighborhood, a hanging full moon burns through the early morning fog. More than a year's worth of dirt shrouds the pickup parked alongside the curb in front of a nondescript bungalow. A dark figure sits as though a tree on a windless fall day inside the chilly cab. For better than an hour, his steel-blue globes stare at the abode. *What if I get caught? No, I can do this. I must. I must* pound through my brain.

He plunges sausage fingers, with permeant filthy nails, into a Demin pocket, snapping off a protruding piece of delicate glass. *Shit. What a klutz.*

Removed from its fabric compartment, the man inspects the damaged porcelain piece. He caresses the figurine, letting his mind drift.

It's time. He stows the knickknack before slipping over the edge of the Naugahyde bench seat, stretching his toes to the cement sidewalk. A breeze rustles turned leaves here and there as the stocky fireplug takes a hurried look over the block—all quiet. Hands squeeze into black gloves, and toque pulls down. Watery eyes dart from trees to houses through stitched openings. Widespread lips poke the mouth hole, sucking oxygen. *Relax, idiot. It needs doing.*

The shadow takes cautious steps over the dewy weeds and dead crabgrass. Exposed socks and lower pant legs pick up goat heads above dirt-caked boots. *Can't she have more pride in her yard?* Deep sun-generated cheek lines turn into an unseen frown.

He meticulously removed every pricking sticker at the bedroom window before two hands vigorously rub the face. He tries adjusting the wool cap. Nothing relieves the infuriating itch.

After an evening of trick or treating, the little girl does not twitch a muscle, cuddling under her comforter's warmth, the first of the last year's Christmas presents. Another, Curly Cathy Doll, shares her polyester pillow.

Even though moon rays seep through sheer curtains, the room is barely lit. His eyes strain to scan the sloppy mess before leveling on the blanketed lump. His mouth curls under the balaclava. On the wrist, a cheap Timex displays three-thirty-two. Though the check is unnecessary, he is fully aware the mother passed out hours earlier, resembling a filleted cod hanging off the sofa. An empty Chardonnay bottle at her feet leaves the carpet damp, the only differentiating characteristic from many permanent stains.

I can do this. I must do it.

The intruder applies tedious pressure to the window sash, jumping the frame from one over-painted spot to the next. Finally, the nasty little man rests his Popeye arms on the sill and turns into a cat poised to pounce on its prey. For a time, he waits and listens.

I can't chicken out now. Feet bicycle up the stucco as he works his bulky frame halfway through the opening. Before catching his breath, the body drops to a blob on the inside floor and lies unmoving. Although expected, padding footsteps in the hallway never materialize.

A wintery breeze flutters the curtains, making shadow patterns dance along the wall. The child rolls and submerges her head farther beneath the quilt.

The form shuffles between clutter to the bedside. Slowly, extremely slowly, he draws back the cover. The girl shudders, and he foists gloved fingers over her mouth. Eyes pop larger than the outside moon—every inch of the young soul quivers. Muffled desperation cries go unheard.

He raises an index finger to his lips. "Shh. It's all right, Cutie-Pie. Your mom needs you to come with me."

The small head shakes, and eyes scream, "NO! NO!"

Swiftly, he rips off the annoying toque and shoves it into a jacket pocket. "Listen, she has to go to the hospital, and you are coming with me." Changing tone, "We'll play games. It will be fun, you'll see. For your mom's sake, you must trust me."

The soothing voice assures the girl. Her eyes reduce to innocence.

“Ok, let’s bundle you and keep warm.” He raises his hand but quickly recovers the piercing caterwaul.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he scowls softly and rips off a strip of silver-gray tape from a roll held on his belt.

To force quiet, one hand pushes her chin hard into her face with more pressure than she can overcome. Tears surge from each eye. “Do not cry, Sweetie. Everything’s good,” no louder than a library whisper. The freehand seals her lips with the broad tape before seizing additional long lengths and tightly binding the wrists and ankles.

Sorry, you give me no choice. No response comes to the unheard apology.

At the open window, the intruder lifts the child and blanket. His hands lower her bound body gently as a wounded chick onto the grass.

The beaming man returns to the bed. He snatches the Cathy doll; the pillow falls to the floor as a hand digs out the porcelain figurine. He positions the ceramic piece sheet-center and steps back. *That should do it.*

Curly Cathy drops from the opening, and he rapidly follows.

The wind dies—the area as still as an unwound clock.

An unnoticed critter purrs against his leg. Left foot lashes out, and the animal hisses and contorts, airborne four feet before crashing to earth and streaking into the darkness. *Damn, that cat scared the shit out of me.*

The kidnapper scoops up Cutie-Pie and the doll and disappears as one.

Chapter 2

Just minutes after six o'clock, Friday morning, nineteen-seventy-four. Shanna Gilbert takes the first call of her shift. "Nine-one-one. What's your emergency?"

Miss Gilbert yanks the headset from her ears and pushes the speaker button on the console. "Please calm down, Miss. Miss? Miss! I can't understand you. Please lower your voice!"

"I... I got up and checked my baby. Her bed was empty. I need help."

"Have you looked through your home?"

"She's gone. Her window is open. Someone took her! Send the police!"

"Is anyone in your house right now?"

"No. Please, hurry. Hurry!"

"They're on the way. Do you live alone?"

"No, with my daughter. Hurry!"

"Do not hang up. I need your name."

The experienced operator extracts pertinent information while dispelling fears and keeping the hysterical woman online.

"I hear a siren!"

"Step outside and meet the officer, Lacie. Make your hands visible. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes."

"I'm hanging up now."

The first police officer arrives at the Clairemont residence within six minutes of the dire call. He pulls his weapon and, with urgency rushing through his legs, runs towards the open main entrance. He automatically levels his service weapon and raises his left hand into a double-hold grip in one fluid motion. A woman's bloodshot eyes stare down the gun barrel. "Police! Freeze!"

“What? My daughter’s missing. Find her.” Torrential tears flood from blood-red eyes.

Without lowering the gun, the patrolman takes two steps backward and commands her onto the porch.

The woman’s frantic spiel is hard to fathom, and he responds, “Wait here. More officers en route.”

The public servant leans right and peeps through the door. Then, with every light in the bungalow on, he takes one small step inside with his pistol panoramically sweeping. He carefully takes the doorknob and jerks the panel while the gun checks behind for a hider.

The rooky follows academy-learned training and searches room by room. As he finishes, more units barrage the street, lights flashing, sirens silent. Unwitting officers descend the property.

A female uniform spots the homeowner and makes a beeline. The rest meet the first responder in the front living area. After a cursory briefing, the seasoned officer snaps orders, “Check grounds for footprints. Canvas the street. And for Christ’s sake, touch nothing. We need to locate this girl ASAP!”

The lead officer manhandles his radio, barking, “Six-oh-one, missing child. Two-oh-seven possible kidnap. Code Two. Repeat Code Two, all available personnel respond.”

San Diego Police, County Sheriffs, and California Highway Patrol blitz the scene. It fast becomes more chaotic than the Viet Nam TET Offensive of sixty-eight.

An hour in, a stark white Crown Victoria pulls beside a squad car and parks in the middle of the street. Two suits emerge. They ignore greetings from lowly street beaters as they cross the yard. A twenty-something comes over. “Officer Mathew Bratt. First on-scene.”

“Detectives Bird and Verduzco. Tell me what you found, Matt Bratt.”

August ‘Blaze’ Bird, a sixteen-year veteran, spending the last nine as a homicide detective, just assigned a new partner. It is Paco Verduzco’s second day in the department, transferring from Robbery Division.

After Bratt explains the current search state, he tells the woman’s convoluted story, adding his belief, “Hungover, if not

still drunk. An empty wine bottle sits on the carpet beside the couch. Lousy mother and housekeeper, every room a disaster. She is definitely hiding something.”

Who the hell does he think he is, Columbo? “How long on the job, Bratt?”

“First-week solo, sir.”

“Stick to patrol. A messy housekeeper doesn’t equal kidnapping. Show us to the girl’s room.”

The detectives follow down the short hall into Constance Rocha’s bedroom. Both men convert to gawkers at vehicle roll-over, eyes fixated on the bed. With a click, the Polaroid camera pops open, and Verduzco, without comment, snaps a photo. The pair separate and shuffle around, careful not to kick clothes or toys. The lead takes notes while the new man clicks more instant pictures before coming together again over the bed.

“Find the mother.”

Lacie Roach sobs on the couch, head squeezed into her hands. The patrol woman sits beside the distressed woman, reassuring hope.

Verduzco takes the edge of a fabric-rolled armchair, leaning forward, back arched, forearms resting on legs. Bird remains standing, powerless to stop Bratt’s analysis echoing through his head, *definitely hiding something, definitely hiding something.*

Blaze dismisses the patrolwoman and paces between questions: “Is the window always open? Why only the bottom sheet? Where’s her blanket? Does she play with figurines? Why such dishevel? Any missing items?” Then it turns personal. “How often do you drink? How much? Do you work? Who looks after your baby? Where is the father?”

“Just stop it! Why aren’t you looking for my girl?”

Just tell us where she is. “We have lots of personnel searching, Ms. Rocha.” *Hardball time.* “Where is your daughter?”

“If I knew that, you wouldn’t be harassing me.”

“Things do not add up in your story. Why are you lying?”

“I am not lying. Find my daughter before it’s too late!”

“Too late for what?”

A middle-aged man, accompanied by a younger one, appears at the entrance door. “Morning, Blaze.”

Bird shifts his glare from the couch and acknowledges the crime investigator, Marvin Kenny, and his assistant. Verduzco escorts the later arrivals into the scene and brings them up to speed.

Upon returning, Rocha's gone, and Paco finds his partner out front, again talking to Bratt. "Where's the mother?"

"I had her taken downtown," Blaze replies.

Another officer approaches with an elderly Mexican woman in tow. "Detectives, Hermosa Aguilera. Lives on the other side of the street..." the policeman points to a dirty lime-green painted house, kitty-corner from the Roach home... "and babysits the girl."

Hermosa's dark, almost black eyeballs drip non-stop. "What happened to Connie? Is she all right? She's like a granddaughter to me. Where is Lacie?"

The aged woman explains she last saw the princess when her eighteen-year-old grandson passed out Halloween candy. The experienced detective takes a quick peek at his partner with raised eyebrows. Then, again to the grandmother, "Is he home?"

She hasn't seen him today and thinks he is asleep. Aguilera leads the duo across the road and into the boy's bedroom. No socks on the floor, the bed made, the boy nowhere in sight, *not a typical teenager*.

"Blaze, get a look at this." Seven porcelain figures line the bureau.

Does this guy swing off-center? "Your grandson likes figurines?" Bird questions.

"Yes, I gave him those from my collection."

"Specific time you last saw him?" Bird interviews while Verduzco continues looking around.

"I'm not sure... nine, ten o'clock."

"What's his name?"

"John. I call him Johnny. His name is Juan Santiago."

Returning to the collection, "There is one missing." Verduzco interjects, staring at a dustless spot.

The older woman toddles to the dresser. She peers at the little statuettes. "Sorry, I can't remember which ones. It was so long ago."

“We need a photograph of Johnny?” Bird takes back charge.

“He loves Connie and would never hurt her.”

“Get me a picture, Mrs. Aguilera. Does he drive?”

“He doesn’t have a license. I do not own a car and walk to the store for food and medicine.”

“Who are his friends? Where does he hang out?”

“He hasn’t any and does not tell me where he goes.”

Back in the front room, the overlooked porcelain collection screams at them. China figurines fill every shelf, nook, and cranny. Hermosa removes a framed snapshot from a ledge and hands it to Bird. Verduzco thumbs through the photos from Connie’s home. He finds the one he is looking for and stuffs the rest into a shirt pocket. “Is this one of yours?” Verduzco hands Hermosa the Polaroid.

The woman shuffles to the dining table and changes her glasses to a pair of thick readers. She holds the picture tilted toward the light streaming through the kitchen window and very close to her face for an extended minute.

“It doesn’t look like one of mine. Where was this picture taken?”

“In Connie’s room, on her bed.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You do not know if it’s yours or not?” *Senile old bat*, Blaze thinks, about as patient as a greyhound waiting for the mechanical rabbit to fly around the rail.

“I have so many. My husband, God rest his soul,” she genuflects and keeps talking, “got me one right after we married. Ever since, my kids, relatives, and friends gave them to me. I just kept putting them in here. I can’t bear throwing away a gift. Thank goodness, nobody has given me any for a long time.”

The detectives tell her they’ll be in contact.

Bird looks over the gathered media from the Aguilera front yard, shouting questions. “Transmit an All Point Bulletin on Santiago! I’ll meet you at the car.”

Paco frowns at the reporters and then at his new partner. “Bad idea.”

His first day, and he’s a frigging authority. Blaze grins and walks away.

Standing before the zoo pen of reporters, the detective holds both hands high in the air, signaling for quiet.

An impatient woman shouts, “Tredberry, KDTV! What happened here, Detective Bird?”

“Child abduction of a young girl...” Before the sentence completes, questions machine-gun from the three television news teams and two newspaper reporters.

“Quiet down! Everyone, please quiet! One at a time!” He looks at Tredberry. “As I was saying, we have a missing little girl.”

“Missing? You said abducted. Was she kidnapped or not?”

Maybe Paco was right! Blaze looks around for a way out before attempting to salvage his impromptu conference by suggesting the outlets broadcast a Public Service Announcement for anyone who has seen Constance Rocha or Juan Santiago call the central station. He tries to clarify, “Santiago, only a potential witness and not a suspect, and the girl probably wandered off on her own.” The figurine is not for public knowledge.

“What is the curiosity with that house? Does Santiago live there?”

Paco hustles over, taps his partner’s shoulder, and leans into an ear. “We have to go, sir.” well above a whisper.

“Have you found the girl?” a newspaper reporter shouts. Halfway across the pavement, heading for their plainwrap, the detectives fail to acknowledge.

The senior man refuses to thank his new partner and shuts his donut hole. *With my training, this guy might just make it.*

They take off in their Crown Vic, leaving the area under Marvin Kenny’s supervision.

Verduzco quietly contemplates their trouble on the drive to the station when his partner’s press conference broadcasts.

Blaze breaks the silence, “That went well! We’ll have this thing wrapped up today, buddy.”

Well? And this joker’s my partner. “I’m going to learn a lot from you, Blaze.”

“Yes, you are.”

Tredberry notices a wrinkled face peering through heavy, outdated, dark-green floral curtains and grabs her cameraman’s arm, pulling him across the street.

Chapter 3

Well before the scene clears, Jason Holland, KDTV's morning news anchor, goes on air. "This just in, a four-year-old local girl went missing from her Clairemont home early this morning. We are taking you live to the scene. Tina, are you there?"

Private investigator Jake Smith stands at his kitchen window watching leaves blow off his backyard maple tree while he waits for coffee to brew. Every morning, even before he starts the pot, he turns on his television and flips to the local station.

"I'm here, Jason. Here's what we know so far..."

Smith forgets his coffee and sprints to the living room. His eyes glue to the set, unblinking for the brief article. A picture of the girl's face appears full-screen. "Young Constance Rocha reported missing by her mother after the girl's room found empty early this morning. Her bed was stripped to the sheet, and a small porcelain figure of a girl lay in Constance's place. Police need your help in locating this man, Juan Santiago." The teenager's picture enlarges in center screen. "Reports coming in are sketchy, but he's the only person of interest at this time. We will update you as we learn more details. If anyone has knowledge of his location or sees Connie Rocha, please notify the police immediately." Holland plays a clip of Detective Bird's impromptu plea for public help with the girl's face back on screen, and a call-in number scrolls across the bottom.

The screen turns back to Holland, sitting at the news desk. "In Lemon Grove, a family Halloween party got out of control last evening. One man shot..."

Smith retrieves the local morning newspaper from his front porch and heads back to the kitchen for coffee. He pops two white-bread slices into the toaster and grabs a jar of grape jelly from the frig.

While eating breakfast and on his second mug of coffee, Alexis emerges from the bedroom in her flannel bathrobe. She walks by her husband and kisses the back of his head. “Good morning, pumpkin. Anything interesting?” She continues to the coffeepot without waiting for an answer.

“The Governor’s race getting nastier. And the local mayor’s race is following suit. They’re all full of crap. Then there’s the regular Halloween stuff: vandalism, mischief, and firecrackers. Oh, some parent in East County thinks someone poisoned her child’s candy.”

“That’s serious. Was it determined?” Alexis asks.

“Doesn’t say. Just they’re investigating. Oh, and Holland broke a report concerning a kidnapped girl from her bed last night.”

“My God, where were her parents?”

“They didn’t have details yet but supposedly looking for some neighbor kid.”

“They’re sure it was him?”

“Didn’t say. I assume.”

“Jake, you’re familiar with what *assume* means?” Without waiting for a smart remark, Alex quickly continues, “These days, abused women are running with their kids. There’s an entire network of services to help them escape and relocate,” she schools Jake. He’s concentrating on the sports page and misses acknowledging.

“Jake! Are you listening?”

“You are right, as usual. I’ll make a note. Can you hand me a pencil?” Jake, usually an extra romantic, sometimes slips. Old habits die hard.

Not ready to banter this early, she gives him a *he’ll pay* look. Alex sits with her coffee across from Jake, not her usual spot beside him.

“Want me to fry some eggs, dear?” Jake knows she hardly ever eats breakfast, an occasional Sunday brunch, or a donut from the ever-present box at work.

“Don’t start, Jake.”

“Sorry, dear. Just offering.” His bull earns another scowl. They sit in silence for many minutes.

“A porcelain figure, uh?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Jake, look at me!”

His head snaps to attention. “Yes, dear.”

“Are you listening?”

“Of course, dear.”

“What did I say?”

“Uh, you’re not hungry.”

“I never said I wasn’t hungry. I just don’t want to bicker this morning.”

“Me neither, dear.” Jake goes back to the football scores. “Our team all but finished this year. One and seven.”

“I’m going to take a shower. I’ll see you at the office.”

“Yes, dear.”

The door locks and won’t open until she knows he has left for work. *He can damn well shave in the other bathroom.*

Alex walks into Hamilton-Adams Investigations an hour and a half after her husband, refreshed from her leisurely primping. She wears her shortest navy-blue skirt and a sheer pink blouse, complemented with red pumps and a pearl necklace.

“Good morning, Janey. I got extra Friday donuts. I hope you’re hungry.” Alexis grins.

“Wow! You’re gorgeous! Did I miss the memo?”

“Oh, no. This is just for Jake.”

“Lucky man.”

“Just the opposite. He won’t be getting any for at least a week.”

They glance into each other’s eyes. When Janey understands, neither woman contains laughter.

“Let me grab a chocolate old-fashioned and see him. Can you put the rest in the break room?”

Alexis takes an extra-large bite of donut, making sure chocolate and crumbs cover her sensual red-painted lips and steps into her husband’s office. Flabbergasted, Jake makes the usual crass comment. She munches and points at her puffed-out cheeks rather than voicing she is not speaking to him. Alex pours herself a cup of coffee from his private pot and sashays off to her office.

Jake jumps up and runs out the door after her. He collides with Janey. “Excuse me. Sorry.” He glares at the five pink boxes. “A little much for six people?”

“Alex told me she’s hungry this morning.” Janey can’t help but cackle and scurry by with the donuts.

Tight-lipped, Jake returns to his desk.

Many minutes later, dropping like a dollop of whipping cream from a wooden spoon, Alex plops into a chair across from him.

Smith’s anxious eyes acknowledge her, and he apologizes for only God knows what.

Alex shrugs, *couldn’t care less*, and tells him she was thinking over the abduction.

The pair discuss how something like this happened in their town.

“That sure sounds similar to the old Angel Snatcher legend,” Alex states.

In unison, they chant the bygone rhythm:

*Sleeping in cozies
In and out abodes
Catch her, Snatcher
We all get caught*

After the laughter dies, Jake responds, “When I was ten, I went to Cub Scout camp. We had a young assistant den leader, and around the campfire one night, he told us the story of Angel Snatcher. I sat cross-legged beside him, and when he finished with ‘he’s coming for you,’ he grabbed my leg. I jumped a mile. It scared the crap out of me, maybe even peed my pants.”

“I was at a church retreat. Another girl got grabbed, but it still scares me.” Deep lines appear across Alex’s forehead.

The two take turns rehashing each version they had heard. Unfortunately, the stories aren’t that similar except for the fact Angel Snatcher left a figure in place of a taken child and that he was coming for them next.

“I guess every kid in the country heard one version or another,” Jake comments.

Virginia Small, the firm's researcher, sticks her head in the doorway. "Good morning, guys."

Jake acknowledges the greeting. Alex's upper lip curls in disdain as she ignores the woman. She's never trusted Virginia around her man and often voices the need to replace her.

Since his old days as a police detective and hers as a television reporter, Jake and Virginia have been acquaintances. However, he was always adamant that their relationship was nothing but professional, with never a hint of inappropriate behavior between them.

Smith points out they are debating the Angel Snatcher urban legend, and without invitation, Virginia grabs a seat to tell her version. "... the police bust the door down, only to see a large dark shadow leap out the window. Their flashlights slowly examine the baby girl. She lays strapped to a blood-filled mattress, her neck sawed through and head hanging by a lanyard of stretched skin over the side of the bed. Long soaked braids of hair drip scarlet liquid. Plink. Plink. Plink. Her clothes cut away from her private area, and, and I won't say, but a bloody-steel pipe rests where her leg was, and a rusty old saw found."

"I never heard of a child sawn apart," Alexis interrupts.

"They found her left hand and an eyeball dropped in the yard." Virginia closes her right eye and widens her left towards Alex.

Her pursed lips separate. "It's only a damn story! I guess *some* people believe anything."

"You guys are aware the police arrested a teenage boy, right?"

"Haven't heard," Jake says.

Alex wants the meeting over and this woman gone, with finality, "I assume that's it, then."

Oh, we know what assume means. Jake smiles at his wife before turning to Small. "Virginia, can you research how the story started? And anything else, like if they arrested someone?" Smith isn't asking.

"Sure, boss. I'll see what I can find." With a satisfied grin, Virginia leaves to get started.

Alex jumps to her feet. "Why waste time on that nonsense? Besides, they have the kid in custody; case solved."

"Just curious, dear."

Chapter 4

An officer escorts Lacie Rocha into Interview Room A. The detectives need to understand her life, every acquaintance, every relationship, where she goes, and what she does.

Blaze starts with the current background. “Do you work?”

“Why aren’t you out looking for my baby?”

“We are. The initial order of business requires eliminating family and friends, so I’ll need you to answer a few questions.”

“You think I did something to my baby? Am I a suspect?”

“No.” *Bet your sweet-ass you are.* “You might, uh, have information that can help.”

Lacie’s eyes spear Blaze’s with distrust. “I’m LVN at the Market Street Clinic.”

“What’s that?”

“A health clinic on Market Street.”

“I am referring to your position.”

“LVN? Licensed Vocational Nurse. I dispense medicine prescribed by a doctor.”

“So, you’re a pharmacist.”

“No...” hands flail. “Whatever.”

“How long have you worked there?”

“A year.”

Verduzco shoves a lined, yellow legal pad and black-ink ball-point along the table. “Make a list of your coworkers.”

“Why?”

“Are you having a relationship with any of them?” Blaze.

“No!”

“What about friendships? Do you have a drink with someone after work or socialize with anyone in particular?”

“No.”

“Lacie, I need more elaborate answers. It will help find your daughter.”

“What’s my life got to do with this?”

The questioning lasts for hours. But Rocha only expounds on one reply. She reveals, “I became pregnant around Christmas, my senior year of high school. Connie and I lived with my mom and dad until after graduation when Scott and I rented the house.”

About the damn time she talks. “Scott’s last name?”

“Mercoume.”

“Where is he?”

“The shit’s gone.”

Blaze questions their relationship. Married? Financial situation? Arguments? Fights?

“The ass hasn’t so much as phoned his daughter since he split. Please find my Connie!”

“Ms. Rocha, where is Scott?”

She blurts out, “Scott’s business failed. We constantly fought over money. Then the bastard splits with his employee.”

“Were you married?”

“No. Got lucky there.”

The detectives need Mercoume’s home address and where he works. Lacie details the father, a thirty-one-year-old therapist. When his *New Beginning Child Counseling Services* closed, Scott and the trollop settled in San Jose, an hour south of San Francisco. Now, Scott works as a counselor at some youth center. He has not seen his daughter since he left the area five months earlier. Lacie also informs her ex-boyfriend earned a Master of Arts degree in school counseling from State. When asked how they met, she discloses that they grew up living next door to each other.

Blaze does the quick math and realizes Lacie was seventeen, maybe late sixteen, when she got pregnant and Scott, twenty-five or twenty-six. *That bastard raped a juvenile and now working on the front line!*

Verduzco inquires about what she does with her child while she’s working.

“My mother used to watch Connie, but since she started preschool two months ago, Hermosa looks after her. It’s so handy having the babysitter right here.”

“Ms. Rocha, how much did you drink last night?”

“I have one glass of wine after work. To calm down. I don’t have a problem! And I don’t care what Scott thinks or says.”

“What does he say?”

“That bastard calls me an alcoholic. Me! And he’s nothing but a drunk.”

“Did he drink around the baby?”

“Well, no. But that’s not an excuse.”

“How about at work?”

“Probably.”

“But uncertain?”

“I have my job, and I don’t know what he did?”

And that’s why he left with his receptionist. “Did he hit you or the baby when he was drinking?”

“No.”

“Have you ever spanked Connie when she, uh, acts out?”

“I never get tipsy on two glasses of Chardonnay.”

“You’re never, let’s say, out of control?”

“Drunk on a few glasses of white wine? No way!”

Next, the detective asks if the figurine is Connie’s. Lacie’s never seen it and suggests that Hermosa gave it to her.

Knocks interrupt minutes before noon. “Excuse me, Detectives, we picked up Santiago, and he’s in holding.”

After a few more challenges, Bird releases Rocha and has a female uniform give her a lift home.

Before the detectives move to the next interrogation room for Juan Santiago’s turn, Blaze tells his partner he’s going to his desk to call San Jose police and have Mercoume, and the bimbo picked up and interrogated. “What did Rocha tell us her name was? Lucy, Lily, Luna?”

Verduzco checks his notes. “Lupe Jimenez.”

“Sounds right. Can you grab coffee?”

An hour afterward, the detectives join Juan in the room. The young man’s cheeks bulge. Then, after the third pink bubble materializes and explodes with a distinctive pop, Verduzco makes him spit out the annoyance.

“What have you done with Connie Rocha?” Blaze starts.

“C... Connie? N... nothing. She’s my friend.”

“You like her? I mean, more than a friend.”

“Wha... what do you mean?”

“Do you consider her your girlfriend?”

“G... girlfriend? Yes... she’s my friend.”

“Johnny, can I call you Johnny?”

“I... I want a Marlboro?”

“Don’t smoke. Paco, can you give him one?”

Detective Verduzco pulls his pack of Winston’s from a shirt pocket, taps out one, and offers it to Juan.

“That’s not Marlboro.”

“It’s all I have. If you don’t want it...”

“I want Marlboro... red!”

“I’m not a cigarette machine. Do you want it or not?”

Juan hesitantly takes the smoke. Verduzco leans over the steel top and flicks his disposable lighter for their suspect. Before the cigarette can ignite, he pulls back the flame, leaving Johnny sucking air. “Tell me about dolls. Do you like dolls?”

“D... dolls. They’re pretty.”

“Do you own a lot of dolls?”

“N... no. I play with Ca... Connie’s Dollie sometimes. I need a light.”

“Did you play with Connie and her doll last night?”

“No. I didn’t see her last night.”

“You gave her candy.”

“I... I did?” After a prolonged silence staring at the flame, Juan adds, “She was beautiful. A princess.”

Was? “And you were the prince?”

“Prince? No... not... Granny says I’m too old to dress up. B..., but she gives me candy, anyway. C... can you light my smoke?”

“Where were you last night?”

“L... last night.” Juan thinks it over for a few minutes. “Home. I gave Connie... K... Kisses.”

“You kissed her?”

“K... kissed? No.” His face deepens to marron.

“Chocolate candy kisses.” Verduzco inserts.

“Johnny, you didn’t sleep in your bed. Where did you go?”
Blaze asks.

“I... I slept at the playground. I... afraid to go home. I... I was in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“C... can I have a Marlboro?”

Verduzco lights a second Winston. He takes a deep drag and suspends a smoke ring above their heads. “Tell me what you did, and this is yours.” He wiggles the smoke between his fingers, dropping ashes.

I will break him off that shit! Blaze’s expression can’t mask his disgust.

“I... I broke granny’s treasure.”

“What treasure?”

“S... she got little glass people. I played with one. It broke. I... I scared and ran.”

“A porcelain figurine?”

“I... I don’t know what that is.”

“Was it a girl or boy treasure?”

“A... a girl. She had a blue dress and a pink umbrella. The umbrella broke. I... it was an accident.”

“Paco, show him your picture.”

While his partner shuffles through the Polaroids, Blaze keeps going. “Johnny, where did you put the broken porcelain girl and her umbrella?”

“I... I can’t remember.”

Verduzco stands. “Must be on my desk. Be right back.”

“You better freaking remember!” A hand slams the metal desk.

Juan cries. “I... I don’t know. Are... you going to tell on me?”

By the time Verduzco re-enters the room, Santiago has chain-smoked four of his cigarettes, and the detective shakes a box-pack of Marlboro reds between two fingers. “Johnny, tell me the truth, and these are yours.”

He addresses his senior partner, “An ocean-blue dress and the right hand missing. I called Kenny, and they can’t locate the piece and are unaware if just hand or holding something,” and tosses the photo to Blaze.

“If Marv is still on scene, have him search the grandmother’s house!” Bird demands.

“I... I need gum, m... mouth dry.”

Blaze pulls a package of Dentyne from his pants. He pushes it across the table.

“I... I like Bazooka.”

“We don’t have any freaking Bazooka! Gum is gum!”

“Only Ba... Bazooka.”

“Damn it, Santiago, chew the gum!”

“No! Bazooka!”

“Partner, find him some frigging Bazooka.”

Another hour into the interrogation, an officer enters and tells Blaze Marvin Kenny holds on line six.

“Hey, Blaze. Let me tell you, that’s the cleanest scene I have been on in quite a while. Nothing turned up, no fingerprints, shoe impressions, and no break-in. The only evidence is the porcelain statue and no umbrella, flower basket, or anything else.”

“Marv, we got the kid here. Can you drop the figurine off?”

The popping and smoking continue for another hour before the investigator appears with an evidence bag containing the piece.

Detective Blaze sets the broken figure on the table. “We found your granny’s doll.” He slides it across.

Johnny picks up and fondles. “Wh... where did you find it?”

“On Connie’s bed, where you left it when you took her.”

“I... I didn’t leave it there.”

“Where did you leave it then?”

“I... I don’t remember.”

“Johnny, you told me you were playing with the little doll and broke it, right?”

“Not this... I need a Marlboro.”

“Answer the question, and I’ll give you one.”

“What question?”

“The figurine! You snapped off the hand, true?”

“What’s that?”

“The little glass doll.” His index finger wiggles toward the broken ceramic.

“Y... yes.”

“Then you went to Connie’s house and climbed into her bedroom through the window.”

“No. I... I didn’t.”

“I saw you!”

“Y... you did? Can I have a smoke?”

“Not until we’re finished. I just told you I saw you. What happened next? You took Connie outside to play and left the doll on her bed?”

“Y... yes.”

“Did you and Connie go to the playground to play?”

“T... the park. Cold. I shivered.”

“Was Connie cold too?”

“Yes, cold.”

“Is Connie still in the park?”

“I... I guess.”

“Which park?”

“I... don’t know.”

Blaze orders Paco to find a city map. He returns within five minutes and lies a spiral-bound *Thomas Bros Maps: San Diego County Edition* street atlas in front of Blaze, open to page one-oh-three. “Two parks are close to Aguilera’s home, Lindbergh and Olive Grove.”

“Ok, Johnny, which park did you leave Connie at?”

“I... can’t remember.”

“Which park did you go to—Lindberg?” Blaze picks the closest one to his neighborhood.

“I... I don’t know the name.”

Verduzco stands, telling Blaze that he’ll get teams searching both.

After more than five hours, reports show that both parks are clear. No girl, dead or alive.

“Enough of your shit. Where is Connie?” Blaze slaps the desk.

“I... the park?”

“She... is... not!... Where... did... you... take... her?” One slam per word until his hand burns.

“I... I don’t know.”

After another two hours, Paco lights Johnny a smoke and joins him with his own Winston. Blaze hits his desk and bangs out a statement on his ten-year-old Selectric typewriter.

Returning, Detective Bird lords over the teenager, shouting threats sprinkled with obscenities.

Paco winks at his partner, takes the sheaf of papers, and sets them in front of their suspect. “Johnny, would you like to go home?”

“Y... Yes.”

He clicks his pen and passes it over. “Sign right here, Johnny, and we won’t ask any more questions.”

Unwittingly, Johnny signs his confession.

“Juan Santiago, you are under arrest for kidnapping Constance Rocha.” The detective jerks the prisoner to his feet and handcuffs him behind his back. “Get this piece of crap booked and transported to county!”

Chapter 5

“Boss, Hermosa Aguilera, here to see you.”

“I just finished for the day. What’s it concern?”

The box stays silent.

Eventually, it clicks. “They arrested her grandson for kidnapping.”

“Show her to my office.”

Janey leads the frumpy grandmother in and offers a seat and a drink. With no response, Fargo looks at the geriatric’s ear, wondering if her hearing aid turned too low. Finally, she touches a shoulder; the startled woman glances. Fargo apologizes and goes back to her desk.

“Mr. Smith, I need your help. The police arrested Johnny. He didn’t do it!”

“Didn’t do what?”

“Take Connie.”

“You’re certain? How do you know?”

“He’s my grandson, not right in the head.”

“Are you saying he’s retarded, err, sorry, uh, slow?”

“Yes, Mr. Smith. Johnny’s been that way since birth. He couldn’t have done it.”

A broken element in the old bulb. “How long has he lived with you?”

“Carmen lived in Tijuana when she had him and could barely support herself, so I took him for a few months, which turned into raising him.”

“Where were you living?”

“The same house. We bought it thirty-one years ago when we came here.”

“What can I do for you?”

“You must save Connie before it’s too late. And find the man who did this.”

Jake rubs his closed eyes, trying to visualize the morning report. “Don’t you and Juan live next door and babysit the girl?”

“Across the street. A friend said I should hire you. She saw you on television.”

I am still getting referrals from that Ortiz business. Smith’s lips draw into a slight, unnoticeable smirk. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Aguilera, this is a police matter. I don’t know what I can do.”

The older woman’s head lowers, and she stares at her sturdy men’s shoes before squeaking, “I receive social security. How much do you charge?”

“Fifty dollars an hour plus expenses, but, as I mentioned, I’m uncertain you require my services. Your money is better spent on a good attorney.”

“I can’t afford one. The police are giving Johnny a lawyer. I heard they don’t do a good job.” Hermosa’s moist eyes finally look back up at the PI.

Jake pulls a pack of tissues from the top desk drawer and hands it to her. “Those are just stories. I’m sure the court will appoint a very competent attorney.”

Without a single dab, she sets the tissues on the desk. “I am sorry I wasted your time, Mr. Smith.” The distraught woman scurries out of the office.

Alex spots Aguilera leaving and takes her place. “What was that?”

“Santiago’s grandmother, the guy they arrested for the Rocha abduction, and she wants to hire us. Not sure what she expects.”

“Can she even afford us?”

“I doubt it. I need to call Doc and see what he knows.” The coroner, Edward “Doc” Martin, Smith’s only friend and confidant within San Diego’s law enforcement community.

“Jake, what are you thinking? We’re not getting involved in this!”

“No, dear. Yes, dear. I’ll be home shortly. What’s for dinner?”

“Are you dismissing me?”

“Of course not, honey.”

Alex leaves work and heads home but needs to stop at a store. Virginia caused her to spend the day fuming, and Alexis plans to make Jake's favorite meal, beef Stroganoff, and spend a romantic evening with her husband.

"I'm heading out, boss. You're the last man standing. Do you want me to lock up?"

"I'll take care of it, Janey. Have a great weekend."

Five minutes later, the hall's quiet, and Jake heads to the foyer to retrieve the afternoon edition. Smith peruses the latest article outlining Constance Rocha's abduction and the arrest of Juan Santiago. He studies every word four times before closing the newspaper and leaning back in his chair, hands interlocked behind his head, feet on the desk, eyes picturing cotton-candy clouds shaped as grandma and Johnny dancing a jig with baby Connie's eyes peering through a far-off billow. *Three victims, a defenseless baby girl, an old woman, and a retarded kid.*

Late evening, the table set, lights off, two candles flicker, while the Smiths eat the homemade Russian dish. Alex takes a sip of Burgundy and casually asks if Small found anything on Angel Snatcher.

Jake confirms, "Virginia found an ancient blurb at the library of a kidnapping in the fifties with an early morning girl abduction. The incident happened in Texas a year earlier than the article, and neither girl nor perpetrator was ever located. Virginia believes that's the origin of the legend."

"Was there a ceramic figurine?"

"Naw, the child's rag doll was on the floor beside the bed. Apparently, the only lead."

"I'm sure Small overreacts, as usual."

"I called Doc."

"Why? We agreed to stay out of this."

We decided nothing of the sort. "He only knows what the news reported but will look into it Monday."

"What are you doing, Jake?"

"Nothing, dear. Just concerned for the girl. If I can save her..."

"The police will find her. It's not our case."

It should be. "You don't believe Bird will find her alive any more than I do."

“Honey, you’re not the only superhero.”

“Let’s take in a movie.”

“I thought we’d stay home tonight. *Casa Blanca* is rerunning at eight. I’ll clean up and get the dishes done. Want popcorn?”

Doesn’t she get enough of those stupid black-and-whites?

“Sounds good, honey.”

Chapter 6

San Diego Detectives August Bird and Paco Verduzco sit at their desks, discussing their strategy and where Connie Rocha's body is. The broken porcelain top of mind.

"Can you look up stores specializing in ceramic figurines?" Blaze asks.

"Will do, boss."

Twenty-four minutes later, Verduzco tells of a boutique in La Jolla they need to visit.

Double-parking the unmarked car on Prospect Avenue, Bird leaves flashers blinking, and they enter Blaha Gifts & Fine China.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of hand-painted porcelain figurines line glass shelves along the showroom's left sidewall, all brightly highlighted by ceiling can lights.

"Good morning, gentlemen. I imagine you are the police?"

"Yes, we talked an hour ago." Detective Verduzco introduces himself and his colleague.

The three stand at the front counter to chat. Verduzco asks about the origin of Blaha. The owner explains it is Czechoslovakian, Bleda Blaha, though everyone addresses him as Buddy and includes that he fled Europe just before World War II and ended up in New York City. In nineteen-sixty-three, he moved to San Diego, opening this establishment.

The discussion turns to Buddy's favorite subject, figurines. Blaze pulls the baggie from his pocket, takes out the broken bibelot, and sets it beside the register. "Have you ever seen this?"

"Heavens, no! I only carry European pieces. This cheap Oriental stuff sells in drugstores."

"Don't you need a closer look?"

Buddy interrupts, “There’s nothing to see. Just focus on the paint. The colors are atrocious, but the brush strokes, tsk, tsk, come with me.”

Buddy leads the agents to his wall of fame. He sweeps his palms. “Meet my Angels.”

Angels? They’re damn pieces of glass!

Bleda picks up many Lladro porcelain figures, establishing quality before proceeding with German-made Meissen, Italian Capodimonte pieces, and many products from England, Denmark, and France. Prices start in the low hundreds and run into thousands. Buddy prattles as though each is a valuable family member while he caresses the fine bone China, endlessly pointing out precise details on each character.

Blaze picks up a twenty-five hundred-dollar Hummel featuring a youthful female, hair, and dress blowing in an imaginary breeze.

“Please be careful, sir. Truly a lovely piece, an heirloom your household will treasure for generations. I hate to let this one go, but confident you will give it a magnificent place in your home. And, for you, a handsome price.”

Gingerly back onto the glass shelf. Not chancing a chip and two months’ wages. Blaze encourages, “My wife must start a collection.” *If we weren’t frigging getting divorced.*

“Wonderful, Sir. I preside over a monthly porcelain club that meets on the third Thursday evening here in the shop, and we would love for you and the misses to attend. I cover everything from new mother through the serious family collector.” Then, he hastily adds, “Every member receives special pricing on my finest works.”

Verduzco questions how many members. Buddy puffs out his concave chest and emphasizes, “Over fifty,” but admits only a handful of giving people open their arms to his little darlings.

“Are you married, Buddy?”

“Oh heavens, I don’t have occasion for a partner.”

Weirdo. No woman has time for his crap. Blaze produces two photographs. The first of Scott Mercoume, provided by Lacie Rocha, and the other; Juan Santiago’s mug shot. “Are either of these members?”

Buddy studies each picture. He keeps going back to Santiago's. "I can't recognize either, but that doesn't mean much. So many one-timers are not as passionate as the rest of us." Santiago's picture holds his mind, and Buddy comments, "This one looks like parent material. What do they call him?"

After telling Juan's nickname, it does not convince the owner he's met either, but he is sure he would remember Juan.

The bell ting-a-lings, and a youthful, well-dressed couple enter the store.

"Please excuse me, gentlemen." He hands Verduzco his business card. "Sir, if you would like to come back this evening, it would honor me to teach you porcelain collecting."

Out of Buddy's direct view, Blaze purses his lips and mouths a silent kiss at his partner. Then, with all teeth showing, he retrieves his evidence from the counter and promises to bring his spouse to a meeting before leading Paco to their department issue.

Back at the station, Blaze finds a message that San Jose phoned. He snatches the horn and returns Detective Devon Hill's call.

Hill tracked Mercoume to his apartment. The father, unaware of the incident, appeared shocked and disturbed to learn his baby girl was missing. He characterized his ex as an alcoholic and capricious mother. "Scott suspects the mother is running a scam to extort his money. Also, he stated, he would hop a flight to San Diego."

"Did you mention we have a suspect in jail?"

"I left that up to you."

"What was his demeanor?"

Hill believes Mercoume is a loving parent, concerned for his baby. Blaze questions about the live-in girlfriend. Unemployed Jimenez was not at the residence, and Scott thought she was out applying for a job. Hill could not locate her.

Off the line, Blaze announces, "Mercoume, on his way. We'll be waiting when he deboards."

At seven-twenty that evening, Bird and Verduzco meet Pacific West flight one-ninety-four at Lindbergh Field. They hold Scott's photo while staring at arriving passengers' faces.

“There’s our boy!” Blaze gestures toward a guy wearing Levi 501 jeans, a blue-flowered Hawaiian short-sleeved shirt, and sockless Huaraches sandals. His light brown-haired pulled back in a ponytail.

“All he needs is a fringing camera,” Bird snarls.

“I guess Lupe couldn’t make it.”

They detain the man. After a brief conversation, and to the traveler’s outrage, the detectives take him downtown.

The three sit in a small room with unrestrained Mercoume conversing smoothly as a slide trombone in a jazz club. Acquainted with his former across-the-street neighbor, Hermosa Aguilera, Scott expresses she’s a nice lady. The grandson he observed around, but they never held a conversation.

“What’s his name?”

“I overheard Hermosa call him Johnny once.”

Blaze doesn’t mention Juan’s in jail and asks, “Are you staying with Lacie?”

“Are you joking? I’m going to a hotel.”

“I understand.”

“Nothing to understand. We never saw eye-to-eye on how to raise our baby. But Lacie tries to be a good mother.”

“What do you mean, ‘tries?’”

“You know, she’s young, didn’t get much training growing up.”

“Scott, is Lacie involved with Connie’s disappearance?”

A slight pause before, “I wouldn’t think so, but who else?”

“What makes you guys fight?”

“We never fought. I just let her have her way. Imagine that’s why we grew apart.”

Verduzco takes a stab. “Scott, why did you give up your daughter and go north?”

“Lacie made my life hell, wouldn’t leave us alone. She enjoyed trying to guilt me. Finally, Lupe and I had to leave town.”

“Why not fight for custody?”

“Women always get the kids. So frankly, I believed it futile and too costly for a no-win fight. Are we through here? I need to check in now.”

“Where?” Verduzco still leads the questioning.

“Not sure I’ll find something.”

Paco mentions a reasonable Super 8 in Mission Valley and offers to furnish a ride.

“That’s unnecessary. I’ll find my own.”

Wanting to keep track of the man, the detective pushes. “The motel is just down the hill from your former home and halfway there. I don’t know if you’re renting a car or what, but it’s well situated for your needs.”

“I’m cool. Am I free to go?”

Blaze clarifies a few further points, thanks the dad for his cooperation, and hands him a card.

As Mercoume leaves, Verduzco comments, “Why didn’t he ask where we are on the case?”

“And avoid telling us where he’s staying? I want eyes on him.”

“You didn’t bring up Santiago’s confession?” Verduzco stays on topic.

“Best see what he does next first. Let’s go.”

The detectives follow Mercoume’s march along the sidewalk. Three blocks away, he pauses at a payphone and makes a call. A half-hour later, a black jacked-up Ford pickup pulls close, and Scott jumps into the passenger seat. Unfortunately, the truck takes off quicker than a dragster at the green, making it useless for the detectives to retrieve their vehicle and follow.

“I got the plate number. Did you read the door sign?”

“Too small. Let’s run the license.”