

ONE

Simon enjoyed this part of the hunt. His eyes were alert with the wild anticipation of another cleansing. Like a hungry alley cat stalking an injured bird, he had to wait for the perfect moment before striking.

He slumped low in the black F-150 Supercab Ford, seemingly unaware of the patrons dashing in and out of the local FoodMart. Anyone noticing him on this crisp November evening might guess that he was waiting for his wife to appear with a cart full of groceries. As he sat in the dark, enough of the bluish parking lot light spilled into the truck for him to read his favorite passage from the Bible, a passage his mother had read to him numerous times. *“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness: ‘Prepare a pathway for the Lord’s coming! Make a straight road for Him! Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills! Straighten the curves, and smooth out the rough places! And then all people will see the salvation sent from God.’”*

Reading these words sent a chill up his spine.

As he waited impatiently, Simon felt a cramp in his lower back, a slight spasm from his intense afternoon workout. He believed in keeping his body fit as well as his soul. He adjusted his six-foot-six frame in the leather bucket seat and gently kneaded the tender muscles. He’d been waiting for over an hour, but hadn’t yet seen her. Her tardiness troubled him. A successful plan depended upon predictability.

Although he would not abduct the redhead today, he had studied her routine for over two weeks, observed her activities with the meticulous attention of a private investigator. Like clockwork, she’d race through the parking lot squealing her tires and haphazardly maneuver the gold BMW into two parking spaces. Always in a hurry, she’d grab her daughter from the back seat and sprint toward the supermarket.

About to abort today’s surveillance, Simon looked up from the Bible and spotted the gold BMW racing toward a vacant parking spot. He glanced at his watch.

Forty-five minutes late.

As in the past, chosen ones made his heart pump fiercely. His face felt hot, ablaze. Watching her, knowing that soon she would be cleansed, overwhelmed him with a level of euphoria few people could understand. For just a moment, he closed his eyes and gently stroked the leather bucket seat, imagining that it was the woman’s soft skin.

Simon loved touching people. As a physical therapist he earned a living bending fingers and wrists and uncooperative joints. Inflicting pain through aggressive manipulation helped the healing process. Who would ever suspect anything unusual if he torqued a pinky a little too far, or bent a knee beyond its reasonable limit? How could anyone guess that his actions were anything but those prescribed by therapy? Pain, he’d been taught by his dear mother, cleansed the soul and purified one’s heart. And Simon, appointed by his Creator and guided by the watchful eye of his mother, focused his efforts on the wretched women of the

world. Yes, he was indeed a gifted therapist, but Simon prided himself more as a healer of souls than bodies.

She parked two rows over; close enough for him to observe her without obstruction. True to her nature, she again seemed to be racing the clock. After snatching her daughter from the car seat, she half-jogged toward the twenty-four-hour FoodMart.

While studying her every movement, watching her through absorbing eyes, a new Infinity parked beside Simon's pickup. A short bald man eased out of the car with a great deal of effort, slowly stood upright, and slammed the door. From the passenger side, a young woman with a petite figure and long blond hair appeared. The man's daughter, Simon surmised. At first Simon couldn't see her face, and didn't really care what she looked like. Then, when she turned to close the door and the mercury vapor light illuminated her features, Simon's heart felt as though it had tumbled down a flight of stairs. The strikingly attractive teenager looked too much like Bonnie Jean not to be her twin.

Impossible.

Bonnie Jean would be over thirty by now, and the last he remembered she'd left Corpus Christi and relocated somewhere in the northeast. Although an uncanny likeness, he knew the resemblance was nothing more than a bizarre coincidence. Still, he felt uneasy. As he watched the bald man grasp the young woman's hand and lead her into the FoodMart, Simon forced the haunting memory from his thoughts.

After waiting twenty minutes, he spotted the redhead hurrying a shopping cart toward her car. He snapped a mental picture.

"Not today," he whispered. "In time, chosen one."

Today, he watched and plotted. The redhead's cleansing would come soon enough.

Another sinner currently awaited salvation in Simon's Room of Redemption.

Simon left San Diego, hopped onto Freeway 8, and headed for his home in Alpine. Plagued by an urgency to get home, an inexorable desire to cleanse another soul, he ignored the speed limit and drove in the passing lane. He slammed his clenched fist on the dashboard.

Sinners will have no place among the Godly.

Again, memories of Bonnie Jean Oliver flooded his mind.

He exited the freeway and drove seven miles along a narrow winding road dotted with farmhouses, dilapidated barns, and acres of open fields. Unlike near the coast, with ocean breezes, palm trees and knotted traffic, east county looked like any other rural community. He pulled into his long, gravel-covered driveway, pushed the button on the remote garage door opener, and sat in his truck for a moment.

Blood would flow tonight.

Fumbling with his keys, he got out of the pickup and walked toward the garage. A heavy fog hovered over the countryside; a smoky mist clung to the earth like smoldering embers. The damp air smelled of freshly cut timber. Samson, Simon's three-year-old chocolate Labrador retriever spotted his owner and his tail swatted the plastic trash barrel with a steady tempo. As predictable as San Diego sunshine, the anxious dog started moaning and doing his semi-circle-samba.

“How’s my big boy?” Simon knelt on the garage floor and let Samson lick his face. “Ready for dinner?”

Simon tipped the forty-pound bag of food and filled Samson’s stainless steel bowl. With the garden hose he gave the dog fresh water, then unlocked the kitchen door.

Except for updated fixtures in the two bathrooms, and a do-it-yourself kitchen the prior owner had put together with cheap materials, Simon’s modest home, built in nineteen-twenty-six, had never been completely remodeled. From the gaudy flowered wallpaper to the badly worn and yellowed linoleum, the interior of the house was in a state of disrepair. The poor condition of the home caused Simon great angst. For years he’d been a neat-freak, a man obsessed with impeccable surroundings. He enjoyed cooking gourmet meals and furnishing his home with tasteful décor; traits that would solicit his mother’s approval. His mother would often quote the hackneyed proverb, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness,” but always added, “There’s no sweepin’ your sins under the carpet in *my* house.”

When he first moved to San Diego from Texas, he rented a condo near the ocean, close to Bayshore Hospital where he worked. But his daily jogs on the beach offered far too many opportunities for sinful thoughts. Scantly dressed, the young women parading up and down the boardwalk were too much of a temptation. By his own pathetic admission he recognized his weaknesses and had no desire to give Satan the advantage. Besides, he needed a remote dwelling, a sanctuary with plenty of acreage and wide-open spaces between houses. He moved to the country where his closest neighbors lived over a mile away, far enough so they could never hear the helpless screams of the chosen ones.

They never die quietly.

Simon had not chosen this particular house for its beauty. Its full basement, an essential feature required for his holy work, distinguished it from most Southern California homes. With thoughtful construction and strategic soundproofing, Simon converted the musty, dank basement into the perfect Room of Redemption.

He reached in the refrigerator, grabbed a bottle of sparkling water and poured a tall glass. The door to the basement was off the kitchen. Carrying the glass of water, he flipped the light switch and negotiated his way down the narrow stairway. The basement, higher than most, built with twelve courses of concrete blocks, allowed Simon to walk upright with at least eight inches between his head and the floor joists. Before unlocking the soundproof door, Simon peeked into the security lens he had installed so he could monitor the activities of his guests. About to turn the dead bolt lock, he stopped, closed his eyes, and could see a vision of the woman he’d just seen at FoodMart.

Bonnie Jean Oliver.

She’d been Simon’s classmate and next door neighbor. He remembered her pigtails, dimples, eyes as green as jade, and the day she’d invited him to her house after school. Her parents were both working. They’d been listening to The Rolling Stones, munching potato chips, sipping Cokes, talking about school and homework.

Simon, on the threshold of puberty, could feel his hormones pumping vigorously. Curious about young blossoming girls—particularly Bonnie Jean, who had always been his favorite—Simon surrendered to temptation and ignored his mother’s relentless warnings about sins of the flesh. He never intended to be so forward, but he could not stop his hand from caressing Bonnie Jean’s tiny breast.

Her reaction both aroused and enraged Simon. Any self-respecting young woman should have been mortified at such a blatant act of immorality. Instead of stopping Simon with a well-deserved smack in the nose, Bonnie Jean’s lips curled to a smile. She clutched his hand, and guided it under her skirt, between her warm thighs.

Simon froze.

Bonnie Jean pressed her moist lips against Simon’s mouth, and her tongue found its way past his teeth. Without warning, another self, one Simon had never known, took control. He pushed her away, knocking her backward. Bonnie Jean took one look at his grotesque expression and must have sensed that mortal danger loomed. She tried to flee, but Simon, his body hyped with sexual anxiety, grabbed a fistful of her long blond hair and viciously yanked her to the floor. What happened after that, Simon could not recall, not even today, twenty years later. He only remembered visiting Bonnie Jean in the hospital, watching in total puzzlement as she squirmed at the sight of him as if he were a poisonous snake. No one ever found out who had beaten her so brutally, stomped on her face, broken her nose. Only after Simon found bloody fragments of her left breast in his Levi’s pocket did he realize he had been her assailant. In constant fear that Simon would disfigure her further, or even kill her, Bonnie Jean never told anyone what had happened.

Simon shook his head as if to erase his thoughts of Bonnie Jean. Visions of this incident often plagued him. He’d never been able to recreate the entire scene. But he feared that snapshots of the incident would assault his memory forever.

He turned the key in the dead bolt, unlocked the steel fire door and stepped into the room, closing and securing the door behind him. Molly sat on the bed with Benjamin on her lap. Reading aloud, she didn’t look up from the book.

“Are we going home now, Mommy?” The three-year-old tugged on her sleeve.

“Soon, honey.”

Simon had designed the Room of Redemption like a studio apartment. It had a full bath, a modestly appointed kitchen with a small refrigerator, a compact microwave, and well-stocked cupboards; a self-contained environment that could adequately support life for an indefinite period of time. He’d been careful choosing the utensils and other supplies. He didn’t want an overly-heroic guest inventing a makeshift weapon.

“Have you eaten anything?” Simon asked.

“Benjamin had mac and cheese,” Molly whispered.

“And you?”

She gave him a cold stare. “I lost my appetite.”

In the corner of the studio Simon had equipped a recreation area with enough play things to amuse the most discriminating youngster: a television with an assortment of Nintendo games, coloring books and crayons, building blocks, stuffed animals—all the essentials to keep a child occupied while Simon had serious conversations with their mommies.

“Benjamin,” Simon said, “go into the play area.”

“I wanna stay with Mommy.” He hung his head and pouted.

Not wanting to antagonize her captor, Molly brushed the hair out of Benjamin’s eyes and gave him a reassuring smile. “It’s okay, honey. Do what he says.” He moseyed over to the play area and turned on the television. Simon sat on the bed next to Molly.

“Why are you holding us prisoners?”

Simon sipped his water. “Do you love your son?”

“That’s a ridiculous question.”

“How much?”

“You expect me to measure my love?”

Simon grabbed her knee and firmly squeezed it. “Indeed.”

The thirty-two-year-old blonde’s voice was unsteady. “What do you want from us?”

“Would you do anything for your son?”

She glared at him with contempt. “What are you getting at?”

“I want Benjamin to go upstairs with me.”

“You’re out of your mind.” *Of course he’s out of his mind. Be careful, girl.*

“Don’t test me.”

“If you think for one minute . . .”

“You’re making me angry, Molly.” His voice remained calm “Do you want to feel the fury of God?”

She considered his threat. “Why upstairs?”

“I have my reasons.”

“I’ll bet you do.”

Simon’s eyes narrowed. “Would you rather I dragged him upstairs by his hair?”

She had no options. Perhaps if she cooperated . . .

Simon reached into the refrigerator, removed a carton of milk, and poured it into a tall glass. “You like chocolate milk, Benjamin?”

“I love it!”

After pouring Hershey’s Syrup into the milk-filled glass, Simon added a small quantity of powder. He stirred the mixture vigorously, making certain the mild sedative completely dissolved. He handed the glass to Benjamin. “Milk will make you grow tall.”

Benjamin grabbed the glass. “Will it make me tall like you?”

“Only if you drink it all.”

Molly hopelessly pounded on the steel door with both fists. “Where *are* you, you son-of-a-bitch? Benjamin, can you hear me? Oh God, oh God, what have I done?” Simon had left with her son over an hour ago. How stupid of her to trust him. But did she really have a choice? She had to keep telling herself she didn’t or else she’d lose her mind.

Screaming for over half an hour, her throat felt raw and on fire. Where could he have taken Benjamin? Why didn't anyone hear her screaming and come to her rescue? Feeling faint and out-of-her-mind frantic, she collapsed on the bed, sucking air in quivering gasps, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Three days ago, when the tire had gone flat and she pulled her Grand Cherokee to the side of the road, she tried calling her husband on his cell phone, but she'd been unable to reach him. She'd left him a message, but Robert had never been one to check his voice mail regularly. She'd never changed a flat in her life and had no idea what to do. When the guy in the black pickup stopped and offered help, he seemed to be a godsend. Acting like a perfect gentleman, handsome, refined, he looked like an athlete. How naïve she'd been.

"Ma'am, I'm afraid your spare's flat too. There's a service station about a mile down the road. I'd be happy to give you a lift."

Over the last three days she'd had plenty of time to think. Had it not been for Benjamin, she would have completely lost her mind. Simon's conduct did not fit the mold of a madman. His quietness, his calm demeanor, almost schoolboy politeness puzzled Molly. Something wild brewed behind those ice-blue eyes. He had not behaved like a raving lunatic. Nonetheless, a demon lived inside him. Why would he kidnap them, lock them in this dungeon with all the basic amenities necessary to sustain life, and do *nothing*?

He hadn't tried to assault her, he'd been kind to Benjamin, and strangely seemed to be genuinely concerned with their comfort. He had, no doubt, a hidden agenda not yet revealed. He hadn't kidnapped them to treat them like guests. Then it occurred to her: a child molester.

She lay on the pillow, closed her eyes, and silently prayed. The thought was too much for her to bear.

Half-asleep, Molly heard the key turn in the door. She stood up and felt a wave of dizziness. Wearing a carpenter's apron with a hammer hanging from his hip, Simon entered the Room of Redemption. Under his arm were two long four-by-fours, one twice as long as the other. He dropped them on the concrete floor.

"Where's my *fucking* son?"

"Watch your mouth."

"I want to see him, *now*!"

"He's fine."

"You're a liar!"

"And you are a sinner."

"Don't you dare judge me, you son-of-a-bitch!"

"Only God can judge you."

"Fuck you!"

Simon rushed toward her and Molly backpedaled, falling onto the bed. He stood over her and extended his hand. But she flinched, expecting him to strike her.

"It's time, Molly." His eyes were different. They glared at her with a penetrating intensity. It felt as if they were touching her skin. "Will you do anything to protect your son?"

Now she understood. She almost smiled. “That’s what this charade is all about. You want to fuck me, don’t you?”

He grabbed a fistful of her hair; his body trembling. “Remove your clothes, sinner.”

“You’ll have to kill me first.”

He turned and stomped toward the door. “Cherish your memories of Benjamin.” He turned the key in the lock. “You’re never going to see him again.”

“No! Please!” Molly clasped her hands as if in prayer. “I’ll do whatever you ask.”

Simon stopped just long enough to get a glimpse of the resignation in Molly’s eyes. To surrender unconditionally, without resistance was the only way God would cleanse chosen ones’ souls. “I know you will.”

Waiting alone in the dimly lit Room of Redemption, her eyes focused on the soon-to-be-built crucifix, Molly felt utter agony. Not knowing what the monster had planned for her son served only to heighten her torment. At this very moment her captor could be doing the unspeakable to Benjamin. He’d always been such a fragile child. She began to sob, trying to suppress her emotions, fighting desperately to remove the vivid images from her mind, but she could not stop the visions or the flood of tears. For a breathless moment, Molly pressed her palms together and fell to her knees. She prayed to a God who had not been part of her life since childhood, a God who had taken her mother away when Molly was only seven years old. She had never been able to forgive her Creator for such a cruel misdeed. But now, at the threshold of death, an event grisly beyond anything she could imagine, she appealed to the only force in the universe with the power to rescue her.

“I don’t care what he does to me, dear Lord. But please, I beg you, protect my son.”

Strangely, a vision of Dorothy, from *The Wizard of Oz*, flashed through Molly’s mind. She could see the young girl staring at the rapidly-draining hourglass, eyes wide with fear, waiting for the Wicked Witch to return. This was not a movie though. There were no Scarecrow, Tin-man or Cowardly Lion to save her. Only a madman.

The metal door squeaked open. She looked into Simon’s eyes and knew for certain that the hourglass had drained.

Still sleepy from his sedative-induced nap, Benjamin asked, “Where we going?”

Simon smiled and buckled the seat belt around the three-year-old. “For a ride.”

“Where’s my mommy?”

“She’s with God.”

The boy thought for a moment. “You mean the God up in heaven?”

“He’s the only God.”

“When she comin’ back?”

For a moment, Simon thought about lying. Under the circumstances God would surely forgive him this one sin. But to preserve the innocent child’s feelings was only a temporary solution. A lie would create false hope. “Never, Benjamin.”

The young boy twisted his knuckles in his eyes and started to whimper. Simon opened the center console and pulled out a Tootsie Roll Pop. “You like cherry?”

Benjamin nodded. Simon removed the wrapping and handed it to the boy.

The boy grabbed the sucker, licked it several times, and then took it out of his mouth. “I wanna see my mommy.”

“Some day you will.”

He drove west on Freeway 8 and exited on Mission Center Road. At eight-forty, almost closing time, he pulled into the entrance leading to Grossman’s Department Store. There were only a dozen cars in the parking lot. Simon stopped the truck in front of the main doors and turned on the emergency flashers. He adjusted his Padres baseball cap so the visor rested just above his eyes. He handed Benjamin a piece of paper.

“Do me a favor.”

The little boy looked at him curiously.

Simon unfastened Benjamin’s seat belt, and opened the passenger’s door. “See that man standing inside the store.” He pointed to a security guard leaning against a pillar. “It’s very important that you give him that piece of paper. Your mommy wants you to. Can you do that?”

“For mommy?”

“Yes.”

Benjamin balanced his unsteady legs on the aluminum running boards and struggled to the sidewalk. Simon pulled the door shut. Before walking through the entrance, Benjamin stopped and looked over his shoulder. A young man wearing a baseball cap backwards, his jeans five sizes too big, held the door open for him. Benjamin shuffled inside. He jerked his head from side to side as if looking for something unknown to Simon. Then, with his arms outstretched and the piece of paper between his tiny fingers, he made a beeline for the security guard as if he were the boy’s favorite uncle. Simon watched the boy hand over the note. He stepped on the accelerator and sped toward the exit.