

Chapter One

The little girl was exactly what *they* ordered. Her light brown hair bounced around her sweet face in spiral curls. Her taupe skin, big brown eyes framed by thick, black lashes, revealed her bi-racial heritage. She was as perfect as a porcelain collector's doll in her pink dress, lacy pale-pink tights, and white patent leather shoes. The darling, six-year-old rode her fuschia bicycle up the sidewalk. Sparkly silver tassels fluttered out from the handlebar grips as she pedaled in his direction. Transfixed for a moment, he watched. She approached him slowly, wobbling a little, under the brilliant green canopy of maple trees. The summer breeze picked up the scent of roses from a garden on its way from the west to the east. He glanced up to see her foster mother chatting happily on her cell phone. *Distracted just enough*, he thought. Turning the ignition fob, he started the van's engine and let it idle. Slowly, he stepped out of the driver's side and made his way quickly, quietly, to the back of the van and opened the double doors. Earlier that morning, he'd sprayed the hinges with WD-40 so they wouldn't make a sound. The child rode past him, not even acknowledging his presence; she was focused so intently on keeping her balance. It made him chuckle, and briefly, the image of his daughter at that age flashed through his mind. Quickly, he pushed it away. She circled carefully at the intersection and pedaled her way back toward mom. The

woman had turned her back and was now yelling at the person on the other end of her call. The foster father, he guessed.

He didn't know what *they* did with the children once *they* had them. He couldn't allow himself to venture down that path. He'd made a bargain with the crooked prosecutor that day three years ago, and he was out of jail and free if he lived up to his end. Besides, he was paid big money and easy money, so he did it. Sometimes the bounty would be up to one hundred thousand per child, especially for a special order, like today. His girlfriend enjoyed all the gifts, dinners out, and perks his employment brought them. He decided to think of that instead.

When the little girl was directly across from him, he snatched her off her bicycle, smoothing the measure of chloroform-soaked cotton over her nose and mouth with rainbow-colored duct tape. Her eyes were wide with fear, and she tried to scream. But the drug started its magic and rendered her unconscious. He had his method down pat. Though she slumped like a dead weight against his chest, to him, she was light as a feather. When he turned, he noticed the riderless pink bike was still upright. It faltered for a foot or so before finally toppling onto its side in the grass of a neighbor's manicured lawn. He carefully tossed her onto the clean mattress and pillows in the back of the van and pressed the doors shut. His partner waiting inside would take care of the rest. He couldn't deliver damaged goods. He glanced around cautiously; making certain that no one had seen and careful not call any attention to himself. Days

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earlier he'd walked the neighborhood searching for security cameras. He'd parked as far away as he could from the two he'd noticed.

Swiftly, he jumped into the driver's seat. Pulling away from the curb in one seamless maneuver, he made a U-turn and drove in the opposite direction. From time to time, he glimpsed into his rear-view mirror to see if the mother had discovered her daughter was gone. When finally, she did, he knew he was too far away for her to notice the van or see his license plate.

## Chapter Two

Tim McAndrews pressed a length of clear packing tape along the top of the last of the cardboard boxes, sealing it closed. The vestiges of his old life were tucked away in the cartons, stacked one on the other, and waiting for the movers to shove them into a dark corner of the attic at the ranch house on the east side of the Cascade Mountains. His single life; college and his first few years with the King County District Attorney's office would be stored there with them. He wasn't going to miss his stuff or the single life. He had readily traded Saturdays wasting time with his best friends, Scott Renton and Kathy Hope, for waking with Dani in his arms. *Daniela St. Clair*. How had he ever won her? The thought of her brought a sigh to his lips and a rush, warm like a hug, to his whole body. She was the most exquisite woman in the whole world. Beauty and brains rolled into one complete package. God, he loved that woman. And she'd married him.

He slid back on the polished oak floor, surveying the condo for the last time. He expected the new buyers would enjoy all the craftsman woodwork and trim he and his brothers had painstakingly added to the place when he'd bought it when just out of law school five years ago. He'd made the door and window casings, baseboard and crown moldings in his family's cabinet shop, keeping his father's years of training and his skills honed. With the way things

were going at the District Attorney's Office, he never knew whether or not he'd be forced to use those skills and sooner than he imagined. He'd been so proud of how that little bit of trim had transformed his unit into art. But today, without furniture, the place looked dark and almost sad. Tim rolled his shoulders, easing the tension in his back. No. He wasn't going to miss the time before Dani. Like oil separated in water, floating on top of his prosecutorial victories and marrying Dani, he'd recently made tragic mistakes. Life and death mistakes that he couldn't fix. He slowly stood and scrubbed a hand through his short sandy blond hair. Decisions needed to be made. He was a married man with responsibilities now.

Two more weeks, only two and he'd have to choose. Should he return to work at the District Attorney's office; take the offer from Elias Cain with the FBI; join the private law practice of a trusted friend and mentor, Brad Hollingsrow; or just tuck his tail between his legs and go home and work in the family woodworking and cabinetry business with his brothers? But after all the money he'd spent on his law degree, and his mother's hopes and dreams for him, that would be a devastating defeat. He'd done a lot of thinking during his current forced leave of absence. But he'd avoided the therapy recommended by the county's ethics review board. He'd shot and killed a man. Though the District Attorney, Paul Goddard, convincingly presented his case before the board and reminded them of Tim's stellar conviction record, they were reluctant to exonerate him. But they had. Goddard begged him to stay. But the King County Commissioners weren't sure he was the type of person they

wanted on their team. They'd told him in specific terms that this was his one chance. Period. Even though his victim was a serial killer who'd broken into his home, intent on murder, the second-guessers thought they knew better how he should've handled it. He shook his head, still in disbelief.

It used to be a man's home was sacrosanct. He was entitled to self-defense. But not these days. According to Miss Gracie Rose, the chairman of the citizen's ethics review committee, he had a duty to flee, instead. That was rich. Dani's penthouse was on the twenty-sixth floor of her office building in Seattle. They were awakened in the middle of the night, and a foot of snow blanketed the city. Flee? Barefoot and in flimsy pajamas? To where in those conditions? As punishment, he was given four weeks of unpaid leave and was supposed to attend 'voluntary' rehabilitation sessions. He had yet to visit one. He wasn't all that sure *he* was the one who needed therapy.

The sound of heavy footfalls coming up the steps outside the open front door returned his attention to the here and now. Movers had arrived, and it was time to go.

"This is last of it..." Tim turned and slipped his arms into the sleeves of the bright blue down jacket Dani had bought him. She'd said the color matched his eyes. He didn't know about that, but he knew she loved him and to please her he'd wear any color she wanted him to. He was surprised to see Kathy Hope instead of the movers. Her Navy blue overcoat covered her green surgical scrubs. The pants legs were crumpled over the top of a pair of Ugg snow boots; half tucked in, half hanging out, giving the impression of a

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disheveled scientist. That was Kathy. He chuckled to himself. Still, the Medical Examiner was one of his closest friends. She'd come here straight from her offices at the hospital. Her blue eyes sparked with almost a dare. She brushed her hair, the color of ripened wheat, away from her face along with her overcoat's hood; her expression was tense.

"Hi." She offered him a hesitant but almost guilty smile. She was carrying a folder, and since Tim was still on leave, he couldn't imagine why she'd be here with her game face on.

"What's up? I thought you were the movers." Tim gave Kathy a quick hug. "Come in; it's a mess, but..." Tim gestured for her to enter. "You aren't bowing out of our ski trip, are you?" They were scheduled to depart this afternoon. Kathy didn't ski. That she'd agreed to go at all had surprised him. He guessed Kathy was going only to please her husband to be, Scott Renton, another best friend, and a Seattle P. D. detective. Or she'd come to scold him for not going to the counseling the District Attorney's Office had paid for. With Kathy, a lame excuse for ditching wasn't going to fly, so he kept his mouth shut. In his mind, he did the math—two weeks a no-show, that was four sessions. The county commissioners might judge that harshly. Kathy was here to remind him he needed to appease them. Her expression was stony like it was when she was going to mother him about something he'd done wrong. He steeled himself for the lecture.

"Tim, it's not a social visit." Kathy's voice reflected the grim turn to her mouth.

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“So, I forgot to go to counseling--There is nothing to say. Warden broke into my home, fixed on murder. I shot him.” For a moment, the agony of that night resurfaced. He remembered it clearly; Dani clinging to him, her face pressed against his back, needing his protection. Warden stabbed their bed until mattress stuffing floated on the air. When Tim flipped on the light, Warden turned and charged in an insane rage. Tim had no choice but to pump hollow point rounds into Warden’s chest. Still, he readied himself for Kathy’s rebuke.

“What? I don’t care if you go to counseling or not. I need your help. And yes, I’m still going on our ski trip.” She dragged a heavy box to where he stood and sat down on it, clutching the file folder to her chest. She glanced his way and ducked his suspicious frown, increasing his wariness. She set the file on her lap, opened it, and started right off. “Two nights ago, these two boys were dumped outside the emergency room doors of Seattle’s Children’s. A nurse found them as she went off shift. They both were moments from death. They were practically exsanguinated. The staff did everything they could, but...” Kathy lifted her shoulders, and a grimace twisted her face. Tim felt bile rise to his throat. He wasn’t sure he was ready to hear about the gruesome things people did to one another this morning. He’d closed that compartment down for the duration of his suspension, and he’d much rather think about skiing. She handed him one of the photos from the folder. He reluctantly took hold of the glossy. “The doctors freaked, they asked for an autopsy. One look and I called Scott.”

“Right thing to do,” Tim commented and looked at the picture. He groaned. Instantly he felt his jaw tighten and clenched his teeth together. The two little boys were twins, not more than six years old. Their blond hair was matted with dried blood, they were nude, severely beaten, and red ligature marks circled their necks, wrists, and ankles. To top off the horror, cigarette burns still angry, and red dotted their torsos. “Damn!” Tim squeezed his eyes shut and felt disgust surging up from the pit of his stomach. “How could anyone...?” Seeing abused children brought up a mix of emotions: anger, distress, helplessness, more anger—mixing and chilling into a cold rage. Prosecuting the A-hole who did this and seeing justice done was going to be a pleasure. He would go for the death penalty. And suddenly he understood his choice of career paths had just narrowed. Kathy’s intent, no doubt.

“Did Scott arrest the parents?” Tim asked. He didn’t remember how it started, but his best friends always informed him about the cases they were working on. Even when they were kids, up in the treehouse his father had built for them, playing at solving mysteries, the three always hashed out all the clues. He also suspected his friends thought it gave them a jump start with the District Attorney and maybe it did. It was no secret Tim was the D.A.’s favorite Assistant. But, he’d earned it. He’d put the hours in on every case he was assigned. It was the family work ethic his father had drilled into him as a child. Back then, he hated it. Now, he was grateful. Hard work brought self-esteem, but most importantly, it brought freedom and self-sufficiency.

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“Scott is joining us in a minute. Captain Martin assigned him as the lead detective. Tim, we don’t even know who these kids are, who they belong to, who their parents are,” she sighed, her voice cracked with sadness, desperation, and there were tears, held back but still pooling in her eyes. Kathy loved children. This was agony for her. Instantly, he empathized.

“What about surveillance video? The hospital has to have that. Did you call Farland? He’s in charge of major crimes while I’m on leave.”

“Scott’s reviewing the video now. And yes I called Farland. But he passed me off to Mo.” Her lips tightened, and her eyes flashed. Mo was Mohammad Rashad, an ADA in his early forties. He and Kathy had developed a mutual hatred for each other. Mo had no use for women in the workplace and resented Kathy. He dismissed her opinions and wouldn’t allow her to testify in court on any of his cases. She was the lead medical examiner. Instead, he forced her to send her subordinate, Jeff Winsley, to go over her autopsy notes. It was ugly. Mo had come to America from the Middle East, where their customs were vastly different. He was a graduate of Columbia Law and never let anyone forget it as if that alone excused his incompetence. He seemed to harbor overwhelming insecurity around the other ADAs. He’d been hired long before Tim, but Tim had been promoted before him. Tim had heard the other ADA’s complain Mo was useless and had been a part of a diversity push by King County. “Mo never returns my calls, Tim. I need you to stay with the D.A.’s office. I can’t work with him. Besides that, I’m not sure he thinks murdering infidel children is wrong.”

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“Kathy!” Tim scolded, feeling his scowl creasing his brow. He had his reservations about Mo, too. But he wouldn’t express them out loud. Rumor and gossip around the office were that Mo associated with a very radical Mosque and that fact left Tim on edge. He wasn’t clear if the whispers were prejudice or truth and decided caution was wisdom. “He’s nasty to everyone,” Tim noted.

“Well, it doesn’t make for a good work environment, that he won’t help me,” she insisted. Tim folded his arms across his chest in a defensive posture. He wasn’t sure he was going to go back to his old job. He loved court. There was a certain satisfaction when he convinced a jury of a bad guys guilt and removed the offender from society. Tim believed the Constitution’s promise of equal justice before the law. It didn’t always happen. But he held on to the ideal; a government of law, not of men, was blind to race, sex, religion, creed, and financial status.

Tim had come by his conviction record legitimately. He’d never covered up exculpatory evidence, even if it meant a jury would hand him a defeat. To do so was wrong and evil. A prosecutor was charged with convicting the genuinely guilty. It made him sick to hear that others in his profession had railroaded innocents into prison to boost their reputations and percentages, and sometimes protected the guilty. In his mind, there was nothing worse than a crooked cop, an arrogant, corrupt prosecutor, or one on the take.

“Goddard had you in charge of the Senchal abuse case two years ago, not Mo. Without your win on that case, he wouldn’t be D.A. at all. You know it, he knows it, and I know it.”

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Tim also knew that if he stayed at the DA's office, he might never progress any further in his career. He'd shot a man. Self-defense or not, promotions were unlikely with that hanging over him. He was only twenty-eight; he had a lot of career time left to be stuck going nowhere.

Tim chuckled. "Appeal to my vanity and get what you want? Alright, tell me what you're thinking, and I'll see if I can arrange a meeting with Goddard. But, damn it, Kath, I haven't decided what I want to do. And you need to try to get along."

"With Mo? Forget it," Kathy stated. Done deal, she and Mo weren't ever going to be buds. "Goddard is going to think you are coming back. He'll be all excited." She shrugged an *oh well* with her shoulders. "He'll manage his disappointment if you don't."

"He's not managing his disappointment, now," Tim laughed.

Kathy grinned. "I didn't think so." Then she turned serious. "You can't let whoever did this get away with it."

"Aren't you getting the cart before the horse? You don't even have the victims names, or a suspect, let alone anything I can use to get warrants."

"Details! Details!" She said and then took hold of his hand and stared into his eyes. The intensity shook him. "That's not the worst of it. Tim, they were sodomized, raped." He gasped, and Kathy's tears were back, welling in her eyes. She was trying to be tough, forcing them not to fall by jerking her chin up. It wasn't working. "Initial lab reports came back. There were traces of Nonoxyl 9. That's a spermicidal emollient if you don't know." Her voice cracked,

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and she swallowed hard. “The perp couldn’t possibly believe he’d get the boys pregnant, so my guess is; he used it as a lubricant.”

Tim let the evidence settle in his mind. Kathy could connect the forensics, and quickly, the crime would come into focus. He wasn’t ready. Damn! He wanted to day-dream about skiing with Dani instead!

“Some of the internal wounds and tears had started to heal. I think the boys were tortured for days.” She dropped his hand and shuddered. She reached for another picture.

“No.” Tim lifted his palm; didn’t want to see it. He could handle a lot of hideous things, had to in his job, but sexually abused and murdered children was one thing that set his anger on fire.

Kathy smirked. “McAndrews, you are a six foot two wimp!”

He glowered at her, but he was used to her barbs. “Did he leave DNA?”

“I didn’t find semen. But, we have a ton of swabs at the lab. If he left DNA, I’ll find it. Won’t be easy. There was some chemical residue, maybe soap? The creep may have washed the boys before dumping them. Trying to eliminate evidence.”

“Nonoxyl 9 and no semen? He used a condom, the deluxe variety with extra protection added. That’s why you didn’t find semen.” Tim mused.

She paused for a moment, before speaking, straightened up, and stared at him with surprise. “How do you know about that?”

“What? Did you think I wouldn’t know about birth control? Come on, Kath.”

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“I guess I’ve never really thought about you having sex--let alone practicing safe sex,” she giggled.

He laughed, shaking his head. “Kath, I’m married.” He reminded her sarcastically.

She looked down at the ground and cleared her throat. “So, the perp tried to cover his identity,” Kathy said, forcing seriousness into her voice.

“Cover-ups don’t always work. Let’s hope the unsub screwed up, ” Tim stated. He felt his eyes narrowing with contempt. He already hated this perp. “I don’t know what use I can be. I’m on reprimand. I’m a bad guy, an out of control, gun-slinging cowboy of a prosecutor, according to Gracie Rose anyway. And I’m going on vacation. So are you for that matter.” He tried on his most calloused voice. Kathy’s stifled laugh was proof she didn’t believe it. She knew him too well. She knew he was hooked. He wouldn’t be able to let a bad guy get away with this.

“She’s an idiot. If she were in the position you and Dani were in, she’d be wishing for a good guy with a gun.”

They both turned as they heard heavy bounding up the stairs.

“Did you see?” Scott Renton asked, dashing breathlessly into the room, his tweed overcoat flapping behind him like Superman's cape in the wind. Still his neatly trimmed dark brown hair was in place, and his dark mustache framed his quick smile of greeting. Before the overcoat slipped back in place, Tim could see the badge Scott had hooked onto his belt and the outline of his shoulder holster. He slid his arm over Kathy’s shoulder and kissed her on the

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cheek. "Can you believe it?" He returned his attention to Tim and handed him a computer print-out that reflected the first responding officer's notes. "We don't have any identification; no idea who these boys are or where they are from. Surveillance cameras caught some guy in a black hoodie, with his face covered by a balaclava. Just dumped them like they were trash. Silver car, Beamer, late model, maybe 2017, both plates were intentionally obscured."

"Did you get anything at all?" Tim asked, hopeful. He couldn't go to Goddard with what little they had. They weren't ready for warrants; he had to have more. A suspect would be a great start.

"There was residue from duct tape glue on the boy's wrists, ankles and across their faces as if to keep them quiet. I found a tiny sliver of tape that looked like it might be multi-colored or maybe rainbow colored on one of the wrists of one of the boy's sweatshirts. Do they make colored duct tape?" Kathy asked, looking over at Tim.

He bit at his bottom lip. He didn't know, but that would be something Scott would chase down. "If you found traces of glue, he didn't wash them very thoroughly."

"I hope he didn't," Scott said, taking a pen from the inside pocket of his overcoat. "Look, here. The wall next to where he dumped the boys was built with 6-inch cinder blocks, from that we have determined the guy is 5 foot 11." He demonstrated on the computer picture. "That's it. How many 5 foot 11 inch guys, driving silver Beamers do you suppose are in Seattle?" He asked, sarcastically. "Seattle's Children's is looking through their database to see if

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the boys were born in their maternity wing. I've got my team checking all other hospitals in the area. Kathy guessed the boys were around six. I'm having them look for the last seven years."

"Any report on the twins in missing persons?" Tim asked.

"I checked. Not in Washington. I instructed my team to look nationwide. It has to be the fricking low life parents." Scott rubbed his hand back and forth over his dark eyebrows. He was as upset as Kathy. Tim got it. Together they were reeling Tim into this case and into staying with the D.A. He was like a big tuna on a commercial fishing boat line. He could fight, but he wasn't going to get away. "CSI is going through the hospital video frame by frame to see if we can recover anything else."

"What are you expecting from me?" Tim let an expression of skepticism sweep over his face. "You aren't ready for warrants. What can I do on leave of absence?"

Scott stared for a moment. Then with exasperation said, "Go to Goddard. He doesn't much care for me, and we're going to need extra money on this case, likely the FBI, and the budget is short after all the Resistance and Antifa—*marches...*"

"Riots, you mean, don't you?" Kathy interjected sarcastically. "Stop looking at me like that, Tim. You minored in history."

"Yeah, I get it. Antifa. What a joke. Communists against Fascism. As government systems go, they are the same thing, just a different vicious killer in charge. In World War II, when the Allies won, and the Communists aka

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Antifa took over East Germany the STAZI replaced the GESTAPO. Same tyrants, new uniforms.”

“Will you talk to Goddard?” Kathy asked again. “Please?”

“Alright. At least we will have him up to speed on the case.” Tim angled his iPhone from his jacket pocket. He turned his back to Kathy and Scott when the office picked up. “Hey, Susan, can you put me through to Goddard?”