

Chapter One

New York, June

The phone rang at 3 A.M.

Michael Richardson sat straight up, checking his bedside clock - wondering who could be calling him so late. He turned on the lamp beside the bed as he reached for the phone - rechecking his clock once again.

“Hello?”

A gruff voice came across the line. “Be at the White Inn in a half an hour, or your son is dead.”

Michael’s blood ran cold. “The White Inn? Who the hell is this?”

“Half an hour. Alone. If I see any of your cop friends with you, your son will die.”

Before Michael could inquire about the caller’s identity once again, the line went dead. He jumped up from his bed, only then noticing that there was a woman there. He couldn’t remember being with anyone the night before, and wondered who she could be. He’d obviously had too much to drink - again. He turned the light off before she woke and asked him too many questions.

Pulling his pants on in the dark, Michael’s head began to swim. His son, David, was in trouble. He was only four years old, and must be terrified.

Where the hell is Cassie? He wondered if something had happened to David’s mother.

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They had separated when David was very young, and were now divorced. They tried to get along for David's sake, but times were hard when there was still so much bitterness between them.

"Where are you going, darlin'?"

Michael turned to the woman in his bed, realizing that she had been awake all along. He couldn't make out her features in the dark, and didn't care enough to try. He had to get to his son.

Without answering her question, he strapped on his gun and left the bedroom. He missed the pout on the woman's face as he threw on a shirt and ran to his car. Five minutes had already passed, and he had to hurry. It was a ten minute drive to the White Inn from his apartment in the city.

His tires squealed as he left his parking spot, and he hurried toward the Inn. His mind was racing as he sped faster and faster. Who could have his son? Why would they take him? What did they want? And did they have Cassie as well?

He wanted to call to see if she was okay, but knew that he was probably being monitored. He'd dealt with many kidnaping cases in his ten years as a police officer, and knew that he had to be extremely careful about what he did and who he talked to. His son's life depended on it.

He could finally understand how people felt when their children were missing. He had been trained in how to deal with parents, what to say, what to do, but never in his life could he have prepared himself for the fear that gripped his heart and the pain that he felt at the thought of

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never seeing his son again.

He and Cassie had met when they were in high school and had fallen in love almost immediately. She had come from a rich family, and him from the poorer side of town. They were mismatched from the start, but perfect nonetheless. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, and couldn't believe it when she had fallen in love with him. Part of him knew the main reason for her attraction at first was the fact that her parents hated him. It pleased Cassie that they didn't approve, and had found it part of his appeal.

They had dated throughout high school and followed each other to University. She had taken fine arts and creative writing, while he studied criminology and psychology. It had been rough by times, but they'd made it through and walked down the aisle after a short engagement. She had become pregnant shortly after the wedding, and they had both been ecstatic at the thought of being parents. It had been a fairy tale romance.

But unlike a fairy tale, they did not live happily ever after. The stress of money and the pressures of parenthood began to wear on them, and it was then they had begun to realize that perhaps they weren't so perfectly suited after all. But they had tried to make it work. Right up until that dreadful night when everything fell to pieces and tore them apart forever.

Michael still loved Cassie, and wished that they could work things out and become a family again. But he doubted that would ever happen. Not until they learned to forgive and forget, and it was hard to put the past behind when it lived with you every day of your life.

His mind flashed to the woman who had been in his bed, and he couldn't help but think

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that he was wasting his life away on women that meant nothing to him, and on a job that brought nothing but trouble and sleepless nights. And now it was the cause of his son's disappearance.

He knew that it had to be someone who was angry with him because he was a cop. The voice had said not to call his friends and so it must be someone that he had arrested at one time. The possibilities were endless. He had arrested many criminals in his day, and couldn't pin it down to just one person who could have done it.

He tried to think about the voice on the phone, but came up with nothing. It had been disguised, and he wasn't even positive it had been a man. He hoped that whomever it had been was talking good care of his son and didn't harm him. If anyone hurt David, he would kill them - no matter the consequences.

The White Inn came up sooner than expected, and Michael's heart pounded in his throat. What was he going to find when he got there? Was David already dead? Was Cassie with him? He couldn't think like that. He had to keep a level head if he was to be of any help to his son.

He parked his car out front and ran inside, praying he wasn't too late.

The White Inn loomed before him like an old friend, and a new enemy. It had been built in the early 1900's, after a fire had destroyed the original structure. It was a beautiful Victorian style Inn with large white pillars and a wide veranda on the front. The cobblestone walkway was lit with lanterns, and the glow of the chandelier called to him as he opened the front door.

Memories surrounded him as he entered the foyer. He and Cassie had spent their

honeymoon there. Did the kidnapper know that? Was it part of his plan? Michael found it hard to breathe and he smelled the fresh flowers and walked on the same carpet that he had carried his newlywed bride over only a few years ago. He hadn't been back to the Inn since, and wished it had been under better circumstances.

The lobby was well lit, and the soft colors and warm lighting contradicted the turmoil inside Michael's stomach. He looked around, trying to find someone who looked suspicious, but the only one present was the night clerk, and he was engrossed in a late night movie playing on a small television set behind the counter.

Approaching the desk, Michael cleared his throat to catch the attention of the clerk. He was a young man of about twenty, and looked disgusted to have been interrupted during his movie, and didn't attempt to hide that fact from Michael.

"My name is Michael Richardson, and I was wondering if there were any messages for me?"

The clerk looked him up and down as though he were a bum off the street. Michael couldn't blame him, as he had just thrown on his clothes from the night before and likely reeked of smoke and liquor. He hadn't even combed his hair or brushed his teeth. He no doubt smelled like a brewery.

Scrunching his nose in distaste, the clerk asked, "are you a guest of the Inn?"

Michael sighed, and looked at his watch. He was running out of time. "No, I am not a guest of the Inn, but I was called and told to meet someone here. I'm a cop." Pulling out his

identification, he noticed the look on the clerk's face change, and he appeared almost nervous.

“Don’t worry. I’m not here for you. I just need to know if someone left a message for me.”

The clerk stuttered and stammered, and finally spit it out that no, there was no message for him. When he saw Michael’s distress, he promised to check the machine on the phone, in case someone called while he had been away from the desk. Michael thanked him, and waited impatiently as the young clerk went through all the messages.

“I’m sorry, sir. There are no messages for you. Perhaps if you would like to take a seat over there.” He pointed to the few couches that were provided for guests waiting for their rooms, but Michael declined. The last thing he wanted to do was sit. He kept going over in his mind the conversation he’d had on the phone, trying to remember anything, a sound, the voice, anything that would tell him who it could have been who had called him.

He searched the lobby area, and couldn’t believe that there was no one there. Where was the kidnapper? He was sure that they had said the White Inn. And the half hour was only minutes away from being up. What was going to happen if he didn’t find David before his time was up? Was he supposed to search the entire Inn? Was that it? Was David somewhere in the Inn?

He thought he heard a sound behind him, but when he turned, there was no one there. In fact, the clerk was gone as well. Thinking that he was useless to him anyway, Michael went to the dining area to look around.

The tables were set for breakfast, and the silverware glistened in the soft lights, illuminating the room in an eerie silver glow. It was as though they were mocking him, making him feel immobile, unable to do anything while his son could be suffering under the hands of some lunatic.

There was a bouquet of flowers at every table, decorated in a crystal vase. They were artificial, but so carefully placed that it was almost as though you could smell the roses in the air. There were tables set for meetings for many, and also private tables for the honeymooners. Michael's eyes fell on the table in the back, facing the window. There was a wonderful view of Lake Michigan, and Michael remembered what they'd had to eat, and what they had talked about.

They had talked about their hopes, their dreams, and each had their own idea of how they should spend their lives. As he thought about it now, they each had different ideas but were oblivious to that fact until it was too late.

Again he thought of Cassie. Should he call her? Maybe David had been somewhere with a babysitter, or a friend, and she thought he was safe. Would she believe him if he called, or would she think it was a ploy to get her to talk to him? No, she would know that he would never lie about anything happening to David. That was one thing they both agreed on. He was to stay out of all their fights. No matter what.

He left the dining room and returned to the lobby. He walked up to the desk, hoping to catch the clerk's attention and use the phone, but the desk was still empty. The movie was

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playing on the television, and Michael thought it odd that the young man would leave when he seemed so engrossed in the film. Suddenly he had a bad feeling that something was wrong. He walked behind the desk, and pulled his gun from its holster as he rounded the corner.

He inhaled sharply. The clerk was there alright. Dead. A bullet through his head. And in his hand was a white piece of paper. Michael knew that he shouldn't touch anything at a crime scene, but he had an intuition that the piece of paper was meant for him. He stepped carefully over the body, his own growing cold as he saw the raw fear in the young man's open eyes. He leaned over to close them, and then reached for the piece of paper. He swore as he read the words.

Time's up

Michael screamed in anguish, as the realization came over him that he should never have left the room. While he was in the dining room reminiscing about Cassie, an innocent man was killed and he possibly put his son's life in jeopardy. He knew what he had to do. He ran out the front door of the Inn, and jumped into his car. He raced toward the lake, feeling that he would find the son of a bitch there. And he had a horrible feeling that he knew exactly who it was.

As he raced toward the lake, he picked up his car phone and dialed the number of the woman who haunted all of his dreams. He knew that she would be asleep, and could almost picture her beautiful raven black hair spilling out over her pillow, her soft lips open just a crack

as she slept. She was probably wearing a simple flannel nightgown, as Cassie was never one for glamour.

He could hear her voice crack, as she attempted to sound awake. She cleared her throat and asked who was calling. Just like Cassie. Always one to ask questions before hearing the story. Sweet Cassie.

His love.

“Cassie, it’s Michael.”

He could hear the change in her voice. “Michael? Do you have any idea what time it is? What the hell do you want?”

Ignoring her question, he asked, “where is David?”

Cassie paused, then snapped, “where the hell do you think he is, Michael? He’s in bed, where you should be.” She paused again. “Are you drunk?”

He only wished. “No, I’m not drunk, Cassie. Dammit, go and check David’s room.”

He could hear the panic rising in Cassie’s voice. “Why? What’s wrong, Michael?”

“Just do it.”

His tone bade no argument, and so she did as he asked and put the phone down. He held his breath, praying that it was all just a bad dream. He prayed that his sweet boy was safe in bed, and that he could just go home and start his life over. His life with Cassie.

The terror-stricken scream he heard next tore through his heart and soul. He knew before she came back to the phone that it was no dream. His son was gone. Their son. And it was all

his fault. If he had only followed the caller's instructions and stayed where he was.

"Michael, he's gone. Where the hell is he? Where are you? How did you know that he was gone?"

Cassie's voice was broken and filled with the same fear that he was feeling himself.

"Calm down, Cassie. I need to tell you something, and you have to listen carefully."

"Just tell me where my son is, Michael."

He sighed, wishing he had the right words to say. "I don't know, Cassie."

"What?" She wanted to come through the phone at him. He could hear her crying, and wanted so badly to be there with her, to hold her and comfort her.

"Cassie, pull yourself together, and write down what I'm about to tell you." He could hear her reaching into the night table drawer, then told him that she was ready.

A car was approaching him in the distance, and he vaguely noticed that it was missing one headlight. It was a fair distance away, but seemed to be traveling at a terrific speed. He gave Cassie a name at the station to contact immediately, and then blinked again as the other car suddenly put on its bright lights. He tried flashing his own at the other car, but it continued toward him, undaunted.

"Cassie, I think I may have an idea of where David is. Someone called me tonight, and told me that they had him. They didn't say who they were or what they wanted, but you need to contact my partner at the station and get his help. His name is Jordan Callaghan. Did you write

it down?"

"Yes, Michael. Dammit, tell me where my son is."

Michael swore as the car came closer, and had to adjust his visor to see better. He thought the car was coming into his lane, and so he moved farther to the right, onto the shoulder of the road. As the car turned as well, it occurred to Michael that it was there to run him off the road.

"Jesus!" He breathed.

Cassie cried into the phone. "Tell me, Michael. Who has our son?"

Michael was faced with a final dilemma. He had only seconds to say final words to his wife, his love. As their lives flashed before him with the bright light, he pictured Cassie's face in front of him. He reached out to touch her, just as he swerved off the road, only to drive over a steep ravine.

He felt as though he were flying. He grabbed the vision of Cassie's outstretched hands, smiled into her eyes, and they floated to the earth together. Before impact, he whispered to her.

"I love you, Cassie."

Cassie stared at the phone in her hands and screamed. It had gone dead. She cried out Michael's name, praying that he would answer her, but to no avail. She threw the phone at the wall, tearing at her pillow in anguish.

"Not both of them. Dear God, not both of them."

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But no one was listening. Cassie knew as she felt the cold hand of fear grip her heart that life as she knew it would end that night.

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