

## ART LESSON

He hadn't cheated, that was the important thing. He'd remained faithful. Hadn't strayed. Jan might not appreciate his loyalty, might not understand given the current circumstances, but he knew what was in his heart.

He had a few more serious problems to deal with at the moment, like getting untied, or needing to get to the bathroom before he wet the bed that he was strapped to, or finding out whether he'd live until tomorrow for Josh's birthday, but somehow, not cheating was important.

Oh, he'd looked alright. He'd looked hard. Even as she sat across the room at the computer, blue light playing off her perfect features, the duct tape flexing just enough that he could take her all in with his good eye, the one that wasn't as swollen and could still see, he looked.

Long blond hair. Amazing curves packed into a tight skirt and ribbed top. Taut muscles. Viciously slender legs. An edge of a tattoo at the shoulder - a little bit of bad girl to entice. A lot of bad girl, it seemed, given his predicament. And though

he couldn't see them right now, deep dark eyes. Pleading eyes that had brought him up here.

But not to cheat. No. He'd come to help.

And look where it had gotten him. Good Samaritan knocked over the head with something hard, blood trickling down into one eye, and hamstrung to a four-poster in the penthouse suite, shirtless.

He thought he'd been inconspicuous when she'd first sashayed into The Church. It was easier to get his work done in The Churchill Room, the quiet bar of the local downtown hotel, than at home. His head hadn't snapped around or anything, but his eyes sure had, as well as those of everyone else that hadn't had so much to drink that they were dozing in their corner. The men all peered over their Miller Lites or their medium-well burgers, or their USA Today, and the women glared out of envy.

Just watching her walk had left him breathless. He'd fantasized plenty, but none of the scenarios that he'd played across his mental movie screen had involved head injury, or the use of restraining devices.

Now, in the half light, she looked up from the monitor, batting her long lashes.

"Well, Steve, It looks like someone's awake. Did we have a nice nap?"

"Doe. Dot thoe nide," he tried. Guess his eye wasn't all that was swollen. He traced a fat lip with his tongue, and winced when he found a crack where it had split open.

More effort this time. More care. "No, not so nice."

She got up, moved over to him, sat on the edge of the bed. It made him tremble to have her so close. She invaded personal space. It wasn't unpleasant, but it was uncomfortable.

She'd done the same thing when she'd shocked him half an hour after coming into The Church, when in between his surreptitious glances, and a distracted review of the region's operating metrics, he found her leaning over his table.

"Excuse me, but you have the same one as I do."

He'd hesitated a minute, trying not to stare at the front of her shirt (or top, Jan would have corrected him), the response coagulating slowly in his brain as if in one of those dreams where everything happens at half speed. She hadn't seemed to notice. Just smiled.

"Computer, I mean. Same model."

"Oh."

"Would it be OK if I borrowed it for a few minutes? I've got this report due in the morning and I need to transfer some files."

He examined her more closely. Her body looked young, firm. No wrinkles. But something in her eyes showed some age, or experience at least.

"Uh, I guess so." Articulate as hell, Steve.

"Well, the only thing is, it's upstairs. In my room."

Not even a flash of a warning light had gone on. Or maybe it had, but like a lighthouse blanketed in the fog of her mesmerizing eyes, he hadn't seen it.

"See, I've got it plugged in. I'm afraid if I unplug it, I'll lose the report, and I just need to get it into another machine to print it..."

Steve hadn't even tried to figure out what help she'd needed, just felt his damsel-in-distress mechanism kick in, and followed her toward the elevator. Ignored the wink he got from the bellman, a young kid with a face pitted by acne, followed her into the cab when the door slid open, and watched her insert her special card for the top floor.

The suite was opulent, with its own hallway, and full of heavy Spanish oak and wrought iron. He'd let out a low whistle, wondering what it must have cost, and how anyone could afford to stay in a place like this, and if you could afford it, why you wouldn't have your own staff of computer geeks on call at a moment's notice instead of asking some stranger in a bar.

Five minutes later, bent over the computer connecting a cable, "Whack!" a sudden sharp pain in his temple, and then darkness.

Now, starting to come around, aching head, no shirt, bound hands, glow of a computer screen.

"Mine's not really broken you know. I had to say something to get you up here. But I'm glad you brought yours. Computer, that is. It will be useful."

Strode back to the screen.

Wondering at that, he managed to pull his gaze away long enough to take in his surroundings. Besides the computer desk and chair, there was a heavy armoire that must have taken a half dozen burly men to move in. Antique style wallpaper. Gold-brocade curtains, closed. A bathroom off to one side, and another door, also closed, with a hint of light filtering in from what must have been the adjoining living area that he'd seen earlier.

There, on the floor, a very solid lamp, rolled on its side, and what was that, yes, a dark stain on its base. That had to be the culprit behind his throbbing head and eye.

"Steve. Look over here, Bud. We need to talk."

He craned his head, and squinted at her again. Same eyes, now glowing with some kind of excitement or anticipation. Her hair tumbled over skin that he could tell was tan, even in this thin secondary light. The exposed corner of tattoo rippled a little as she shifted in her seat.

"I need to know a little more about you, Steve. I know a lot already. It's incredible what you can do with a search engine and access to a hard drive."

He knew that. But there was nothing secret on his machine, or in his history. Painful maybe. But not secret. Not unless she worked for his competition selling ball bearings and wanted to know how far he was behind his sales target for the month.

"I know, for example, that you work for Standard United as a VP of Sales. You've got a wife, Janet, of 22 years, stay-at-home mom, former PTO president, and fundraiser for the Booster Club. Also goes by Jan, Carla, or JC."

True. Jan never knew when to stop volunteering, and she had all kinds of nicknames.

"You've moved six times in the last ten years. Started in Cincinnati. Then Atlanta, Dallas, right here in Canterbury, Scranton, Syracuse and back to Canterbury. Had to be tough on a family, Steve." Arched an eyebrow.

Tough? She had no idea.

"And based on your e-mails, looks like you've got a son, Josh, 16. Actually, 17 effective today."

Today? Was it Wednesday already? That would mean he'd been out all night.

"What time is it?"

In response she opened the door. Light streamed in. Lots of it. He squeezed his one working eye shut. Let it open slowly, adjusting. He began to discern furniture in the next room, hazy, but there. Over her shoulder, he could see more cabinetry, a huge television, framed pictures. A coffee table, something bright and shiny on it. The corner of a silver tray with something laid out on it. Silverware maybe?



"Afternoon, Steve. You were out a long time. It's OK though. Gave me lots of time to work, to add to what I'd found out about you already."

"Found out about me already?"

"Steve - I am nothing if not a meticulous researcher. Let me tell you what else I know."

He didn't like that she had discovered personal details about his family, but still, they were small, innocuous. At least she hadn't gotten deep.

"Avid Bengals fan (nice photo on your home page by the way). Crossword puzzle aficionado. Competitive runner. Say...these race times are pretty good Steve. That's kind of interesting."

He continued to keep quiet. She still hadn't dug up anything big. He tried to steer her in another direction.

"What do you want with me? I don't carry much money. I'm on an expense account. Nobody's likely to pay much of a ransom for a mid-level sales guy."

"Relax Steve. At least for now. Your money's safe. I've got different plans for you and yours."

You and yours? He didn't like that last part.

"But first, like I said, I need to know some more about you. Something deeper. Like...what is it that you're most afraid of, Steve?"

He winced. It had been a long time, but it was still there.

"Ooooh," she purred. "I thought so. Thought it might still be important."

She held up a printout copy of a newspaper article.

"Here we go, Steve. Times Union. Twelve years ago. Right here in Canterbury. I guess there's a family member that doesn't show up in any of your pictures."

She started to read.

"CHILD, 9, DIES TRAGICALLY IN DIVING ACCIDENT"

Her mock serious reporter tone vanished for a minute.

"Why do they always put that in Steve? Is the death of anyone reported on the front page of a newspaper ever not tragic? CHILD. 9, DIES TRAGICALLY OF OLD AGE." I don't think so."

He seethed, but didn't answer.

"Consolidated Press Reports. Sunday. - 'Charles (Charlie) Whitehouse was one fantastic little boy,' says neighbor Joan DeFontaine. 'I can't believe that he's gone. He was so full of energy and loved life.' A life that was cut short yesterday at the Maple Avenue Bridge on a sunny July afternoon.

At its peak, the bridge towers forty-three feet over the muddy roiling waters of the Nankaug River. This morning it sports a new protective barrier on either end, and Mayor Sorenson has last evening said that dredging will begin first thing tomorrow morning to remove dangerous underwater debris.

But on Saturday afternoon, the sun was high in the sky, and Charlie was high atop the bridge, freckled face gleaming as he surveyed the world around him.

'Charlie just wasn't afraid of anything,' says DeFontaine's son Pete, a neighborhood friend who was at the scene at the time of the accident. 'I don't know why he got it in his head to jump from up there, but once he did, if you knew Charlie there was no stopping him.'

Young DeFontaine is as surprised as anyone at Charlie's action.

'We were playing Whiffleball in that field, you know, at Water's Edge,' he continues, referring to Water's Edge Park, adjacent to the bridge and the river.

'It was Charlie's turn up at bat, and we looked around and he wasn't there. We thought he'd run into the woods, to, um, you know, whatever. Then we looked up, and there he was climbing the bridge. He got to the top, looked around for a while, and did like a Tarzan yell, and jumped!'

It's clear that this part of the story is difficult for DeFontaine to relate, but he plugs on bravely.

'He comes flying down with this big grin on his face, splashes into the water, and then nothing - he didn't come up.'

'I thought for a second that his Dad was going to save him, but I guess that didn't happen.'

For ironically, Charlie's father, Stephen Whitehouse, of North Hill Road, was driving by the park on his way home from the hardware store just as Charlie was ascending to the apex of the structure.

'I barely missed hitting him. He just slammed on the brakes right in the middle of the bridge and got out, with the car still running,' says Jon (T-Top) Darven, who was following behind Whitehouse.

'I saw him yelling and scrambling up the bridge, but must be his boy didn't hear him. Or ignored him.'

'Then, when the kid jumped, he looked to go after him. I swore he was going to. But he didn't at first. He stopped for a few seconds, and then finally dove in. By then it was too late. I can't help but wonder if he'd jumped a few seconds sooner if he could have got to him.'

Indeed, five or ten seconds may have made the difference. According to the police divers who later found the body snared in undergrowth, Charlie may have struck a submerged log and drifted unconscious into the tangle. If his father had reached him before that, he may have avoided getting caught.

'Mr. Whitehouse was under there, for like, forever.' Says Pete. 'I thought they were both dead, or maybe floated down the river, but he came up after a while, and no Charlie.'

Darven echoes the story.

'He tried and tried. Must have gone under and popped up thirty, forty times. But he couldn't find him. If he'd just jumped right away...'

Why the delay? Whitehouse was not available directly for comment. 'This is a private time for us,' wife Janet says. Please let us mourn in peace.'

An unidentified member of the police rescue team who is familiar with the matter does explain Whitehouse's slow reaction, saying that his hesitation was due to something incredibly simple, and incredibly sad.

'He told us his shoelace got caught on one of the bridge rivets. He tried to get loose, but he couldn't at first. Man, that had to be tough.'

The team member backs Whitehouse.

'Personally, I believe him. I mean, who wouldn't save their own kid if they had the chance?'

Stymied by a shoelace. That's something that Stephen Whitehouse will have to live with for the rest of his life.

And so will everyone else that knew Charlie.

'I just miss my brother,' cries Joshua, Charlie's younger sibling, the same freckles dotting his teary face. 'He was really cool.'

A private service will be held for the family tomorrow."

She approached the bed again. He looked down, anywhere except at her face. Stared at the bed covers, the computer, the side table. Felt and smelled her breath, warm, with a hint of hazelnut. He studied the bit of the tattoo poking out from under her sleeve. A skull and crossbones, ringed in flames. The word 'MIKE' underneath, and a date.

"This is really heartbreaking, Steve. I can't imagine what it must have been like."

Steve choked back a lump in his throat that matched the one on his head, and tried not to react to the needling in her voice.

"Are you about to cry, Steve? I wouldn't blame you."

Finally, he looked up at her. Her face shifted. Got serious.



"Steve. Tell the truth. Why didn't you jump in the river right away? What is it you're most afraid of? Is it heights, or water? You can tell me."

"Why you evil..."

"Steve. That kind of attitude doesn't suit you. What really happened? What's your biggest fear?"

"My shoelace, "he managed in low tones, "got stuck on a rivet. Just like the man said."

"Alright, Steve-O. Have it your way. But I personally believe it was height. After all, you dove in 'thirty or forty times' according to the paper."

Steve's head hung, remembering. He had tried to look everywhere in the mud and sticks, but he must have missed the spot, the one spot, where Charlie had drifted.

I mean, it's all kind of hard to believe. A shoelace. Tell you what. I met a man once. Something happened to him that's a little like what happened to you. Worked at a nursing home. It burned one night. He's standing outside. Could have gone in and

rescued people. Why didn't he? Said he thought the firefighters were in there already, but they weren't. If he'd gone in,..."

This was, indeed, achingly similar. "What happened?" he heard himself asking, regretting it almost immediately.

"His own mother was one of the patients. He worked there so that she could stay for half-price. She died in the fire. But that's not all."

She laughed, and he knew not only that there was more, but that it would be unpleasant.

"Five years later, he died in a fire himself. Got trapped in a burning building, couldn't get up the guts to escape."

Her eyes were positively dancing now, with a malevolent twinkle.

"So you see, Steve, it's important to know what your greatest fear is. His mother died because he was afraid of fire. He died himself because he was afraid of fire. If he'd faced his fears, maybe one or both of them would still be alive."

She winked. Just a couple of friends talking gossip.

"Now, you sure you don't want to come clean and admit yours Steve? Which is it? Heights, or water?"

Steve glowered. Looked back down. Didn't answer. Just asked again what she wanted.

She shrugged. "Maybe some day Steve. Some day I'll meet a man who will admit his fears. Maybe even someone who will overcome them."

She appraised him one more time. "Now, back to the present. You're not ready yet. Let's get you prepped."

She turned, scooped up something shiny from the computer table, and approached the bed again. He trembled a little. Scissors.

"Not to worry Steve. Not yet. I'm not going to cut you with them. Not unless you misbehave that is."

She continued.

"Now here's how it's going to work. I'm going to cut one arm loose. When I do, you're going to roll over on your stomach, and I'm going to wash your back."

"Umm...couldn't I just shower in the bathroom or something? I'm not going to go anywhere. Plus, I've really got to, uh, go."

"Nice try, Steve, but no. I'm strong, but I don't want to take any chances. Here's what I'll do though. When I cut your hand free, you can use this."

She tossed an empty Gatorade bottle onto the bed. "You do anything though, make a sound I shouldn't hear, and these scissors cut off everything important to you. Got it?"

He nodded.

"Now, I'd better hear that bottle filling."

She snipped the tape on one hand in three quick cuts (those scissors must have been sharp), said "You've got twenty seconds," and turned around to give him privacy.

He contemplated breaking the bottle for a moment, but found it was plastic. The room echoed with the sounds of Steve nearly filling the container. As he did, he looked around the room again. Yes, he thought so. He had spotted it, when he was surveying his surroundings before. Small and silver, on the nightstand.

"Sounds like you're done, Steve. Hurry and get decent now."

He finished, grabbed at the nightstand, rolled back, and zipped, just as she turned around to find him, as requested, face down. Though he couldn't see it, a slight smile creased her lips.

Steve felt her re-tape him to the bed, and heard her walk to the bathroom, run the tap, and return. She scrubbed his back.

"What the hell?" he wondered.

She left again, footsteps trailing off into the living room. Metal clinked on metal. She returned, and he felt her straddle him. A bottle opened, he smelled alcohol, and a cool rag wiped his back again where she had washed.

A small moan of anticipation escaped her.

"OK, Steve. Get ready. This might hurt a bit."

He felt a sharp stab of pain over his right shoulder blade and twitched. Then another.

"Why are you torturing me?" he bleated into the pillowcase.

"I'm not, Steve. I'm improving you," and that was all that she'd say for a while.

For most of an hour, she inflicted on him the same pain. He felt it move all across his upper back, accompanied by the sound of a small motor. Periodically, she'd stop to wipe up some blood. It hurt, but it was tolerable. Maybe not torture after all. Certainly not, compared to wondering what she was going to do with him eventually.

He gritted his teeth the whole time, and clenched his fists, especially the right one, which was wrapped around the salvation that he'd grabbed from the nightstand when she'd freed him for a moment and turned her back. He clung to a thread of hope that he might use it.

Finally, she stopped. The sharpness of the pain subsided, followed by a dull throb.

"There," she said. Now we'll match." He heard the metal clinking again, and her footsteps retreating once more. He breathed, slowly. Was she done, or was this only the first step in an escalating parade of torment? Maybe she'd started small, enjoying herself on the close-up work astride his back, and eventually ramping up the pain until it would be unbearable. Who knew what new instruments she'd gone to fetch from the other room?

As if on cue, he heard the start of the small motor again, though this time she didn't come back into the bedroom. It droned for a while, maybe another hour, and he debated trying to start his escape. In the end, he decided against it. She had to stop sometime. Had to sleep. Then he'd work on it. He just closed his hand tighter.

Eventually, the motor stopped. He heard the sounds of packing up, of paper ripping, and her approaching footsteps again.

He twisted his head around and saw her standing in the door. He noticed a fresh white bandage on her left bicep.

"I've got to go now Steve. Be a good boy," and with that she spun away. Once more he listened to her steps, and the door to the foyer snapped closed. Distantly, a bell chime sounded for the elevator, and then it was almost silent - only the low thrum of the room's air conditioner continued.

He waited, and decided to count to 1000, giving her time to come back. He got to 300, decided he couldn't wait any longer, and slowly uncurled his fist. A few drops of blood dripped onto the pillows. He almost dropped the little nail clippers in the process, but managed to hold on.

He turned them in his hand, and applied the sharp edge to the duct tape. After an agonizingly long time worrying through the edge of his bindings, and several slips, he heard a small rip. In his excitement, he almost dropped the clippers again. They opened up, exposing the nail file section. He began to saw, and after a while was rewarded with another ripping sound. He twisted, but the tape wouldn't give. Exhausted, and disappointed, he slumped. He gathered his breath, trying again, working it back and forth, back and forth, and with a sudden tear, he managed to free one hand. After that, the second one



was easy. He got up, sweating, shook his cramped right hand, and limped around on his legs to get the sleep out.

He stepped into the washroom, and stood staring at himself in the mirror. He looked a wreck. Bloody mat of hair. Swollen eye and lip. Bruise on one cheek.

He tried turning around to see what she'd done to his back, but couldn't make it out. Just saw a patch of blood.

Deciding he'd better get out of there before his luck changed, he walked back into the bedroom, and started toward the door. He hesitated when he saw the computer. Her computer, with a screensaver of the Maple Avenue Bridge on it.

He decided that he had to look. Typed a little, and found he needed a password. He realized what a shot in the dark that would be, with someone whose name he didn't even know.

What had he observed about her? Nothing, practically. She knew his name, his family history, his hobbies. He knew that she looked good, had a supply of duct tape, and...what?

Then he remembered the tattoo he'd seen. Husband's name?  
Boyfriend? Brother? Son?

He typed M-I-K-E.

No luck.

M-I-C-H-A-E-L.

Nothing.

M-I-K-E-Y.

Still no dice.

He typed the date he remembered under the tattoo, both backwards  
and forwards. Still nothing. He was going to have to go soon.

He didn't want to be caught here. Had to get out.

Thought. A password is something that you think about every day.  
Something you obsess over.

He tried the name of the hotel. No.

He'd decided to give up and leave, but just as he was walking out, thought of one last try. Couldn't be. That would be too scary. But he'd heard it twenty times today.

Tried S-T-E-V-E.

He couldn't imagine why, but he was in.

He was excited now. Might finally have found something on her. A crack in the armor.

Started with her e-mail. Scanned the new messages.

The first was from the hotel chain. "Dear Miss Doe..." A survey.

The second one though was interesting. From the Columbus Dispatch on-line librarian. Subject line: "TRAGIC FIRE KILLS EIGHT" Unusual the story should use the word that she'd made fun of earlier.

Curious, he opened it.

"National Press Dispatch. - Sunday. Fire swept through a three story apartment complex here in downtown Columbus

Saturday night, killing an elderly couple, a family of five, and a bystander, who apparently ran into the burning building in a daring rescue attempt. The cause of the fire is still under investigation.

Sadly, Mr. and Mrs. Horace Briggs, 74 and 72, were pronounced dead at the scene, as were the Cruz family, Peter, 29, Teresa, 27, and three unnamed younger children. The circumstances surrounding Michael Rasmusen, the bystander, were particularly ironic however.

Three years ago, Rasmusen's mother and several others died in a blaze at a nursing home. Not knowing that she was still inside, Rasmusen stood watching the fire consume the building.

Could it have been his sense of loss and guilt that drove him into the flames last night? We'll never know, but at least he made a valiant attempt."

Michael Rasmusen? MIKE, a name he'd seen surrounded by flames on bronze skin?

He looked at the date on the story. One day after the one on her tattoo! She'd memorialized the day that Mike had died.

So there was some connection. He had to have been close. So close that his death had pushed her over the edge, and into torturing strange men? Who was this person?

He looked down at one more e-mail, and his heart shuddered.

"Sent today. 9:02AM. From BigJosh17."

"Dear Diane: I think it is great that you and the other people at the office want to surprise my Dad with a picnic on my birthday. I will meet you at 3:00 as planned."

Josh? His Josh? How? What could she possibly want with him? To hit him over the head with a Spanish-style lamp, and to stab him in the back for an hour with who-knows what?

They were going to meet? He had to find out where. He scrolled through the other e-mails. There were very few. A confirmation for a car rental, under 'Diane Doe.' Another survey. A coupon.

He toggled to 'Sent Messages.' Only one. "Josh. 3:00. Hotel lobby. See you there. Diane."

He looked at the clock in the lower right corner of the computer screen. 3:15. He raced out of the hotel room door, ran to the elevator and punched the button. Waited two seconds, got impatient, and tried the stairwell door. Couldn't get it open at first. Heard the elevator arrive and ran back. Jabbed at the ground floor button, and waited for what seemed like forever for the door to close.

A young couple looked to get in at the fifth floor, but changed their mind when they saw him. He caught another glimpse of himself. No wonder. Disheveled, bruised, shirtless, barefoot, blood dripping down his head and back, and now, a frantic look in his eyes.

Finally, "Ding!" and he burst into the lobby. Looked around. A man in a business suit halted as he came through the door. The desk clerk looked up, shook his head in disgust, and ducked into the backroom.

He saw the bellman, the acne-faced kid who'd winked at him the night before as he got into the elevator. Scrambled toward him

as the desk manager emerged from the back with a burly security guard.

"Have you seen a woman and a boy?"

The bellman stared.

"Lots of women and boys staying here sir," he managed to gulp.

"The boy's sixteen, no, seventeen. The woman's older, blond, tan, very pretty."

The guard was closing the distance quickly. The bellman's face lit up.

"Oh! Not pretty. Gorgeous! The one you went up to the penthouse with last night."

The guard was almost there. The desk manager began "Sir, I'm afraid..."

Steve persisted with the bellman, ignoring the desk clerk.

"Where? Where are they? Where did they go?"

"Sir. I'm sorry," and the guard grabbed at his wrist.

"Out the front door sir. She had a big limo. A stretch."

Steve's head sagged. Could be anywhere.

"But I did hear her say something about the park. Couple of them in town, but..."

Before he could finish, Steve had wrenched free of the guard, leaving him grappling air, and fled through the front door.

"Water's Edge Park," he yelled. "Maple Avenue Bridge. Send the police."

Couple of parks indeed. There was only one that she could have taken him to.

Steve zigged across the street, dodging a Toyota pick-up and a couple of bike riders. He sped past the IGA, through a backyard which housed a yelping poodle, down an embankment, and picked up the jogging trail that ran along the river.



Knew where he was now. Just over two miles. Could cover that in twelve or thirteen minutes. Wearing shoes.

He got there in less. Saw the limo standing by the old sycamore at the edge of the park. Ran to it. Flung open the back door. Empty.

Looked around. Nothing. Ran to the other side of the limo, and spied Josh's new Nikes and a pair of Champion athletic socks in the dust.

Looked up, up at the bridge, and saw long blond hair, a tan body, a body that the night before had been the most beautiful that he'd ever seen. Next to her, he spotted Josh's tousled head, his hands behind him, wrapped in duct tape.

He knew what she wanted now, and knew that he had no choice but to play it out. He began to climb.

She waited. Patiently. Smiling. Even from here, he could see her eyes dancing.

A rivet pulled at the torn skin on his right hand where the nail file had cut him, and he almost pulled back in pain, but he had bigger things on his mind. Made his way up the trellis.

It was eerie how the memories came flooding back, which was what she wanted of course. To see him suffer through it again.

He pictured Charlie, a prince standing atop the bridge, surveying land and sky, screaming like Tarzan, and ..., and jumping. Not coming up.

His shoelace getting snagged. His own jump. The search for the body, over and over in the murky water. Finally, a strong, firm hand pulling him out, telling him it was over.

Well, this one wasn't over, and he wasn't about to lose his only other son. He climbed.

He got to within what on the ground would have been two long strides, and she stopped him. Softly, but surely.

"Steve. Good to see you again. I thought that you'd never get here. Found the nail clippers, I guess. By the way you're dripping with sweat, it looks like your race times would still

hold up too. I wondered if I might have to come get you, but you did well Steve. You did well."

So, she'd left a way out for him. Made him work. Was still making him work.

"Stop it. What do you want?"

"We've already been through this, Steve. I want to find someone who will tell the truth." She grinned.

"What's your biggest fear, Steve? Heights, or water?"

"I told you once. It's not either of those."

She tsked at him.

"Steve. I thought you would have figured it out by now. There's only one way to get out of this. You have to tell the truth. Mike didn't. Mike burned."

Steve thought. Diane, or whatever her name was, waited. He debated lunging at her. Looked at Josh's wondering face and decided against it. Studied her. Calculated.

"OK. The truth. But first, who was Mike?"

"Fair enough. Then the truth? Deal?"

He nodded.

"Mike. Mike was a coward. A coward I found in the paper and learned about like I did with you. Had a chance to save his mother. Didn't. Had a chance to save an elderly couple and a family of five when I left him in their burning apartment building. Didn't. Then, in the end, he's treated as a hero. But he wasn't. Just a scared, shivering boy in man's clothes."

"A coward like so many of us. We're all afraid of something, Steve, right?"

She didn't wait for his agreement.

"Afraid of looking for a new job when the one we're in stinks. Afraid of staying in one place long enough for somebody to figure out your story."

"I already told you one story about being afraid, Steve. Let me tell you another one. One that means a lot to me."

It's about a little girl, only five years old. Nice family. Really sweet. Nobody fights. Only one problem in this family. One problem. That's Uncle Jack."

"Cause you know what Uncle Jack does, Steve? He abuses this innocent little five year old girl. Abuses her just about every time he sees her until she starts to grow up."

"And that's not the worst part. There are some nasty folks out there, Steve. On every block, in just about every house, there's some kind of a secret. This one was just a little darker and nastier than most. But it wasn't the worst part."

"The worst part was that this little girl's father, Uncle Jack's brother, found out what he was doing. He *knew*, Steve. He knew, but he didn't have enough guts to step in, or even just to call the cops."

"You see, Steve, he was afraid. So afraid that he let it go on for years. So afraid that when she got a little older, and finally confronted him about it, that he wouldn't admit it. So

afraid that even when she ended his whimpering lies forever, he still would not take responsibility."

"We're all afraid, Steve. But what we're most afraid of is admitting that we're afraid - of seeing ourselves in our own light as we really are."

She stood tall and righteous, glowing in the sun.

"So, what is it, Steve. Truth now. Keep your promise. Heights, or water?"

"It's not heights. It's not water."

She screamed in frustration. Her eyes turned to black. She motioned to push Josh.

"Wait. Wait. I'll tell you."

She hesitated.

"I said I'd tell the truth, but it's not either one of those."

She paused. He heard sirens approaching in the distance.

"My biggest fear is...losing another son."

Her face contorted, wondering, working, absorbing, and finally formed a smile.

For a moment, life was still. Nothing happened. Just a freeze-frame. Then Steve spoke.

"That's my biggest fear...losing a child."

He blinked away a tear.

"And I'm not going to lose Josh."

He jumped at her, grabbing, and came away with a handful of gauze. She teetered on the edge long enough for him to make out the fresh tattoo. Waves. STEVE, in block letters. Today's date.

Then, she fell. Fell with Josh. Steve reached, and fell with them, all three tumbling through the fading afternoon light.

They hit the water, and went under. He lost his bearings for a moment, wondering which way was up. Stilled himself, floated for

a minute, got himself pointed upward, and kicked. He broke the surface only long enough for a quick breath, and to see Josh, hands tied, but dolphin-kicking toward the shore, when he heard a splash behind him.

"Guess it wasn't heights, Steve. Now let's see about water."

As he turned, she grabbed him in an iron hug, and dragged him toward the bottom. He began to thrash, but she was incredibly strong. He struggled to free himself, but the more he squirmed, the tighter she held, and he realized that his resistance was only wearing him out. It dawned on him that if he kept fighting, that she would get what she wanted.

He would die, here, where Charlie had, in the same water, under the same bridge. She'd have another newspaper clipping, a big, fat juicy story, with a headline in it that used the word "TRAGIC" for sure.

He had nearly resigned himself to his fate when a terrible thought popped into his mind. She might not just stop with him. He pictured her dropping his lifeless body and pushing up for air. Grinning as she shook the water from her hair and swam



toward Josh on the shore, his hands still tied. Laughing as she finished him and made the story complete.

He had to find a way out.

Hard as it was, he calmed himself again, like a light turned on in a dark room, thought of something that might work.

He made himself completely quiet, and conserved all of his energy. His chest was screaming at him for air, but he pushed it out of his mind. This would only work if she believed it.

He held his composure for maybe fifteen or twenty seconds, and then twitched. When he did, she squeezed. Her grip was incredible. But her will had to be even stronger, to stay down here for this long. What could drive someone so completely?

He did it again - twenty seconds, twitch, squeeze. And a third time - count, twitch squeeze, and he noticed that her grip was weakening. Finally, he stopped moving completely, counted longer this time,...28,...29 waited, waited, ...59, ...60 felt the pain searing in his lungs, waited,...73,...74 and at last she let go altogether. He waited a few more seconds to be sure he was free, and finally kicked toward the surface again.

It seemed forever that he climbed. He was sure that at any second she would grab him, and that if she did, he could not survive. He had to breathe.

At last he burst into the air, gasped once, twice, and again, and looked toward the shore. Josh was there, but where was she? He spun around, expecting to see her grinning at him, but nothing. Turned back, and stroked toward shore.

As he did, things came into focus. He heard the sirens again, and now saw flashing red, blue and yellow lights spinning behind his son. Saw an officer untie the duct tape from Josh's hands as he reached shore.

He stumbled to Josh, and hugged him. Hugged him hard.

"Dad. You were down a long time."

"I was. Almost too long."

"And you knew I'd make it to shore."

"Why not? You've done it at swim practice a couple of hundred times."

Josh blinked back tears.

"Dad. You told the truth. When she asked what you were afraid of."

He nodded.

"When we lost Charlie, I swore I'd never be in that situation again. Helpless. And that you wouldn't either."

"That's why you took diving lessons, and swim rescue, and swim team, ever since you were little."

"That's why I got into shape and started running."

"And that's why I learned to hold my breath for four minutes underwater. In case I ever had to. Today, I did."

They hugged again.

"Is she gone, Dad?"

"I think so, son."

"Did you kill her?"

He thought.

"No. I think she killed herself. The river is narrow there, but deep. She had to win. She wanted it so badly that she held me down there too long. By the time she thought she'd killed me, it was too late, and she must not have had enough left in her to make it all the way back up."

The cop standing behind them heard his radio crackle. Answered.

"Roger that. Just a minute...let me check."

Turned to Steve.

"Blond woman? Tan?"

Steve nodded. "Yeah. And two tattoos on her upper right arm. The name 'Mike' ringed in flames. And 'STEVE,' under waves, like this."

He turned to show the cop his back.

The officer talked some more into his radio. Questioned the caller a couple of times. Whistled.

"That's her alright. She's dead."

Josh and Steve peered at him.

"Got those tattoos on her arm."

They waited.

"Those, and more. Sergeant said her shirt rode up when she came out of the water. She's got about fifty of those things on her back, every one with a different name."

Steve and Josh looked at each other.

"But the biggest one, right in the middle of her back, is different. Just says 'DAD,' with a picture of a knife underneath."

Steve blinked.

"She's been working on those tattoos for a long time, mister."

"Yeah," said Steve. "For a long time."

"Ever since she was just a kid, probably."