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Bernadette Hayes shucked her swimsuit, surrendering herself to the shivery embrace of dark water. The tall, dark-maned woman swam toward the center of the small lake, scanning the circlet of pineclad hills, flat black against the predawn sky. Venus was a faint twinkle.

Safe at last, thank God!

It was October already, and she and the boy had been on the run since April, a six-month helter-skelter through nine or ten countries, a score of hideouts, across thousands of miles. Enough was enough. Her physical and emotional reserves, not to mention her finances, were exhausted. *Andy desperately needed to put down roots, go to school, become a little boy again.*

Three days ago, courtesy of Trish DeVore, an old schoolfriend, Bernadette had been offered a tiny guest cabin tucked behind a long-shuttered Tudor mansion overlooking sleepy Shield Lake. Only a dozen or so vacation homes dotted the shore of this private enclave high in the San Bernardino Mountains ninety miles east of downtown Los Angeles. There was no public beach, no burger shack, no souvenir stand, no unauthorized access past the gate guard. The nearest store and gas station were three miles away at Chambers Lake, where Bernadette had stocked up on supplies.

The predawn skinny-dip was a guilty indulgence—this was the second morning in a row Bernie had dared slip out of the cabin and down to the tiny beach, leaving eight-year-old Andy still curled in his Buzz Lightyear sleeping bag. But she'd be back at her post in ten minutes max. No more bogeymen were going to invade the dreams of *her* little prince. Let him awaken at his leisure, to the smell of pines out the window and bacon sizzling in the skillet. For the first time in months Bernie felt they'd found a place where no one could find *them*.

At the Shield Lake security gate, two guards were enjoying their morning overlap. Mannie Sanchez was about to go off duty and head down the mountain. Pudge Whitlock, just clocking in, had brought doughnuts and a newspaper from his bachelor cabin at Chambers Lake. He snorted:

“My grandma could outbox both those stiff. Throw a goddamned punch, why don'tcha?”

There had been a slow-as-molasses heavyweight fight the night before, and both men were watching the uneventful Sports Center “highlights” on the corner TV. While doing so, they were also ignoring several closed-circuit monitors with static shots from cameras mounted outside the gatehouse. But nothing much ever happened up here anyway, at least not on weekday mornings, with summer long gone and kids back in school.

So neither man caught the flicker of movement across the second surveillance screen, the one showing the lake-loop road around the corner from their post. When, a moment later, Pudge did glance over, it was too late.

Just beyond the barrier arm and the purview of the video cameras, a motorcycle was now coasting down through the dark trees toward the intermittent sheen of gray water. There were two men astraddle, both keyed up and bone-tired. The one up front wore a half-shell helmet and leather cycle vest that exposed shoulders nearly as wide as the handlebars. He had a silenced Glock 30 tucked into his vest, a folding Ka-Bar combat knife in his boot, a backup gun in his saddlebags. But, at a glance, the most menacing thing about him, discernible even in this scant

light, was the sutured grin on his burn-scarred face. The second man, by comparison, seemed teddy-bearish—small and slope-shouldered, round-faced and fuzzy-haired. He carried only a knife.

The two had made a wide detour around the gatehouse, sweating and cursing as they horsed the big Harley Low Rider through the flanking forest. They had pushed hard through the night to get here before dawn, after killing the DeVore woman in her Carmel cliff-top house. The bitch had tried to hold out on them, but just before the end, with her voicebox no longer usable, she'd scrawled directions to the cabin where the woman and the boy were hiding out.

Halfway back to the tiny beach, Bernadette heard tires popping across gravel. Blinking water out of her eyes, she saw two men pushing a motorcycle silently along the cove road. Then cycle and men disappeared behind roadside pines—and didn't come out.

It was like a knife through her heart.

The enemy was here, stalking her. She had to think and act fast—now or never. Or was it already too late? Was Andy already dead? But Bernadette's intuition told her that her precious one was still safe in dreams. The men must have glimpsed her in the water, or the straw bag she'd left on the beach.

She launched herself forward, breast-stroking to avoid churning the glassy water. It was a race for life, but not hers, not anymore. It never occurred to Bernadette she might swim away, back across the lake, hide somewhere. She swam directly into the trap. Moments later, touching bottom, she surged out of the shallows and started sprinting toward her beachbag.

One man was out from behind the pines and running, on a straight collision course. Bernie could hear boots thudding on the sand, gasping breaths, louder and nearer. Her bag was a few strides ahead.

She dove for it, expecting a bullet to explode her brain.

Her fingers clawed at the straw handle, spilling the contents—lipstick, keys, gun, *cell phone!* She snatched it up as a boot crashed down on her right forearm, snapping the bone in a shockwave of pain.

She let go the phone.

Her attacker's full weight, knees first, landed astride her spine, stunning her, voiding her lungs. Her head was yanked back by a fist knotted in her hair. Fingers vise-gripped her throat.

"Pizda rvannaya!" The snarled Russian oath—"Stupid bitch"—confirmed all her fears, sealed her doom.

But Bernie's left hand could still move. Her fingers closed around the cell phone as her face was ground into the sand. She couldn't breathe or see, but her fingers knew the keypad. She sent the staccato chirps winging off with her final message.

Goodbye and godspeed, my darling Andrushka!