

*Part One*

*Abduction Central*

Day One—Tuesday, August 17, 2010

Penelope sat in her room suffering through another *time out*. She was bored after a half hour of reading books, including her favorite, *The Magic Tree House Collection*. Leaning against the headboard with her bare feet splayed out in front of her, she stared across the room at Bear and Tipitu. The latter, a battered cloth rabbit, winked at her with its one remaining button eye. Sitting side by side on a comfy pink and white striped chair in the corner, these normally benign creatures appeared to stare back at her in an accusatory fashion.

She looked away from them and focused on the bright red and yellow plastic playhouse, which she no longer used because she was too big to fit inside. She was not fond of the jarring colors and wished she could have a larger pink and purple fairy castle model. She saw this very playhouse at a store in the mall, but so far had not been able to convince her parents that she needed a new one.

Finally, she sighed and let herself think about her earlier behavior because that is what her parents said she must do before she would be allowed to go downstairs. The bedroom door was ajar and faint sounds of food preparation reached her from below. She knew her parents were right. She had been disrespectful when she shouted at Papa. Sometimes she yelled without knowing she was going to because she had so many pressing thoughts, but couldn't always find the right words to get her point across. This made her feel stupid and that made her angry. Her parents and teachers said she was a smart child, but Penelope wasn't convinced.

She was already sorry and feeling guilty. As she thought about the words she needed for the apology she must deliver, she heard the front door open and then a voice. "What is this?" it sounded like, but she wasn't sure. Then there was a noise that didn't sound right at all. It was the sort of sound that meant something had fallen or broken. At least she could not be blamed for whatever was happening down there. Then the front door slammed shut in a way that would make her parents angry.

The silence that followed the odd sounds seemed even less normal. She was not supposed to leave her room, but the more she listened and didn't hear anything, the more convinced she became that something had to be wrong. After she thought for a minute about what would be the right thing to do, she decided to risk her parents' further disapproval in order to investigate.

Slowly, she descended the carpeted stairs with her hand trailing lightly along the polished oak banister as she peered down into the open foyer. The house was completely silent and she felt a shiver of fear like when she looked up at the mall and didn't see her parents for a moment. She had never felt this way at home, though. *Why isn't anyone talking?*

At the bottom of the stairs she could see a lot of Daddy's colorful building papers scattered on the floor. He will be upset to see them like this, she thought, and stooped to pick them up. With two sheets in her hand, she looked toward the dining room and decided it was more important to see what was going on in the kitchen where her parents were fixing dinner.

Stepping around the brochures, she walked quickly through the dining room and entered the doorway to the kitchen. On the floor just inside, a man lay unconscious and bleeding from a head wound. His tall frame nearly filled the space between the entrance and the work table in the center of the room. Long blond hair was matted to the side of his forehead by a thick smear of blood.

"Papa!" She dropped down beside him and nudged his shoulder. "Wake up. Please wake up, Papa."

When he did not respond, tears sprung from her eyes. She blinked and shook her head. Looking wildly around the kitchen, she did not see anything out of place. *Why did Papa fall down?* She shook his shoulder again, but he still didn't move. She studied his body and the scary-looking open cut on his forehead and tried to think about what she should do.

Recalling that Papa kept his cell phone in the right front pocket of his slacks, she reached in and pulled it out. After trying one last time to wake him, she dialed 911 and pressed the green button as her parents told her she should if there was ever an emergency. She hoped this was in fact an emergency and that she would not get into more trouble for using Papa's phone.

"911—what is your emergency?"

She was relieved to hear this validation of her decision. "My Papa is on the kitchen floor and his head is bleeding. I can't wake him up," she shouted into the phone.

"Are you at your own house? Is anyone else there with you?"

Penelope hesitated and looked around the room. It occurred to her for the first time that she did in fact appear to be alone. "Daddy is here somewhere I think." She peered back into the dining room. Then, "I don't know," she wailed. "Please come help Papa. We are at our house."

"What is your name and how old are you, honey?"

Penelope sniffed. "I'm Penelope Freeburg-Scott and I'm seven years old, but I'm almost eight."

"OK Penny, do you know your address?"

"My name is Penelope. We live at 4218 Forty-Second Street in Laurelhurst in the big brick house with the pond."

"That is very good, Penelope. Is the man on the floor your grandfather?"

"My grandfather doesn't live here. He's my Papa." Still on her knees she placed her hand on his chest and shook him gently, then sucked in a large gulp of air. With a wrenching sob she yelled, "He won't wake up. What should I do?"

"Help is on the way, Penelope. It will only be a few minutes. Do you mean the man is your father?"

"Yes, my Papa."

"Who is the Daddy you mentioned before?"

Exasperated now and crying harder, she raised her voice again. "My father, Daddy."

"Oh, I see. Penelope, see if you can calm down a little for me. I want you to stay on the phone and talk to me until the doctors get there, OK?"

Deanna Paxton, a detective with the Seattle Police Department's Criminal Investigation Bureau, glanced at her cell phone—6:30 p.m. She left the unmarked 2009 imperial blue Chevy Impala at the curb on Forty-Second Street and walked up the sidewalk, holding her silk three-quarter-length sleeved jacket up to her neck. A sudden decrease in temperature and a stiff breeze were evidence of an accurate weather forecast. A thunderstorm was on the way and the cold front preceding the storm was definitely passing through. The chilly breeze blew straight down her collar, causing a momentary regret about the extremely short-cropped hair style with just a wisp of bang across her forehead.

She looked up at the twin gables of the big Tudor-style house painted tan with brick accents, and formed a first impression of moderate wealth and refinement. The Laurelhurst neighborhood located north of downtown is known for its pleasant upper-middle class lifestyle, and lovely homes with private boat docks along the coast of the peninsula jutting between Lake Union and Wolf Bay. She knew the area had relatively little crime and plenty of large older homes like this one.

Based on the initial call-out, it wasn't immediately clear what type of crime had occurred, only that a man was down with a violent head injury. Despite the cool moist air and whatever horrific event waited inside, she paused at the entrance to the property and gazed at one of the most appealing front yards she had ever seen. Beyond the public sidewalk, the driveway split in both directions forming an oval frame for a lush landscaped area that encompassed the entire yard. A spur of concrete branched left toward the end of the house presumably leading to a garage.

The sun was beginning its final descent toward the flat horizon and only a couple of hours of daylight remained. Looking across the planted area through the swaying branches of paper birches and creek dogwoods, she could make out the ambulance parked in front of the house and an SPD cruiser behind it. She contemplated the gently curving driveway that led to the front door, but being a gardening enthusiast herself, found it impossible to resist walking through the enchanting center space despite the unseasonable chill.

Her own small bungalow located in an even older Seattle neighborhood had a relatively large backyard, where she attempted to grow roses and various perennials year round. Unfortunately, her profession didn't leave a lot of time for horticulture or anything else for that matter, and the garden never came close to the one in her imagination.

A flagstone path led from the concrete into the professionally maintained landscaping, which featured a large koi pond—complete with a wooden bridge—surrounded by natural vegetation. Small solar lights lining both sides of the path at eight foot intervals would maintain at least an illusion of warmth after the sun went down. Studying her surroundings with a practiced eye, Deanna recognized a number of native species. Pale green leaves of grassy arrowhead protruded from the water with a few white tri-petal blossoms still clinging to the long stems. Spindly branches of willow herb bent down to skim the glassy surface.

While she contemplated the miniature ecosystem, totally captivated, one of the last dark pink blossoms fell to the surface and was met by a large curious orange and white mottled goldfish. She passed by a formation of lichen covered rocks nestled in greenish yellow club moss and mats of alpine heather. One of the rocks suddenly moved. She jumped back, then smiled and watched the large green and brown turtle slide into the water.

Reluctantly, she emerged onto the driveway directly across from the home's front entrance, walked around the ambulance, and climbed the three wide steps to a covered tile portico. The front door was open, so without bothering to knock she entered into a large foyer. A huge sparkling

crystal chandelier hanging on a long chain from the second floor ceiling brightly lit the space. Looking up, she noted an oversized sky light that would certainly brighten the area during the day as well.

The patrol officer who responded to the call stood in the middle of the floor writing on a clipboard. He straightened up and greeted her. "Hello, Detective. How you doing?"

"I'm good, Mike. You?"

He nodded then cocked his head toward the dining room. "They're patching the guy up, but it doesn't look too serious. Near as I can figure, someone whacked him and he fell to the side and hit his head on the corner of the granite counter." He shook his head. "That stuff doesn't give much. It split the side of his forehead open. There's no indication of who or what hit him, but there's a little bit of blood on the granite, so . . ." He shrugged. "I'm just trying to piece it together. The guy doesn't seem to know what happened . . . at least that's what he says. Anyway, he didn't just fall. There's a big egg on the top of his head in addition to the forehead laceration."

"Thanks, Mike. Do me a favor, will you? Call for the techs to come and dust for prints, and check for other blood and whatever else they want to do."

"Sure thing, Detective. Another thing that might be more important I guess. He insists there is another guy in the house with him, but we can't find anyone. His daughter was upstairs when this all went down. She doesn't seem to know anything either." He looked askance and Deanna had the impression Mike had doubts about this situation. She had learned to respect the instincts of patrolmen who routinely arrived first on the scene, so she kept an open mind.

Noting the gleaming marble floor and polished wood surfaces, she mused under her breath, "someone has a housekeeper." Everything seemed in order except for a pile of brochures littering the floor just inside the door, ruining the perfection. She glanced up the wide carpeted staircase then turned her attention toward voices coming from further inside the house.

Following the sound, she proceeding through the spacious formal dining room and could not help but note the beautiful hand-scraped plank flooring and glass-fronted cabinets built in along both side walls. She stopped for only a moment to admire the collections of colorful art glass vases and beautiful stemware then sighed and stepped into the kitchen.

Glancing at the corner of the counter just to the right of the doorway, she noted the spot of blood Mike had mentioned. There wasn't much of it and the speckled granite provided camouflage. *Good eye, Mike.* Paramedics were working on a good looking guy with a great physique and long blond hair. He was sitting slumped in a chair next to a rustic antique table. A tight-fitting pale blue T-shirt showed off his impressive pectoral muscles and biceps quite well. Looking around the spotless kitchen, Deanna had the impression he would be very upset about the blood stain covering his right shoulder.

A pretty little girl with dark brown hair curling around her chubby face stood with the toes of one bare foot on top of the other, leaning on the back of the man's chair. Deanna thought the child looked adorable in her feminine outfit of pink slacks and a white cotton long-sleeved top with small Disney cartoon figures marching across her chest. The girl was watching intently as the medic finished applying butterfly band aids to an inch-long cut on the right side of his head near the end of his eyebrow.

She looked up at Deanna and the site of the woman seemed to break the stoicism she'd been maintaining. She began to cry and her body shook with pent up fear and emotion as she fell onto the man's lap. Deanna stepped forward and picked her up, allowing the child to sob into her shoulder. Although this seemed like the right thing to do under the circumstances, she was uncomfortable, having had no personal experience with children. She was accustomed to keeping her feelings in check. In the department, she had a reputation of toughness and lack of emotion and

she tried to live up to it. For the most part, she'd found a way to avoid analyzing all the ways this strategy masked or even suppressed her feminine inclinations.

She patted the girl's back. "It's OK now. You must be a very brave little girl," she said, tilting her head back to look at Penelope's face. She tried to soften her look with a broad smile. The girl struggled to return a friendly look and Deanna felt a little flutter in her chest. She looked down at the decidedly hunky blond victim and nodded as she set Penelope back on her feet beside him. He put his arm around her and whispered something.

In response, she kissed his cheek and placed her hand gently next to the cut. "Does it still hurt, Papa?"

"Not much now, sweetheart, thanks. And thank you for calling these guys." He nodded toward the paramedics and glanced up at Deanna, while speaking to his daughter. "You were very brave and did exactly the right thing."

Deanna watched the interaction closely, thinking that this appeared to be a normal loving father-daughter relationship, unlike so many others she routinely encountered. She realized the medics were suggesting that he go to the hospital to get checked out.

One of them, a petite young woman inspected him appreciatively. "You could get stitches if you want," she offered with a smile, "but it isn't necessary. It probably won't make a difference one way or the other as far as scarring goes," she offered, apparently assuming the flaw of a scar would be of concern to him. "It should heal up nicely. We're more concerned about the bump on the top of your head. You might well have a mild concussion."

He said he understood, but that he preferred to stay at home. Deanna did not see any reason to pressure him on the point. She had a lot of questions for him in any event and she would just as soon ask them here, rather than in the hospital environment. As the pair of EMTs left, Deanna sat down and looked at the sheet of paper they handed her on their way out.

"You are Don Freeburg?" He nodded then shook his head, obviously still feeling a little disoriented.

"Hello, Don, I'm Detective Deanna Paxton," she said gently, reaching across the table to shake his hand. She turned to Penelope. "And you are Penelope. I'm happy to meet you."

Penelope looked down at the floor and then up at Deanna through the wispy ends of her bangs. It was a cute shy gesture. Don's eyebrow pulled together as he squinted up at her. He nodded his acknowledgement, then immediately looked up as another tall well-built guy entered the kitchen and greeted them. He wore jeans with a cream colored polo shirt and black blazer, and a baseball cap covered hair so short it was almost a buzz cut. The weapon and badge on his belt indicated that he was also a detective, but he appeared to be at least ten years younger than Deanna.

"Don, this is my partner, Jim Taglia."

She couldn't help being amused at the way Don subtly looked Jim up and down before shaking his hand. After acknowledging Jim, he slumped down in his seat again. An instant later he shot up straight and frantically looked around the room. "Charlie? Where's Charlie?" he cried, obviously in a panic.

Penelope was still standing beside his chair and apparently thought he was questioning her. "I told you, Papa, I don't know where he is. Please don't be angry with me. I'm sorry I shouted at you before. I'll never do it again," she cried. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Don seemed to relax a little. He patted her back and looked imploringly at Deanna while he struggled to even out his tone for his daughter's sake. "It's all right, sweetheart." He gave Deanna an even more urgent look. "They must have taken Charlie," he said. "Oh God, they really must have taken him." He abruptly stood, but began to sway dangerously and plopped back on the chair with Jim supporting his elbow.

“Easy, you’ve had a couple of hard hits there,” Deanna warned. “You really ought to go in for a scan. You probably do have a concussion.” She glanced up at her partner as he pulled a chair around next to her so he too could face Don. She shifted her own chair a little closer to the table. “First though, can you tell us what happened here, and who is Charlie?”

“Charlie is *my* partner.” Don began, shaking his head in an apparent effort to clear his thoughts.

Deanna glanced at Jim to gauge his reaction. Her partner was a nice enough guy and certainly not homophobic, but sometimes he made sarcastic comments or inappropriate remarks without thinking. Now, thankfully, he was staring straight ahead at Don professionally masking any negative thoughts he might be entertaining. She redirected her attention to the extraordinarily handsome victim, while unbidden and complicated thoughts swirled in her own head. Gazing into his bright blue eyes, she collected her thoughts. “OK, Don, go ahead and tell us what happened.”

Don took a minute to calm himself until he was able to describe the events. He and Charlie were starting to prepare dinner while Penelope sat up in her room. “We had a new recipe for clay pot chicken we were trying.” He stared at the package of chicken breasts on the counter next to a partially chopped pile of mushrooms and shallots, and tears welled in his eyes. He shook his head again. “The door bell rang and Charlie said it was one of his agents coming to pick up the new brochures.”

Penelope pointed toward the dining room. “Daddy’s building papers are on the floor, Papa. I picked these up.” She pointed to the two brochures on the table beside Don.

Jim got up and went back to the foyer to take another look at the way they were scattered there. He asked the techs who had just arrived to be sure and photograph them. When he returned to the kitchen, he picked up a brochure from the table and inspected the bold cursive font across the top: *Sheridan Place Offered by Charles Scott, Commercial Real Estate Broker*. He studied the small picture next to the heading of a jovial-looking man with thinning dark hair, and assumed it must be Charlie. The brochure described space for rent in a new commercial building on Second Avenue in downtown Seattle.

Deanna was studying a copy as well. After looking it over, she said, “so I take it whoever was at the door was not Mr. Scott’s employee.

“All I know is, Charlie went to answer the door and I heard him say something I couldn’t make out and then I heard a sort of scraping sound. I thought he said my name, but it wasn’t very loud. I started to go through the doorway—he nodded toward the dining room—but just as I started through something hit me.”

“You said they took him. Why do you think there was more than one person?”

Don thought for a moment. “I’m not sure. Maybe it seems like somebody was with Charlie and somebody else hit me.” He shook his head and picked up Penelope’s hand. Tears were still streaming down her cheeks.

“It’s OK, honey. We’ll find Daddy.” He gave Deanna a repeat performance of the pitiful imploring expression.

Deanna took Penelope’s hand and moved toward the dining room. “Mike—Officer Swenson—please see if Penelope can show you her room and have her explain everything she remembers about what happened.” Penelope complied and started to leave, but looked over her shoulder at Don.

“It’s all right, Penelope. You go and answer all the questions the policeman asks you.”

He turned to Deanna and Jim. “Thanks, she’s freaked out enough without me making it worse. She was up in her room when this” . . . he waved his hand in the air . . . “happened. You have to find Charlie. I have no idea why someone would take him, but he’s a little high strung and I can’t

even imagine how he'll handle this—whatever it is.” He pushed a blond wave back from his face and looked around with a bewildered expression. “What the hell has happened?”

Deanna glanced at what appeared to be an ornate silver wedding band on Don's finger. “Um, what exactly is your relationship with Mr. Scott and Penelope?” She glanced at Jim, but he didn't react.

“Isn't it obvious, Detective? We consider ourselves married even though the state of Washington doesn't recognize it.” He made a derisive sound. “We have a legal domestic partnership, though. Penelope is our daughter through surrogacy.”

“Something like that is what I assumed, but I needed you to tell me. Now, do you have some coffee we can make? We need to get a lot more information from you about your life, your profession, and any problems or issues you and Charlie might be having, so we can start to figure out who attacked you and why Charlie is not here.”

“I'll make it.” Don stood up and waited until he felt steady enough to navigate the short distance to the counter, then slowly made his way there and plugged in the coffeemaker. His back was turned away when he quietly said, “I notice you did not say that Charlie was kidnapped or taken against his will. Do you doubt what I'm telling you?” He turned around to face them with an open questioning expression marred by tear tracks on both cheeks.

Deanna answered carefully. “Don, we honestly don't know what happened and you apparently don't either. There are many explanations for why Charlie might have left with whoever came to the house. Obviously, if someone hit you we have to assume the worst, but let's take it one step at a time. It has only been an hour, but that's too much time for us to try to track down a vehicle and we wouldn't know what to look for. We'll talk to your neighbors to see if anyone saw something.”

She raised her chin at Jim and he nodded, evidently having understood the silent communication. “Believe me,” she continued, “we're going to be thorough, but like I said, one step at a time, OK?”

“I understand.” Don turned to the sink and stood still for a few moments with his hands on the edge of the counter for support. Then he began to fill the coffee carafe. Looked over his shoulder, he asked, “Do either of you take cream?”

He busied himself with the preparations, but he was clearly still in pain. As the sense-heightening aroma of Seattle's Best filled the kitchen, he slowly returned to sit at the table and slumped forward.

“Actually, something has been happening to us over the past month. There is nothing wrong between Charlie and me. I mean, we're all happy . . . but we're very worried about a letter we received from an attorney, and well, our attorney has answered it, but we don't know . . .”

“What was the letter about?”

“Look, this doesn't have anything to do with what happened here. You have to get out there and find Charlie.” Tears welled in his eyes and his hands were shaking.

“Please try to answer our questions so we can figure out how to proceed with finding Charlie.”

Don brushed tears from his cheek and glanced up at the ceiling. He took a deep breath and sighed as he looked back at Deanna. “All right, apparently the woman we used as a birth surrogate has decided she wants some rights. It was a traditional surrogacy. That is to say we used her egg, you know, not a third party's and donated both our sperm. Now she is claiming that Penelope is not our daughter at all. I mean, she is insinuating that she was not inseminated.” He looked as if he might be sick. He put his elbows on the table and lowered his face into his hands.

Deanna was shaking her head over what he had revealed, but she also could only imagine the headache he must have. Jim said, "I'm not really getting this. Did you have an artificial insemination done with a professional agency or a legal agreement or something?"

"That is what we thought we were doing, but now we don't know what to think, except that we're having genetic testing done and we're afraid of the outcome now."

"You didn't do that when Penelope was born?" Deanna asked.

Don sighed again. "We were young and excited about having a daughter. We thought it was cool to not be sure which one of us is her biological father. Then time went on and we never did it. She looks sort of like Charlie though, so I think we both assumed he is the bio-dad."

Deanna was having a tough time remaining objective and detached. The story was affecting her on a personal level and she shook herself internally to bring her full attention back to Don. "I feel for your situation, but has the legal back and forth escalated to something that makes you think someone would kidnap Charlie?"

"No, that makes no sense at all. I just wanted to tell you the only thing I can think of that is not going well in our lives right now."

"I'd like a copy of the letter you received from her attorney and your attorney's name before we leave in case we need to check on it. What is the surrogate's name?"

"Andrea Castillo. She lived in California at the time we found her on a Web site for women offering surrogacy. She was affiliated with an agency in California and we used it because the surrogacy laws down there were a little more, um, favorable than here."

Deanna did not feel the need to further pursue this line of questioning at the moment. She glanced at her watch. It was seven o'clock. She nodded to Jim again and he got up from the table.

Looking down at the top of Don's head, he said, "Mr. Freeburg, please understand that we'll do everything in our power to figure out what happened to Mr. Scott." Then he glanced at Deanna and left.

She sipped the delicious rich black coffee Don had placed in front of her. "Now, tell me more about Charlie's work and also what you do for a living."