

To Protect the Innocent

Mark Locke Mills

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Mark Locke Mills

Dedicated to the defenders
of children everywhere.

Contents

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	9
Chapter 3	19
Chapter 4	29
Chapter 5	41
Chapter 6	47
Chapter 7	67
Chapter 8	79
Chapter 9	87
Chapter 10	101
Chapter 11	111
Chapter 12	115
Chapter 13	121
Chapter 14	131
Chapter 15	137
Chapter 16	145
Chapter 17	149
Chapter 18	153
Chapter 19	161
Chapter 20	165
Chapter 21	175
Chapter 22	183
Chapter 23	195
Chapter 24	203
Chapter 25	213

Mark Locke Mills

Chapter 26	221
Chapter 27	231
Chapter 28	243
Chapter 29	251
Chapter 30	263
Chapter 31	271
Chapter 32	281
Chapter 33	291
Chapter 34	297
Chapter 35	303
Chapter 36	313
Chapter 37	329
Chapter 38	341
Chapter 39	349
Chapter 40	357
Chapter 41	365
Chapter 42	373
Chapter 43	381
Chapter 44	389
Chapter 45	395
Chapter 46	405
Chapter 47	413
Chapter 48	419
Chapter 49	429
Chapter 50	439

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CHAPTER 1

Four-thirty. Quitting time almost put Dan in a good mood as he glanced past the clock to the keyboard-clicking secretaries outside his cubicle. It was gray and it was drab and it was full of smoke from the cigarette he had just sneaked in his no smoking office. "Almost quittin' time for the suit," he muttered to himself as he absent-mindedly switched on his desk fan to clear the air. Suit was the name he had been sarcastically calling himself since the day he changed careers from police detective to insurance investigator. Dreamily, he leaned back to let the cigarette do its nerve-soothing work. But it was not to be as the telephone's abrupt ring split the haze like a scalpel, breaking the nicotine spell.

"Investigation, Forester," he answered dryly, fully expecting just another routine call from a suspicious insurance agent. They suspected their clients of insurance fraud and Dan was so bored by it all.

* * *

1280 miles away in Omaha, Nebraska, no one at KNOC-TV knew yet who Daniel Forester was. It was a hectic day, even for the newsroom. Reporters ran to and from the producer's desk with scripts. Tape editors raced videotapes to the control room and in the midst of it all, the assignment editor barked out orders to the field crews through his two-way radio as the police scanner crackled out its garbled chatter. Everyone rushed around hurriedly as though theirs was the biggest story of the day. Everyone, that is, except News Director Bob Manson and Senior Reporter Susan

Jensen. They had learned long ago that getting all hyped up over a story wasted valuable energy. They chose to take a more serene approach . . . even to big news.

“Reporters are hooked on the adrenaline-rush,” Susan liked to say, “the frenzied pace . . . and a lot of them act this way even with more routine, humdrum stories. Urgency makes them feel important, even when their story is of absolutely no importance. After all, if you’re in a big hurry what you’re doing must be important . . . right?” But that wasn’t the case on this day in this newsroom.

* * *

“Dan . . . Mike never came home from school and I’m going out of my mind! I called all his friends and the last they saw of him, he was walking home!” Jan spit the words out all in one breath. It was her voice alright, as Dan subconsciously visualized her worried-but-beautiful, slightly freckled face framed by flaming red hair. But so terrifying were her words that, to him, the last few sounded like they were being spoken through a megaphone from the other end of a tunnel. He had a sickening feeling that this would be a tunnel of no return.

* * *

After five years of doing stories about the search for a missing Omaha boy named Jeremy Fenner, the big day had finally arrived. His remains had been found and KNOC-TV Reporter Susan Jensen was on it like a pit bull. The child had been kidnapped, mutilated and murdered. Authorities suspected a pedophile. Every TV newscast in the state was leading with the story and the Omaha stations were devoting most of their early newscasts to it. But because of Susan’s efforts, KNOC was better prepared than the competition.

Susan had followed the Jeremy Fenner story the closest. Every step of the way she produced stories and special series reports on missing children. Twenty-eight years old, pretty and shapely, she looked like a cross between a beauty queen and a college professor. Her smooth, golden hair ended in soft curls that bounced around a ravishing-yet knowing face with penetrating eyes that seemed to look right through you. This was a beautiful and intelligent woman whose love was her job. Fenner and the missing children issue had become a cause for her and she had spent years researching it. She had also grown close to Jeremy's parents. Some of her colleagues thought too close.

* * *

Normally it was just a good-looking, well-built man with jet-black hair and a fiery-yet-icy stare inside Dan Forester's insurance office window. But at this moment the glass housed a tight-skinned mask of horror as every muscle in his body went instantly taut and a blaring alarm shot off in his head; a silent but deafening siren that only he could hear. He felt panicked and paralyzed and it was several seconds before he could speak. "Are you sure he didn't go home with one of his friends?" he finally managed to ask his wife.

"Yes, I called them all . . . and besides, you know he wouldn't do that without calling me," came Jan's inevitable answer.

Dan suddenly went hollow as if the breath was being sucked out of him by a high-powered vacuum. It was his worst nightmare. As a former policeman he had seen too many kidnapped, mutilated and murdered children.

A familiar odor then slowly began creeping into his nostrils. A subtle, metallic scent that he hadn't smelled in a long time. It was frightening, yet he couldn't quite place it. "Could he have stayed late at school for something?" he

asked apprehensively, wanting to explore every hopeful possibility.

“That’s the first thing I thought, but . . . but I called the school and . . . he didn’t,” she stammered.

What’s that smell? It was foreign, yet familiar and he was afraid of the answer.

* * *

Like many people Ross Huggins wanted better cards than life had dealt him. His was a little known job with the FBI doing background research on all kinds of strange and mysterious subjects. Most of the bureau’s employees were involved in some type of research at one time or another, but Ross was given the really off beat stuff to look into. It could be interesting work, but he often wished he was out on the front lines of investigation instead of buried in the bowels of the Bureau’s dark, dank, vomit-green research basement in Quantico, Virginia. He longed to get away from his cave, as he called it, and get into the real world of FBI fieldwork. Three times he had requested a transfer to a field investigation unit, but had been told each time he was too valuable where he was. This is irony, he thought. He figured if he wasn’t so good at his job he would be investigating instead of back-grounding. But he had the patience of a fisherman and day after day he did his job in an office strewn with books and papers alongside the most advanced computer hardware and software available. He did it extremely well, waiting for the break that some day would make him a field investigator.

Unfortunately for him he looked much more like a research librarian than he did an FBI field agent. At a slight 5” 8’ with a crew-cut and glasses he didn’t exactly cut an imposing figure. But the key to Ross was his eyes. They were calm, yet intense. Most people who knew him would

have been surprised to learn that along with an IQ of 148, Ross had a black belt in karate and knew how to use his deadly skills. His job wasn't glamorous and he often got bored stiff. But things were about to change as his boss Don Westerhoff walked into his office.

* * *

It hit Dan like a hard slap in the face as he heard his wife whimper on the other end of the phone. The odor in his nostrils was fear itself and he hadn't smelled it since just before his last fierce, death-ridden firefight in the Iraq war. His buddies had thought him crazy when he told them he had actually smelled fear. "More of Forester's cosmic crap," one of them snarled, referring to his natural tendency toward existential philosophy, which often seemed out of place in the harsh, cruel reality of war. Dan was probably the only deep-thinker in his company and most certainly the only one who often put his deep feelings into words, both in conversation and in the journal he kept. But he was also the first one to charge an enemy position or go after a sniper. He had always been contradictory, combining firebrand behavior with well-read, intellectual awareness. But at the time he knew what he had smelled. It was so vile that he had lain awake nights saturating his cot with sweat and worrying that at any moment the fetid sewer of horrors, as he called it, would wind its sickening way back into his nostrils and take its unsweet time to leave.

Even now, as he gazed dumbly at his busy co-workers through his office window, he felt the sweat again. His shirt stuck to him like wet paste and the telephone receiver slid on his ear.

"Are you sure he's not over at Bill's?" he asked hoping Mike may have gone to the neighbor's house.

"No, I checked."

“Think hard a minute Jan,” Dan pushed, “is there anything you might’ve missed?”

“No! You’re not listening . . . I already told you . . . there’s nowhere else he could be,” Jan sputtered between choked sobs.

Scenes of horribly dismembered children tumbled over each other in his head, battling for his attention. He had thought Iraq was as hideous as life could get, but he was wrong. Fifteen years on the Washington, D.C. Police Force had shown him more inhuman, brutal treatment of children than he had ever imagined possible.

Although he liked being a detective, six months earlier he decided that the irregular hours and all the late night stake-outs weren’t leaving him much time for the only thing in his life that meant anything to him: his son. It was a battle between the job he liked and the son he loved, and Mike won. So, with more than a little trepidation, he made a dramatic career change and took a job as an insurance investigator with the Alliance Insurance Company in the Washington suburb, Silver Spring, Maryland. “The job’s a joke,” he told Jan when he decided to make the switch, “but it’s a nine-to-fiver so I’ll finally be able to spend time with Mikey.” Now, snapping back to the present, he realized that it may have all been for nothing. Mike might be . . . well, he didn’t want to think about that.

* * *

“I’ve got a weird one for ya’ this time,” Don Westerhoff said as he absentmindedly looked around FBI Researcher Ross Huggins’ messy office.

“What now?” Ross whirled around quickly.

“They want you to do a profile study on pedophiles.”

“But we already have one,” he told Don.

“Yea, I know, but you know the boys upstairs. They’ve decided the old study is outdated. They’ve ordered a new one starting from scratch. You’ll have to profile it all, from the pedophile’s childhood to the cause of his death and everything in-between.”

“Man, Don, this one’s gonna take some time.”

“Well, if you’ve got the time we’ve got the queer,” joked Westerhof as he walked toward the door hesitating just long enough to see if he would get a laugh out of Ross. He didn’t.

CHAPTER 2

“Call 911. Tell ‘em Mike is missing. Say a neighbor told you he saw a man grab him and shove him into his car,” Daniel blurted out all in one breath. The institutional gray office walls closed in on him like a man-size vise as the sickening fear-smell once again filled his nostrils.

“But . . . why lie about the man?” Jan asked innocently.

“Because if you don’t, the cops will think Mikey stopped on the way home to play, or just ran away and they’ll drag their feet.” He knew police procedure and he struggled to breathe, trying to override his confused whirlpool of emotions and get himself under control.

“But I don’t want to lie.”

“I know baby, but if you don’t it could hurt Mike.”

“There’s gotta be another way.”

“I’m all ears,” Dan said softly, trying to couch his rising anger, “you tell me what it is.” Ire boiled up inside of him as it did when someone else couldn’t see what was so obvious to him. He loved his wife and tried hard to keep from losing his temper as he had done too many times before.

Jan often accused Dan of always thinking he was right and much of the time he did. Because of his keen, perception he often was, or at least he believed he was, and he had little patience with anyone who didn’t see things his way. Jan sometimes accused him of having an incredible amount of unwarranted self-esteem.

“Oh, I don’t know . . .,” Jan murmured, searching.

“Well, I do!” he said firmly. “Remember I was the cop. Just make the call and we can argue about it later!” The familiarity of his sudden anger helped him catch and then dominate the horror that welled up inside him. It also helped

to dilute slightly the repulsive fear odor that had steadily grown stronger.

“But . . .,” Jan said.

“Every time you say but you could be putting another nail in Mike’s coffin,” he blurted, regretting it even as the words came out of his mouth. As a policeman he’d picked up the habit of being direct and graphic, and he knew he’d just made his wife more anxious.

“Oh, Danny!” Jan shrieked.

“Just make the call,” he snapped, the guilt about upsetting her leaving as quickly as it had come, “I’m coming right home. I’ll be there in half-an-hour.” He slammed the receiver down with a clang that reverberated around the closet he called an office.

After several months he had stamped nothing of his personal touch on the cubicle. There were no pictures on the walls, no cute little sayings pinned up anywhere. It was as if he didn’t plan to be there very long. He ran one hand through his thick, coal-black hair, which he wore longer than most insurance men, while with the other he grabbed his black leather jacket and headed for the door. Even under the sudden suffocating pressure that gripped him, he sensed the contrast between the cold, colorless office and the warm, soft crackle of his leather coat as he put it on.

* * *

Douglas Glassman was a good husband to his wife Sandra and a good father to his two daughters Kate and Kelly. Wearing glasses and sporting a few too many pounds, the only thing striking about his looks was how utterly plain they were.

With brown hair, brown eyes and no distinguishing features he was the type of person that no one really noticed. The type that blended in with the background wherever he was. He had sold insurance for the same company for the last

20 years. He belonged to the Chamber of Commerce and to the Elks Club in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He coached little league baseball and soccer, even though he had no sons or daughters on the teams. Everyone who knew Doug Glassman considered him to be a model citizen, and he was, except for one dirty little secret.

* * *

Why can't she ever just do what I ask instead of arguing? Dan mindlessly asked himself as he sailed down the gray hallway on his way to the parking lot. It was a question he had asked himself before, but it seemed especially critical now, when every second might count. He was painfully aware of the child sex abuse cases, which had ended badly because authorities had moved too slowly. But with a tornado of emotions whirling around in his head he was already regretting his impatience with his wife. And on top of it all was Jan's maddening tendency to question anything and everything he did, no matter how small or trivial . . . or crucial it was.

Daniel believed that in times of crisis any decision, even a bad one, was better than wasting time dwelling on the predicament and discussing which action to take. His was the attitude of the combat soldier. It worked well in Iraq where he served as a special-forces marksman and demolitions expert. Later it was what made him a good cop. But it also caused problems he wasn't aware of, since he often leaped into action where a more thoughtful approach was needed. It was his instinct to instantly prioritize the problems and then quickly solve them one at a time, in their order of importance, using different tactics for each. Unfortunately, in doing this he tended to look at each tactic individually instead of together as a whole, which meant he often overlooked the probable overall consequences of his actions. It was this instinct for instantaneous reaction that had served

him well in the deserts of Iraq and on Washington's tough streets, though not always so well in everyday life. Dan's feeling was that sometimes overreaction is the best reaction. But whatever it was, right now he felt like his brain was on fire as he slammed the car door shut.

* * *

Douglas Glassman first noticed he was different at age 12 when his younger brother, Jason, had a friend stay overnight. He accidentally saw the boy in his underwear and became aroused. That was the beginning of an emotional roller coaster he was forced to ride. Much of the time he struggled to rid himself of his desire for young boys, yearnings of which he was deeply ashamed. On an emotional level he was literally sickened by the idea, but intellectually he knew he was a pedophile. He had, however, managed to mostly repress his pedophilia over the years. Consequently, at the age of 40 Doug had spent a lot of time indulging in self-hatred as well as exercising self-control. He was getting psychological therapy for the former, which was helping him with the latter.

"The weird thing is that I honestly do love kids," he told his therapist, Dr. Christine Johnson in their first session. "Oh, I don't mean in a sexual way...I mean in a love way. I love being with them, helping them and teaching them. Sometimes I think I just carry this love too far and it gets mixed up with sex."

"Well, that's improbable because you are only interested in sex with the boys, and not the girls. If your theory about extended love for children was correct, it would follow that you would desire sex with girls also," came the doctor's reply.

"Yeah . . . I guess that makes sense. Maybe I'm just grasping at straws."

“That’s often how we get answers Doug, so please don’t stop grasping. In fact, both of us will do quite a lot of grasping to get to the root of your problem. You must understand that it took forty years to reach this point and we won’t figure out how you got here in just one day.”

The fact was that Doug really did love kids. Besides coaching the little league teams he was a big brother to several under-privileged children and helped out in the anti-drug program at his daughters’ elementary school. He loved children and genuinely cared about their welfare, but his deep, dark secret was that he craved little boys and that was something that at times nearly drove him over the edge. He was so disgusted with himself that at age 23 he had thought seriously about suicide.

Then he met Sandy who, without knowing his problem, gave him reason to believe that he might be able to bury it. It had stayed buried for years, through marriage to Sandy and the birth of their two daughters. Then, however, Doug’s natural love of kids piloted him toward little league coaching and other children-related activities and his long suppressed, inner monster began to surface.

* * *

After 11 years of marriage Jan Forester was well aware of Dan’s jump-start character, as she called it, and it was a big reason she questioned many of his decisions. But she often did it in unimportant situations where one decision was as good as another, and sometimes just to irritate him. It always worked and their relationship was tumultuous. But as Jan once told a friend, “the highs are higher than the lows are low.” As turbulent as their marriage often was, they were very much in love.

When Dan cruised through the Alliance office area more than one head would turn as the office secretaries were keenly aware of his rugged countenance. His face looked

like it had been carved out of solid granite with chiseled, stony features that screamed man, and his deep, steely eyes looked as if they could burn two holes right through you. His lean body was muscular except for the incongruous, but slight beer belly, evidence of his fondness for beer and whisky and he looked like he would be more at home in a saddle than at a desk.

“He isn’t exactly handsome,” several secretaries had agreed over after-work drinks one evening while they rated the men in their office, “but he sure is sexy.” He was unanimously voted the man they would most like to sleep with. Whatever he had, Daniel wasn’t aware of it, and that probably made him even more attractive.

* * *

After looking all over KNOC-TV for Bob Manson, Senior Reporter Susan Jensen decided he must be in the general manager’s office. She didn’t like going up there because News Director Manson and General Manager George Abbott argued too much. But she had to talk to him about the Jeremy Fenner story so she headed upstairs. Thinking about the sad scene of the dead boy’s remains, she was about to knock when she heard loud voices coming out of the office. Deciding to take advantage of the secretary’s absence she stood in the outer office and took in every word of the heated discussion. She also wanted to make sure that in their heated argument Bob didn’t tell George about a major plan they had hatched.

“News you can use. That’s what people want Bob,” Abbott said in his used car salesman voice, “stories on things like health and finance. You tell ‘em how to be healthier and richer and they’ll watch.” George Abbott was a short, balding, roly-poly man. He had the look of someone whose life had been too easy.

Bob Manson was tall and lean with a mop of unkempt salt-and-pepper hair going in all directions. He looked like he had smoked too many cigarettes and drunk too many beers in his life and the massive quantities of coffee he consumed daily just added to his face's pallor.

"You just made a better argument for the blood-sucking consultants than they could ever make for themselves. George, you're a smart guy . . . can't you see these guys for what they are?"

"Oh I guess I'm just stupid Bob, but I suppose you're gonna tell me."

"Yea, I am. You pay 'em fifty thousand bucks a year to tell you what they've found to work in other TV markets and you automatically think the same things'll work in this market. I think deep down inside, you know they're wrong, but you've paid 'em so much money you can't justify not taking their advice. Well, I'll say it again, what works in New York or L. A. is not gonna work in Omaha."

"And I'll say it again Bob! People are people and viewers are viewers wherever you are."

"Not so. I tell ya' . . . this state is better educated than most. Nebraskans want good, solid, hard news. They don't want the flash and trash New York and Miami shit where if it bleeds it leads or L. A. gossip, where the big story is Liz's 29th marriage. You forget that Nebraska students always have some of the highest basic skills test scores in the country." Bob chose not to mention the rumor that some teachers teach the contents of the test beforehand, which was the subject of a Susan Jensen investigative report that would soon air on KNOC news.

"And you forget that the ratings dropped in the last book."

"One lousy point or two, depending on which book you look at . . . and you know the figures are only accurate within three points. So, whatever they are, they could be wrong by

three points one way or the other and I'm sure that's the case here. This has happened so many times before I can't even believe you care."

"Well, Bob, all I can say is . . . I hope you're right because you seem to be the lone voice. The rest of the industry is going with shorter and lighter stories with a little glitz and drama while you insist on the same old tired city and county news. You even bore the crap out of the audience with statehouse news. We've all got to change! These are different times. I just hope you're not letting your stubbornness cause you to be left behind."

Listening outside the door Susan thought, George you've been reading too many TV trades again.

"Thanks so much for your concern George," Bob shot back, "but that is really the point isn't it? I'm the one who's been in the news business for 20 years, not you, and certainly not the consultants who're getting rich off your lack of confidence in me." Bob thought about the fact that most general managers like George had worked their way up to the position as TV advertising salesmen, and the fact that you can't make a salesman into a newsman.

"Well, maybe you're too close to it Bob. Maybe you need an outside opinion from someone who doesn't have a news background . . . someone who is more like the typical viewer."

"Someone like . . . let's see . . . like maybe you George?"

"Yes . . . like me."

"Yea, and maybe I need an acid enema too. Boy, I'll tell ya, if you would've given me that \$50,000 instead of squandering it on consultants, I'd have produced special series reports that would knock your socks off. Oh, and your ratings would be a lot higher than they are now. But you've got the purse strings. By the way, you're going to get just the kind of news you're looking for tonight. Sex, death, blood,

tears . . . the whole thing. They found Jeremy Fenner's body . . . or what's left of it. So, tune in and watch. Your tired old, heavy-handed newscast is going to get you the highest ratings of the year tonight. Gotta' go, bye." Bob loved making a dramatic exit and taking one last shot at George on his way out the door. But this time, as he left he walked right into Susan and knew instantly that she had heard every word of their discussion.

"We've got a problem with the live van and Leon says he can't fix it," she said matter-of-factly. There was no need for embarrassed courtesies between them. They both knew she was an eavesdropper. What good reporter wasn't?

"Can't or won't?" Bob asked pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and offering Susan one. "I'll take care of it . . . I'll be damned if I'm gonna let that pissant screw with this newscast." George Abbott wasn't the only pain in Bob's neck. The news and engineering departments were often at odds too. Bob liked to say that there are men and women, and then there are engineers.

Mainly, however, he knew this newscast with its many angles on the Jeremy Fenner story stood a good chance of winning all the major news awards that year. Almost as if he had sensed what was coming, two weeks earlier he and Susan had supervised the production of six background stories relating to the missing boy. Three concerned Fenner himself and the search efforts made to find him and three concerned missing children in general. When KNOC-TV News hit the air that night it would have most of its newscast already in the can while its competitors would have to scramble helter-skelter to put together a news show. Bob and Susan both liked winning awards, but Susan had another special reason for wanting this newscast to be the best it could be.

CHAPTER 3

Leaving work early was not unusual for Dan, but recklessly gunning his midnight-black Mustang out of the parking lot and roaring down the street was. He loved the car he had bought shortly before he went into the Army and had taken painstaking care of it. He had even stored it in an air-conditioned garage in his hometown while he was in the service. The car represented a simpler, more innocent time; a time growing up in Baltimore, Maryland where life was uncomplicated. Things were more black and white then without so many gray areas. He had grown up tough, attending inner city schools and he remembered much of his youth as a continuous battle between right and wrong, good and evil, strong and weak. Iraq blurred all those lines and shaded Dan's sight with permanently gray-colored glasses.

"Please God, say Mikey just stopped to play and lost track of time, not that he was grabbed by some pervert son-of-a-bitch," he desperately mumbled to himself as he raced down the pot-holed street, completely unaware of the irony of using curse words in a prayer. Then, as he ran his second red light, not an unusual habit for any Washingtonian, he offered the inevitable deal, "God, if you make Mike O.K. I'll really start living a good Christian life." Daniel still hadn't learned that God doesn't make deals.

As he careened down New Hampshire Avenue the dreaded fear-smell returned. Call it warring soldiers' collective anxiety sweating out of their pores and vaporizing into a stench that only other soldiers can smell. Call it an unexplained, clairvoyant vision manifesting itself in a doomed scent. But whatever you called it, Dan knew it, and he knew it to be the incense of fear.

Like the putrid odor of burning flesh, the smell of fear is hard to shake. No one knew just how hard better than Dan as he had smelled so many burning bodies blown up in IED explosions in Iraq. It simply wouldn't go away. With every ounce of his strength he forced himself to live with fear and eventually to actually relish it. As one entry in his journal read, "I've finally made fear my friend and as long as we're friends I see everything with a new, crystal sharp clarity and I feel I can do anything." He had hoped, though, that after coming home from Iraq he would never have to smell the terrifying odor again . . . and he hadn't . . . until now.

* * *

"Have a nice chat with Abbott?" Susan Jensen baited her News Director, Bob Manson as they walked back to the KNOC-TV newsroom.

"You oughta' know . . . you heard every word of it."

"Yup . . . same old crap from the same old fart."

"Yea, and I'm sick to death of it."

"I don't blame you."

Susan had served in the Peace Corps in Ecuador after college, then settled down to concentrate on her career goal in journalism: to become a network correspondent. But just as she began making good contacts, the network news industry began scaling down. Her aspirations dimmed. Now she worked, half-satisfied, for Bob Manson, her news director and mentor. She felt he had forgotten more about news than she would ever learn. The only thing that made her job bearable was that Bob gave her more freedom than most reporters enjoy.

Some considered him a dinosaur in the present form-over-substance trend in TV news and he often felt like he was fighting a losing battle over cosmetics-versus-content. The winners, it sometimes seemed, were the George Abbots

and the blow-dried, good-looking anchors who could read, but who often didn't really understand what they were reading. The appearance of a newscast had taken priority over its content and TV consultants were doing a booming business telling their client stations how their news shows should look. Bob Manson, however, still believed in just plain hard, investigative news with few frills and didn't like a lot of anchor personality interjected into his news shows. Some called him old-fashioned and he did look somewhat like a character from an old comic strip. With sharp features hardened and softened by the pressure of years of serious journalism, Bob looked road-weary but wise. His skin had the pallor of a chain smoker, which he was, and he had a curmudgeonly look that seemed to be a perfect fit for his personality. A wiry man of six feet, his black and gray hair often fell in uncombed clumps over his strong and sometimes fiery eyes. The fire was still there whenever it was needed. The coals had just cooled over the years.

Manson had had his fill of station-hired consultants who told him on a regular basis to change his hard news philosophy. "It may be good, solid news Bob," more than one had told him, "and it may be the most solid news show on TV. But what's the difference how great it is if no one's watching?" Consultant after consultant finally convinced Bob's bosses that if they didn't change to a more glitzy, soft and light newscast with more entertainment value their ratings would end up in the toilet. So far that hadn't happened, but the ratings had slipped a couple of points recently and some of KNOC's higher-ups were sure the final flush would happen any day. Bob was tired of battling the Abbott types and Susan shared his frustration. But unlike Bob, Susan felt she may be on the verge of a major career change and it all revolved around Jeremy Fenner and children like him.

* * *

At their modest, colonial, white-with-blue trim Wheaton, Maryland home Jan Forester was just getting off the phone with the Montgomery County Police Department. She nearly panicked when the voice at the other end asked her for the name and telephone number of the neighbor who had seen Mike being abducted. But wisely she said she didn't know the person's name and asked that they please look for her son now and ask questions later.

It worked. The authorities put out an all-points alert for Mike and sent two squad cars and a canine unit. As Jan hung up the receiver her heart was beating so hard and fast that she felt like it was about to burst out of her chest. She looked down, half-expecting to see a throbbing bulge in her skimpy, yellow halter-top. It roared in her ears like a resounding bass drum in a 4th of July parade and she had to steady herself on the kitchen table. She briefly wondered how nervous she had sounded on the phone. Then, she realized her nervousness might have made the lie about not knowing the neighbor sound more convincing. She sobered when she thought that if Dan wanted the lying call to be made so bad he should have made it himself and she should have told him to make it. "As usual," she said out loud, "I think of these things about a half-hour too late." With all of this racing through her mind, she threw her softly flowing, scarlet hair back into a ponytail and headed out the door to retrace Mike's eight-block walk to school. Not once did it occur to her that the story about the neighbor sounded more plausible coming from her. Dan was right again and subconsciously it made her mad.

Her legs felt like boat anchors as she trudged up the sidewalk glancing in all directions. She knew Mike wouldn't stop to play and besides, he was a loner and didn't have anyone to play with. Anyway, she thought, after all the

lectures and warnings about how important coming right home is, that's not what happened. She felt like she was sinking into the sidewalk with each step. It was like running in a slow-motion dream, her energy being devoured by terror bubbling up inside of her and by the ever-hungry concrete beneath her feet. Then, the guilt started creeping in as she began facing up to a possible reason for Mike's disappearance.

* * *

As FBI Researcher Ross Huggins sat at one of the office computers his fingers typed away but his mind wandered. His slight-but-slick good looks complimented his nice guy disposition. Blonde hair and a mustache accentuated an oddly boyish face. He was one of those rare, genuinely nice people who actually had compassion for those around him. His kids loved him and his wife, Sara, knew what a wonderful husband she had. He had a good job that paid enough so that she didn't have to work if she didn't want to, and he was basically the all-American family man. Several of the FBI field agents that knew him called him Mr. Clean and sometimes joked that Ross was the nice guy he was because he had never had to go undercover, as they had, and mix with society's lower elements. This characterization galled him to no end since undercover work was exactly what he wanted so desperately. He was bored with his job, but good at it, and it was no accident that his bosses had chosen him to do the pedophile study. He didn't know it but he had become somewhat of a legend in the research department for his analytical talents. He had a knack for finding what others would consider insignificant bits of information and turning them into major pieces of an investigative puzzle.

Block 1

Backtracking Mike's route, guilt seemed to grow stronger with each step as Jan thought about how they fell into an unfortunate category when it came to school bus transportation. They lived close enough to their son's school that he wasn't eligible to ride the school bus, but far enough away to question the safety of walking. Neither of them liked the idea of Mike walking, but Dan worked early hours at Alliance and Jan's hours as a nurse at nearby St. Christopher's Hospital were usually early and always unpredictable. Driving Mike to school was out. In another time and another town there would probably have been a number of neighbors to pitch in and help . . . but not here.

Block 2

Jan reflected that she had been the most vocal in her opposition to Mike walking. She had suggested he take a taxicab to and from school each day. Dan had logically argued that they couldn't afford it and that taxis in the area just weren't reliable.

Block 3 and no Mike.

"Oh God, how I wish I had stuck to my guns and not let Dan win that one!" she cried out-loud in her horror, as her heavy feet seemed to sink further into the concrete. "We should have gone with the taxi or come up with some other idea . . . but no . . . as always it was easier to go along with Dan than to fight. Now my weakness may have killed my son."