

Ransom

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

Laughing, holding hands, walking slowly or in groups, kids poured out of school at the end of another day.

One group, two sixth grade girls and a sixth grade boy met one of their moms at the gate and started walking home together.

About a block from the school, as they passed a nondescript white commercial van, the side doors of the van flew open and three men wearing masks and gloves jumped out. "Blue, blue, blue!" one of them shouted, pushing kids around. Another pushed the adult woman and one of the kids to the ground as the third grabbed the brown haired girl wearing the blue jacket and carrying the blue backpack. She, along with other kids and the adult, screamed.

The men loaded her into the van, which screeched away, closing its doors as it sped down the street, taking the side mirror off a parked car in its haste.

*

From the passenger seat of the van, Paul watched as their charge was bundled up in a blanket. Easy, he thought, she wasn't even screaming anymore. All the fight had gone out of her when they got her into the van.

Timmy looked at the tag on the backpack she'd had on her back. "It's her," he announced.

"Good fucking thing," Daryl, the driver muttered as he gunned the van down the street. Three more blocks, left at the stop sign, two blocks, right into the storage yard entrance.

"4436," Paul reminded him.

"Yah, I remember," Daryl said as he punched in the numbers. The electric gate opened and he drove the van into the storage yard, slowly. Down three rows, turn...

Paul and Timmy opened the van doors and hopped out as the van stopped. Paul ran to a storage unit door and opened it while Timmy ran down to the end to the silver minivan, getting

in and starting it as Lou got out of the white van carrying a wriggling blanket. Daryl pulled the van into the storage unit. He shut off the engine, leaving the key, and got out. He helped Paul sweep the van for anything they might have left, then closed and secured the storage unit door.

By that time, everyone else was in the minivan. They got in and drove slowly away.

*

Jim was in his office when he felt it happen. He put down his pen and closed his eyes. Damn!

Katy, are you all right? He called mentally to his daughter.

I'm sorry, daddy; they surprised me, she replied, full of remorse and fear.

I won't let them hurt you, he sent to her.

Katy stopped struggling. *I know, daddy.* Then more mischievously she sent, *Can I watch?*

Jim smiled grimly. *Of course, dear. I'm watching, and I won't let anyone hurt you.*

Jim relaxed a bit as he felt his daughter relax. Reaching out mentally through her, he identified her kidnappers. They were at least as scared as Katy! Part of a gang -- but they didn't know who their boss was. They were given targets and instructions. Okay, it would have to be the slow way if he wanted the ringleaders. Remaining focused on his daughter, he reached out with part of his mind to give his wife the news.

Doris had calmed down somewhat by the time the police and neighbors appeared on her doorstep, letting her know that her daughter had been kidnapped. Jim had put her in contact with Katy, so she knew she was safe. But she was still very distraught, and mad as hell.

She screamed out in rage. Part of her knew that Katy wouldn't be hurt, but part of her was still frightened, and mad. Part of her also knew those people didn't know they had stepped across the line -- and straight into hell.

*

"Stop here," Paul said, going from the printed instructions he had. He was in the back seat, the girl still wrapped up next to him, with Lou on the other side of her. He nodded to Lou, "Let's see her head."

Lou unwrapped their package a little, revealing a blue-eyed brown-haired girl.

"Keep quiet or I'll beat the crap out of you," Paul warned her with a finger.

Katy gave him a nasty look, still scared. Yet she was feeling stronger; she could still feel her daddy, and feel how scared these men were.

Paul nodded and got out the cell phone, pushing a speed dial number.

*

Jim's cell phone rang. He took a breath and answered it. "Hello?"

"Mister Harris, we have your daughter, and if you want to see her alive again, you will do exactly what we say," Paul said clearly, reading from his script.

"Let me talk to Katy!" Jim told him.

Paul pushed the speakerphone button on the phone. "Still there Mister Harris?" he asked.

"Katy?" Jim called out.

"I'm here, daddy -- I'm sorry," Katy apologized over the phone.

Paul pulled the phone back. "Harris, don't bother contact the police, they can't help you, and don't tell them nothing if you want your daughter back. Start pulling together cash -- a quarter million in nonsequential unmarked bills. You've got until three tomorrow afternoon. We'll call again in a few hours. Understand?"

Jim couldn't help but smile. "Oh, I understand. And don't worry, I won't go to the police. Just relax, Katy. Your mom and I ..."

Paul ended the call and tossed the phone to Daryl in the front passenger seat, who rolled his window down a little and flipped the phone into nearby bushes. "Let's go," Paul said. He looked at Katy and warned her, "One peep, and you get wrapped up again, got it?"

Katy nodded, wishing she could wipe away the tears. But she knew her daddy wouldn't let her get hurt.

Paul watched the kid turned away from him. Everything was going according to plan. "Watch your speed -- not too fast, not too slow," Paul warned Timmy.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," the driver grumbled.

*

Trying to get to his own house ... the area was so clogged with police, media, and gawkers. Once Jim identified himself to the police, they were able to lead him through the gauntlet and he even managed to park in his own driveway.

Inside, a coat-and-tie wearing police officer explained what Jim already knew, that their daughter had been kidnapped. The pattern fit similar incidents in other parts of the state. Recent news coverage of Jim's company might have had something to do with it; they weren't sure.

Jim interrupted and told them he and his wife needed some private time together. He took Doris by the hand back to their bedroom, closing the door.

Inside, they hugged each other fiercely. Jim had kept constant mental contact with Katy, and drew Doris in as well, watching through Katy's eyes as she was driven down the freeway. Jim knew their destination, and that it would take them a half hour at least at this time of day.

Jim looked into his wife's eyes. He showed her his overall plan -- first and foremost, keep Katy safe. He'd gone through the kidnapper's minds, more like sewers, and none of them had any intention of hurting Katy -- they were as scared as she was. Second was to wipe out the kidnapping ring. He didn't have leads on the higher ups, yet. While he knew where they were going, he could only follow with Katy until they got there. The tricky part, Jim reminded his wife, was doing things in a way that wouldn't give away Jim's mental abilities, or Katy's developing abilities. If it had just been one on one, one person trying to grab her, Katy would have been able to paralyze her assailant at least long enough to get away. But the way it had been done, she didn't stand a chance.

They held each other for a few minutes, whispering. Jim maintained the three-way contact with Katy and Doris.

Holding hands, they went back to the living room. Multiple people started talking at once.

"All of you, shut up," Jim told them. He pointed to the one with the tie. "You are the only one that talks to us, got it? The rest of you bozos, you go through him, or through the door, got it?" He got out his cell phone and flipped it open, going to call records. "I've already been contacted. I spoke with Katy. They want a quarter million in cash, unmarked nonsequential bills. Here's the call info, but I'd bet that phone is in a dumpster somewhere." He handed his phone to the one with the tie and took Doris by the hand into the kitchen, where he got a soda.

"Mister Harris," one of the uniformed police started saying, "We need..."

Jim turned on him, pointing a finger. "Shut up or get out! We don't talk to *you*, we only talk to *him*." Jim pointed to the one with the tie again, then turned his back on them and led Doris back to their bedroom, closing the door.

They sat on the edge of the bed, holding each other. Doris cried softly, holding on. Jim held her, trying to keep calm, to keep Katy and his wife calm, but it was hard, so hard, with the rage seething through him. He could reach out and kill them, or make the car break down. But that could be dangerous to Katy. The ones in the van, they were dead already; they just didn't know it. He wanted the ringleader. He wanted the ringleader so bad he could taste it.

*

Traffic wasn't too bad; they beat the rush hour, and most of it thinned out as they went into the foothills.

They parked the minivan in the garage of the rented house, waiting until the garage door closed before opening the van doors.

"Bring her," Paul told Lou.

Lou picked up the girl, who didn't even make a sound, and carried her into the house.

Exposing the girl's feet, Paul put a cloth wrap around her right ankle, then threaded the light steel aircraft cable through the loops in the wrap three times, making sure it was snug. He slid the anchors up the cable and crimped them securely. The other end of the cable was secured to an anchor bolt drilled and screwed into the concrete slab floor of the house. He unwrapped her.

Katy looked at the thing on her ankle, following the wire to the bolt in the floor. She looked up at the men and wiped her eyes.

Paul didn't understand it; she wasn't screaming, fighting, crying.

"Don't try anything, and you'll be fine," Paul told her.

She nodded, still rubbing her eyes. *Now, daddy?* she asked mentally.

"Do you need to use the bathroom?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. She felt her daddy's answer and sighed. She understood -- they needed to learn more.

Paul showed her to the nearby bathroom. It was small and windowless, and the door knob had been removed. Paul turned on the light. He pointed to the tub, which had blankets and a pillow in it. "That's where you're going to be sleeping."

He stepped back and pulled the door closed.

Katy sighed. She wasn't as scared now. She smiled -- they were the ones who should be scared! Daddy reassured her she was doing the right thing, and to keep her eyes open. She knew Daddy was watching.

But right now, she did have to pee.

Exiting the bathroom, the man who'd grabbed her was standing there. "I'd like something to drink, please," she asked.

Lou nodded, and led her back to the kitchen.

Paul was sitting at the table. "The first time you try anything, we lock you in the bathroom, got it?" he told her.

"I understand," she agreed. She opened the refrigerator. "I'd like some Pepsi, and a banana, please," she asked Lou.

Lou looked to Paul, who nodded.

Katy looked at what Paul was doing, connecting something to cell phones he had on the table? Wires ran from the phones out to funny wire things out on the patio.

Jim smiled, looking through his daughter's eyes. Clever -- high gain, very directional antennas pointed at cell towers down in the valley. That would make locations very difficult to establish. And a bag with more cell phones! One call each?

Paul checked the phones, the blue one and the green one. Just like the instructions said, the blue one was for calling his boss, and the green one was for calling the mark. Both showed full sets of bars, even up here in the hills. Paul figured it had something to do with the stuff on the patio, but he wasn't paid to think, as he'd been told many times.

He picked up the blue phone and dialed a number when it was ready.

Jim, looking through his eyes, wrote the number down.

"Hello?" the voice answered on the other end.

"Steps one, two, and three done with no problems," Paul reported.

"Excellent," replied the voice. "How is our guest?"

"Sittin here drinkin Pepsi and eatin fruit," Paul replied.

Damn, Jim thought, might be hard to get leads on the higher ups...

"Give me a call at eight tonight. Be sure and offer her dinner."

"Will do," Paul replied, "Call you back at eight and see she gets dinner." He knew he was expected to repeat back the instructions he was given.

"Very good." Click,

Paul put the phone down and turned it off. This was too easy... He gave her a nasty look.

"I'm not going anywhere," Katy told him.

"Got that right," Paul muttered.

"Can I have my bag so I can do my homework?" she asked.

Paul shook his head, and got her bag.

Katy took out her books and got to work. She hoped daddy was going to do something good...

*

A lot of people were getting impatient, Jim included. He'd been in contact with the president of their bank, starting the process of gathering cash. An FBI crew had arrived, tried to take over things, but Jim told off their lead, insisting on going through the one local cop, Lieutenant Walsh. It took a while to get the point across, but he did. Through Walsh he learned that this kidnapping did indeed fit the pattern, and the way the other incidents had gone, if he paid the money, his daughter would be released unharmed. Of course he learned that and much more from rummaging the minds of the people present, and the kidnappers. Once before, police had caught intermediaries, but the brains behind the operation hadn't been located. That fit with what the leader of the gang thought; he figured there were at least two kidnap crews working. The way the gangs worked, the cash was dropped off in a crowded area, and once the gang left the drop site and verified the money, they called their cronies to release the hostage.

Jim was surprised when he rifled the FBI lead's mind; that guy was quite relieved at Jim insisting all contact go through the local cop; that way the FBI guy could relax and wait until they had enough information to start being useful.

Jim had one of the police technicians run the phone number he'd picked up, and not surprisingly, it was a cell phone, as was the one from the first call he'd received. They were running the location of that one, but Jim had his hunches what it would show, most likely a similar trick with a directional antenna. Turn the phone on, make a call, turn the phone off. Use a different phone each time? That would make it a lot harder.

*

Paul turned on the blue phone again at eight, and dialed the number.

"Yes?" answered the voice.

"We had dinner. She even did her homework," he reported.

Laughter on the phone. "Place the call, speakerphone," the voice instructed.

“Right,” Paul said, “Speakerphone.” He picked up the green phone, turned it on, pushed the speakerphone button, and called.

“Hello?” Jim said, answering his cell phone using the headset, one of the FBI technicians holding the phone.

“Mister Harris, how are you doing getting the money together?” Paul asked.

“It should be ready tomorrow morning. Takes time to get that much cash together. Let me talk to my daughter.”

“Go ahead,” said the other voice in Paul’s ear.

“Talk,” Paul said to Katy.

“I finished my homework,” Katy said, “and had dinner. I don’t have a toothbrush, though.”

Jim smiled. “Good girl. We’ll get you home as soon as we can. We love you.”

“I love you and mommy -- I’m scared, daddy,” Katy said, suddenly close to crying.

The voice on the other phone laughed maliciously. “That’s it,” he said, “Hang up.”

Paul disconnected the other call and reported, “Done. What now?”

“Don’t do anything stupid, and call me at seven tomorrow morning,” the voice instructed.

“Call tomorrow at seven. Got it,” Paul repeated. The call ended with a click.

Paul powered off both phones, disconnected the antenna wire from the green phone, took the piece of green tape from the top of the phone and put it over the phone display to indicate it had been used. He put it in the used phone bag, then got another phone with a piece of green tape out of the other bag and connected it to the antenna and charger so it would be ready to go.

*

Jim took Doris by the hand and went back to their bedroom, closing the door, letting the mob in the other room argue.

They sat on the bed holding hands. Jim shook his head. “I don’t see how I’m going to get to the higher-ups,” he explained to Doris. “The team leader was recruited over the phone, and has only had phone contacts. I can’t track a bag of money, so there’s no sense taking it that far. I don’t want her to spend the night with those vermin.”

Doris nodded, tears showing. “I want my baby back,” she whispered.

Jim hugged her. "I do too, darling. She won't be hurt, I promise.

*

Katy sat in the kitchen chair, holding her knees. She'd had a chicken pot pie for dinner, same as the men. She could feel her daddy, like she always could, and if she tried, she could feel her mommy as well. Mommy was crying, and scared. Katy didn't like that, and it made her a little scared, too. But before, she'd only been able to feel mommy when they were close, like in the same room -- now she could feel her from far away!

Her daddy felt mad, really mad, madder than she'd ever felt him before. She let him know she was all right.

She heard her daddy, clear and cold, *Katy, if you don't want to watch, go to the bathroom now. We're getting you out, and I'm going to start.* Katy held her knees closer, rocking a bit more. *I'm fine, daddy,* she thought back. *I want to watch. Do something good!*

*

Paul looked over the printed instructions again. They had two hour shifts to stay up and watch. They had air mattresses and blankets in the den, the only furniture in that room, except for the alarm clocks. Damn, the gloves they had to wear itched. They'd ditched the masks when they'd ditched the stolen van used for the snatch.

He looked out the window at the lights sparkling in the valley below. Tomorrow this time he'd be on his way to Vegas, \$20,000 richer.

"Why couldn't we have beer?" Lou complained, looking in the refrigerator again. He closed it and walked away in disgust.

Paul was about to say something, when all of a sudden the lights dimmed, flickered, and went out! Suddenly it felt really cold in the house. He tried the light switches -- he could see his breath! "What's going on?" The only light they had was from outside, streetlights and other lights coming in through the windows. A layer of cold fog appeared, a couple of feet thick, obscuring the floor.

"What the fuck is going on!" Lou yelled, his hands in the air, stepping through the heavy fog, swirling thickly about his legs.

Lou jumped, like he'd been poked.

Lou jumped, then screamed! Paul ran to him, but backed up as Lou spun around and thrashed his arms, screaming, clawing at the air. It looked like blue glowing ghost snakes were attacking Lou! Wherever the blue ghost snakes touched him, sparks flew. And some of them ... some of the snakes stuck their heads *inside* him, producing orange sparks. One struck inside

Lou's chest, and another struck inside his head, Lou screaming all the more, thrashing, trying to grab them, but his hands just passed through the snakes. The other men rushed up as well, but held back, keeping their distance. "What the fuck?" yelled one of them.

Lou screamed again and fell forward into the fog. He disappeared silently; they didn't even hear him hit the floor.

Paul had a very bad feeling about this. "The girl," he said, turning around.

Katy was sitting in the chair, holding her knees to her chest, the seat of the chair just above the fog layer.

"Yah, the girl!" Daryl said, and took a step toward her, reaching out...

Flashes of blue swept through the fog to Daryl, jumping up and attacking.

Daryl screamed and writhed as the glowing blue ghost snakes swarmed him! Paul glanced behind him; Paul pointed to one of the others. "Look for Lou!"

"I ain't!" yelled Timmy, shaking his head and stepping back, adding "I getting the fuck out of here!"

Paul looked over at the girl, who was sitting in the chair, arms wrapped around her legs. And she was smiling...

"What are you doing?" he yelled at her, yelling over Daryl's screaming.

Katy smiled.

Daryl let out an even louder shriek and vanished as a large blue ghost snake dove inside his chest! He fell backwards and disappeared into the fog.

"What did you do to them?" Paul yelled at the girl.

Katy smiled and said, "I didn't do anything." But then she pointed at Timmy and said, "You're next!"

Timmy jumped and turned as if to run, but started screaming and writhing as he was swarmed by the malevolent blue glow of the snakes.

Paul really wished he had a gun, but the guy running the deal insisted, no guns. "Stop it! Stop it now, or I'll..." Paul shouted at Katy, and pointed a finger at her.

His hand, his whole arm felt like it was on fire, on fire and being crushed as ghostlike glowing blue snakes wrapped themselves around his arm, biting, squeezing... He screamed as one dove *inside* his arm, and he could feel it coming up his arm, up through his shoulder...

Katy watched as the last two disappeared into the fog and it was quiet again.

The fog dissipated quickly. The lights came back on, and the room felt warm again.

“Thank you, daddy!” Katy called out, clapping her hands. Then she picked up the phone with the green tape on it, turning it on. She nodded and listened as daddy’s voice in her head explained what she needed to do.

*

The crowd jumped and went quiet when Jim’s cell phone rang again.

Jim hit the button on his headset and said, “Hello?” The others safely out of the way, he’d linked Doris in with Katy as well, calming both of them.

Katy’s voice came through the headset, and the speaker the FBI technician had connected to the phone. “Daddy, I’m all right. The men left the house. The address is 3140 Santa Mira Drive, but I don’t know what city. We drove past a park close to here, Los Gusanos, that’s G - U - S - A - N - O - S. I don’t know if they’re coming back. Please send someone quick, daddy!”

One of the cops shouted out a city name and another grabbed a radio.

Jim smiled and hugged Doris. “Good job, sweetie. Stay on the phone with us. We’re getting help now...”

One of the police called out, “ETA three minutes!”

Jim told her, “The police should be there in about three minutes. Where are you?”

“I’m in the kitchen, daddy. I’m all right. Can someone tell Becky and her mom that I’m okay, please?”

Jim smiled as he held Doris close and kissed her forehead. “As soon as you’re safe, we’ll tell them, sweetie,” he said into the phone.

Daddy, can I have more Pepsi? Katy thought to her daddy.

Yes, sweetie, you can -- you’re probably going to be up for a while answering questions, he replied.

I don’t want to talk to anybody until I’m with you and mommy, Katy sent back.

That’s fine, sweetie. Jim was proud of her.

Daddy, a while ago when I was scared, I reached out ... and I could feel mommy, Katy told him. Making it go dark and cold first, the fog and the blue snake things were really cool!

Jim squeezed Doris and kissed her on the head again. *Our little girl is growing up*, he shared with his wife.

"Tell her to stay where she is," one of the cops called out.

"Stay where you are, they're almost to you," Jim explained.

"I'm sitting at the kitchen table," Katy replied. She poured more Pepsi into her cup and took a sip.

"Coming up to the house," a cop called out.

Katy heard cars pulling up. "I think they're here," she said into the phone. She heard men running, and saw something move by one of the back windows. Shouting from the front of the house, and a crash. Men ran into the house, pointing guns and yelling. She sat in the chair drinking from her cup. "They sure are noisy!" she said.

They had to call for a unit with bolt cutters to cut the cable around Katy's ankle, after carefully documenting the scene. No sign of the kidnappers.

Jim and Doris were proud of their daughter, who was adamant that she wasn't going to answer *any* more questions until she was with her mommy and daddy. No, they hadn't hurt her or touched her, just put the thing around her ankle. No, that's another question and I'm not answering questions until I'm with my mommy and daddy!

It took another two hours before that happened, the police insisting that Katy be taken to a hospital and checked out. She answered questions for the medical team, but not many.

During that time, Jim sat at his home computer, looking at Google Earth. He had the location of a cell tower, and the sector the call had come from; that's all they had. When the police tech gave him the information (a conversation the tech had already forgotten), he remarked that it was strange, that when they triggered the location system to look for that particular phone, only one cell tower saw it. Usually a bunch did, and the one with the best signal made the connection.

Jim nodded, looking at Google Earth. The same deal -- extending a narrow sector from the cell tower, yes, it ran right up a canyon, with only a few houses showing.

Katy's reunion with her parents was emotional, even though Jim had kept in constant mental contact. The police cars pulled up, and an officer got out and started to pick her up, but Katy insisted on walking.

Jim and Doris came out on the porch, under the bright lights of TV crews and strobe flashes from other media. Katy walked a few steps, then ran to her parents, jumping into their arms.

The media of course clamored for attention, bombarding them with questions.

Katy turned in her daddy's arms and looked out at the bright lights. She pointed at one, and things quieted down a bit. "You're breaking my mommy's flowers!" she shouted. That got some laughter. Katy waved a hand until the mob quieted down again. "How many of you would be here if my skin was brown?" she asked, and then turned back to her daddy's arms.

Jim hugged his daughter, and his wife. Doris gave him an accusing look. *I didn't -- that was all Katy, and I'm proud of her!* Jim sent to Doris, and Katy. Katy hugged them both.

Inside the house, things looked tough. Holding his daughter, he said out loud, "Katy, I'm sure these people have a lot of questions for you. I want you to do your best, but when you're tired, we'll stop, and start again tomorrow morning. Okay?" Jim gave the FBI team nasty looks.

Three and a half hours...

*

Jim smiled and relaxed. "I think that's enough for tonight," he told the realtor.

"See something you like, Mr. Harris?" the realtor asked, noticing the first smile she'd seen on her potential client.

After the kidnapping, he and Doris had ostensibly started looking for a new house. Actually, Doris had been interested in a larger house for a while; she was looking, in the same area they now lived in. Jim's searches were more wide ranging, particularly in some spots up in the foothills, on the other side of the valley.

Two different realtors, eight nights of driving slowly through neighborhoods, the realtor driving slowly as Jim reached out to the houses, hoping to find occupants and probe their minds.

And on the eighth night, bingo! A house at the end of a cul-de-sac, the top of a narrow canyon looking down into the populated valley below. Jim closed his eyes and recalled the image of the van in the driveway, advertising an antiques shop a few minutes away. He just might swing by on his way home...

But the important part, he found the bastard! He'd known so quickly... Oh, scanning minds even lightly, it was so easy to pick up the Deadly Sins, but this one mind, he could tell from the first contact, this was someone *special*.

Another sigh. He'd argued with Doris, one of their few arguments. They'd argued about what to do when he found the bastard. Yes, put a stop to his schemes -- Doris understood what

that meant. Before they'd gotten married, Jim had shared his secret, his talent, with his bride-to-be. He was so lucky, he thought, she loved him in spite of it. Loved him in spite of passing that terrible gift to their only child, their Katy.

Now Jim knew he'd identified the bastard. He'd confirmed in that sewer of a mind, choosing Jim and Katy based on a news story, a newspaper article, a short piece in the local evening news. As he'd done before, as he'd done with others.

Jim set his jaw -- as the bastard would *never* do again. Jim knew there was another kidnapping in the planning stages; he needed more information, but he'd derail that one.

The need for more information was about the only reason Jim had left the bastard breathing. But while he gathered information, he would be sure nobody else got hurt.

*

Ken made his way to the hotel's registration desk, only having to wait a few minutes in line.

"Ken Allen," he said, getting out a copy of his registration, and his credit card.

The young woman behind the desk tapped a computer keyboard. "Welcome back, Mister Allen, here for three nights, convention rate, oh, one moment..." She stepped away from the desk for a moment, returning with a large mail envelope. "This arrived for you. I'll imprint your card... Sign here, please... Room 316 as requested, do you need help with luggage?"

Ken picked up the envelope, about nine by twelve inches, one of the padded envelopes he used in his antiques business -- with his labels on it, but not his writing, even though it was addressed to him, here at the hotel! "Ah, no, I can get it, thanks," he told her, putting his credit card back in his wallet, and scooping up the card key for his room and the registration materials, along with the mystery package.

Up to the third floor, down the corridor, nice room, clean, not stuffy. Leaving his bag by the closet, he walked to the desk, taking out his pocketknife and opening the padded envelope.

Inside was something about six, seven inches on a side, wrapped in cardboard. Opening that revealed a hand mirror with a note taped to the back. He looked in and at the mirror. Junk -- not going to get any interest at an antiques show, that's for sure.

He unfolded the note taped to the back and read it.

Mister Allen, if you want to see the person in the mirror alive, you'll do exactly as I say. Don't contact the police, as they can't help you. You need to think about gathering cash, unmarked and nonsequential bills, and more than \$150k. I'll call you on your cell phone at eight tonight. Try anything and you will die. Painfully.

Ken turned pale and sat in the chair by the desk. He placed the mirror carefully on the table, then rested his head in his hands.

He sat back after a few moments. Not good! Whoever it was, they knew a lot about him. He looked over the envelope. Evidently had access to his shop as well, even used his postage meter.

He frowned. They had access to his shop, knew his calendar, that he'd be here for the antiques show, knew his cell phone number. If they'd just wanted to kill him, they'd had ample opportunity. He managed a slight smile. No, this was about *revenge*. Someone was acting emotionally -- and when people act emotionally, they make mistakes. He sighed and nodded. He just *might* survive this. *Might*. He was starting at a significant disadvantage.

Okay, think, and think logically. The language in the note -- the language he used. Ah, but the language he'd used a year or so ago! And the reference to \$150k -- he'd moved to 200, 250, and then 300 over the last year as he refined the process. So, someone from that initial group of victims? He shook his head -- all those files were back in his office. A cold thought -- in his office on the computer. Supposedly encrypted, but he wasn't an expert on that. Okay, ditch all those files when he gets back. If they could be decrypted, they were his death sentence.

He looked at the note again. Nodded to himself -- this was about revenge. Revenge, terror, death. Isn't that what he would do? He allowed himself a smirk. No, it's just business. Maybe a little revenge, but death, quickly. He needed to be *very* careful on this one.

In the ballroom overlooking the Pacific, sipping a glass of chilled white wine, Ken mingled with other Antique Guild members. A few minutes before eight, he made sure his cell phone was tuned on. He didn't give out the number, but he was fairly certain that wasn't an issue. He was sure it wasn't an issue when his phone rang at just about eight.

"Excuse me; I've been expecting this call," he apologized to others and stepped away, putting the headset in his ear and pushing the button on its side.

"Hello?" he said, stepping out on to a balcony.

"Mister Allen, good evening and thank you for taking my call," an amused male voice said.

"Indeed. What can I do for you?" Ken offered.

"Well, first off, I suggest you suspend any and all kidnapping activities. If even a copycat hits the news, you are going to feel it, but not for very long. Understood?"

Ken nodded. Whoever it was, at least they didn't know his planning. He'd lost a crew four or five months ago, had two rapid successes, and then a completely botched snatch. He hadn't moved past the planning stage on anything else, preferring to remain very quiet.

“Understood and agreed,” he replied. That also confirmed it was the kidnapping part of his portfolio causing trouble, not the blackmail business, which he suspected he was going to need.

“Good. I’m a simple man such as yourself, Mister Allen, and this is merely another business transaction. An important transaction, but it’s business. When you return, I would like you to gather three hundred thousand dollars, the usual caveats, nonsequential, unmarked -- you know the drill. One week from today. Delivery details to be worked out, but I’m sure the approach will be one you’re familiar with. Understood?”

Ken nodded again. “Three in a week. How can I be sure this is the sole payment?”

The voice at the other end of the phone laughed. “I’m sure you can give a better response to that than I can, Mister Allen, having dealt with the question far more times than I.”

Ken made the assumption his other lines of work were also known. “Sir, you are most thorough. I will do as you request. When we speak next, I may also have some suggestions on further business between us.”

The voice laughed again. “As long as they assume you and I will be toasting our mutual success in Paris with our mistresses ten years hence, I would be interested.”

“Sir, I assure you,” Ken spoke honestly, “that would be a most desirable outcome.”

“I think we understand each other very well,” the voice replied flatly, acknowledging the mutual death threats.

“When should I expect to hear from you?” Ken asked.

“I’ll call in a week, possibly a day earlier,” the voice replied.

“Thank you for giving me the time,” Ken remarked.

“We do our best when we have the time,” the voice concluded. “Until next week.”

“Goodnight,” Ken responded.

Click.

Ken sighed and pulled his phone from his pocket. He pushed buttons. Didn’t recognize the calling number. No matter.

Ken turned and mused, looking out over the Pacific. Whoever it was, he seemed to know pretty well what Ken was up to. Assume access to Ken’s office, home, computers. Access to secured information on those computers? Given physical access to the systems, probably.

So how was he going to fight this one -- or should he? It was something to consider, partnering with this person, or offering them a percentage, particularly if that percentage got him an explanation of how he'd screwed up.

For now, though, assume he's under the microscope. How to set up secondary channels, new channels, resistant to detection and intercept?

Indeed. His wineglass was empty. For now, though, he was an antiques dealer, and one with an empty wineglass.

*

Ken shook his head again, laughing under his breath as he pulled out of the hotel parking structure. He flipped his sunglasses down to shield his eyes. The bastard, he thought, the cheeky bastard -- I probably saw him countless times over the last few days, maybe even shook his hand, ate with him.

Reviewing his room bill, a phone call, and he recognized the number, his cell phone. Why would he call himself? Then he looked at the time and date the call had been placed. The bastard had placed the call from Ken's own room at the hotel! What balls!

Ken laughed more as he pulled out into traffic. He was looking forward to meeting this bastard. Looking forward to it -- almost as much as he was looking forward to watching him die.

*

Ken sat at his computer and frowned. Unfortunately, the way he'd set things up made it very difficult to track when his encrypted archive was accessed -- a deliberate choice.

With a sigh he double-clicked on the archive file. He got out his wallet and pulled out a card, flipping it over to show a long group of nonsense characters.

Looking through his eyes, Jim copied down the key, and typed it in to his computer, to unlock his copy of the archive.

Ken nodded, looking at the files. He double clicked the blackmail spreadsheet -- who should he hit up for the money? He started going down the list, remembering a bit about each "client."

*

Jim sighed, shaking his head. He had the files. He felt like he'd been dragged through a sewer, going over that list... He closed the archive, dragged it to the trash, and clicked secure delete.

Ransom

With a sigh, he said, “No!” and shook his head. It stops here, he thought. It stops here, and now. No more shakedowns. No more blackmail.

He pulled a quarter from his pocket, muttered, “Heads he goes slow, tails he goes quick,” and flipped it up in the air, closing his eyes.

He looked down at the carpet where the coin had landed.

He shrugged and sighed once more, closing his eyes and reaching out.

*

Doris woke partially when she heard Jim come into their dark bedroom, and go right to the bathroom. He closed the door before he turned on the light so he wouldn’t disturb her. She heard the shower going. She smiled; the new house was going to be so nice. Something good was going to come out of this mess after all.

She woke partially a while later to her husband crawling in bed with her. She held him -- he felt ... needy. “Something wrong, darling?” she whispered, kissing the top of his head and holding him the way he liked, the way both of them liked.

Jim held his wife, letting go. “It’s over. He won’t hurt anybody else.”

Doris held her husband. But now her eyes were wide open.

FIN

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Ransom

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