

Prologue

“What was that?”

Beneath the roar of the low flying helicopter, the barking of the dogs, and the staccato bursts of the police radios, the two state troopers heard a nearby animal squealing.

They directed their flashlight beams into the thickly wooded paths that stitched back and forth across the camping ground. At first they saw only the placid ocean glinting through the spruce tree trunks but then, as the police helicopter spiraled northward driving gusts of wind down into the trees and underbrush, they spotted an apparition, a dwarf sized form so decayed with twigs and leaves it resembled a mythical creature. A miniature Caliban. For a moment it was pinned in the vaporous halo of the flashlights, and from its small throat came a moan, as of some primeval species waiting for the wolves to close in for the kill. It removed its grubby paws from its face to reveal eyes blind with terror, a mouth stretched into a black hole. At the sight of the two troopers, the creature was momentarily immobilized, but then it spun around to escape.

The two men sprinted after it. It gained the other side of the bridge and nearly reached the woods before one of them was able to lay hands on the small maddened thing.

“Hey, take it easy, kid. We’re on your side.”

It shrieked and kicked as they picked it up and headed back to the parking lot. One of the men spoke into his radio, and when they reached the parking lot, it swarmed with police cars, fire trucks, television trucks with antennae poking up like above ground periscopes, uniformed and plainclothes police and firemen, national guardsmen, public service employees, volunteer search parties, journalists and TV reporters. Police dogs leaped and pulled against their leashes. Trucks, SUVs, ordinary cars and motorcycles filled every available space in the lot.

“– fearing another strike by the ‘fly’ killer,” an eager, almost jovial TV reporter was shrilling into her microphone, “representatives of local, county and state enforcement agencies, assisted by volunteers, have been out in droves since last – hold it! There’s been a new development! Something’s happening!” Her happy excitement was palpable. “I believe – yes, yes! They’ve found one of the children – ”

“Hey, clear the way,” the trooper was pleading. “Have a heart. We have to get this kid to his mother – ”

At the word “Mother” the animal turned into a little boy. “Mama! Mama! Mama!” he bellowed.

The police cut a swath, elbowing reporters and photographers aside, and the troopers relinquished their find to a plainclothesman amid shouts of, “Which one is it? Is the kid hurt? Was he molested? Has he told you where the others are? What happened to him?”

Along with the child, four men piled into one of the police cars and, strobe lights turning, siren wailing, it angled out of the parking lot and headed out along the dirt road that led to the entrance of the camping ground. A convoy of official cars and media vans followed, while others remained behind to continue the search. Through it all, the small captive kept up his ear splitting lament.

They speeded along the dirt road through woods, fields, and then across a narrow causeway over a tidal inlet. The ocean off to the left of the car twinkled, a treasure trove of reflected jewels.

“Slow down,” one of the men complained in a tired voice, “although wouldn’t it be funny if we saved the kid from the maniac, only to kill him in a car crash?”

No one said anything but the driver slowed the car.

At the western edge of Freeport, the car skidded to a stop in front of a group of low-lying, institutional brick structures. The men hustled the child into the brightly lit police building, closing the door behind them and stationing guards to keep out their pursuers. The moment they were inside, the child stopped screeching and collapsed. A quivering mass of jelly, he rested his head against the chest of the policeman who held him. His eyes were blank and his facial muscles, under coats of mud and leaves, were loose. From outdoors came the din of the media, but inside it was oddly tranquil, as if they had entered a sheltered cove after being buffeted by a turbulent sea.

“There’s no answer at the Haskell house,” the desk sergeant said. “They must be out searching on their own. I left a message on their machine.”

As the police officer placed the child on the wooden bench opposite the sergeant’s raised desk, another man appeared and knelt in front of the small boy.

“I’m Captain Rohman, son. What’s your name?”

From a whirling dervish the child had metamorphosed into a dirty vegetable. He stared past the captain and showed no reaction to the question. Intermittently he stirred, but only to bring a little fist up to wipe his nose. The captain reached into his pocket and offered him a handkerchief. The child shrank away.

“Tell us what happened, son.”

This time the head lifted, giving everyone in the room a view of a face more swamped with misery than any one of them had ever witnessed. A policeman blew his nose.

“Bobby,” the little boy whispered.

“Is that your name? You’re Bobby Unger? Okay, Bobby, tell us what happened.”

His voice heart broken, the child wailed, “Don’t tell Mama!”

“Don’t tell Mama?” Tension, perplexity and compassion warred on the captain’s face. “Where *is* your mama, Bobby? Wasn’t she with you?”

The dismal little figure humped itself into a ball and moved back against the wall. It seemed to be burrowing, looking for a crack behind the bench into which it could disappear. A paroxysm shook the small frame and a single excruciating sob broke from the throat. Around the room, stolid faces, accustomed to viewing tragedies on a day-to-day basis, were making visible efforts to remain rigid.

“Bobby, you have to help us find the others.”

No response.

One of the uniformed men reached into a pocket and produced a lint coated lemon drop. He brushed it off with his fingers and held it out on the palm of his hand. The little boy looked at it for a moment and then, with a swipe of his hand, knocked it to the floor.

“You thirsty, Bobby? Want a drink?”

No response.

“Tell us where you were camping, Bobby. Were you pretending to be cowboys rounding up the cattle?”

This time when the boy raised his face, a child peered out of an old man’s eyes.

“Maybe you pitched your tent next to a stream. Cowboys always do that. Can you help us find the stream, Bobby?”

Suddenly the child screamed, “Stop calling me Bobby! I’m not Bobby. I’m Teddy!”

Confused, the captain looked around for help. None was forthcoming. “I thought when you said Bobby before – ”

A chest-ripping sob.

“Listen, Teddy, we have to find Bobby and his mother. We need your help. You went camping Friday with your friend Bobby – that right? And his mother. You were expected home yesterday morning but you never showed. What happened?”

The expression on the boy’s face made the captain falter. He rubbed his

palm against his nose. “You’ve got to tell us, Bo – Teddy. They may be in trouble.”

A sob.

“Maybe if we go back to the campground.”

The child turned his head towards the wall and his shoulders shook with uncontrollable, silent sobs.

“Want something to eat, Teddy? Want a drink?”

“I wanna’ be dead.”

The room was quiet. Everyone stared unbelievably at a four year old who wanted to be dead. The telephone rang. “South Springport Police . . . How long? . . . See anybody inside? . . . Name and address? . . . I’ll send somebody right over.”

He turned to a uniformed policewoman. “Party of the name of Lavenburg, corner of Upper Mast Landing Road and Bow, says a suspicious gray minivan’s been parked down the road from her house for six hours. Take a look.”

“How can a minivan be suspicious?” grumbled the policewoman. Obviously reluctant to leave the scene, she shoved a cap on her head and opened the door. Immediately, like the blast of a storm, shouts and questions hurtled into the station house. Before she could slam the door shut, the pandemonium grew even louder. A horn honked, tires squealed and two people – three, if you counted the object bouncing in a sling on the woman’s chest – burst into the room. It required the combined efforts of four policemen to close the door after them.

“Mama!” little Teddy screamed. The woman flew across the room to scoop the boy into her arms. The baby howled, the woman sobbed, the chaos rose.

“Teddy, Teddy darling. Teddy, my darling, are you all right? Are you hurt? Oh Teddy darling.”

She tried to pry him off the bench but suddenly he shrank away and hid his face. His father, tears streaming down his cheeks, forcibly lifted his son into his arms. “Are you okay, honey? Did anyone hurt you?”

Amid the babble and the confusion, Teddy lay quiescent against his father’s chest. After his initial cry of “Mama!” he was like a rag doll, his eyes dulled by grief. His father hugged and kissed him repeatedly, the tears falling on the boy’s head. They paid no attention to the others in the room. The baby continued to howl.

“Darling,” his mother said when she was able to control her voice, “What happened? Where were you? We expected you back yesterday morning.

Where are Bobby and his mother?”

Without warning, the little boy vomited, spilling the contents of his stomach over the front of his father’s shirt. His father hugged him closer as the small boy began retching out words. “Mama, Daddy, Mama, Daddy, Mama, Daddy – ”

A policeman disappeared and returned with wet paper toweling and a glass of water. Teddy’s father was completely oblivious to the other man’s efforts to clean off his shirt.

“Mama, Daddy, Bobby screamed and screamed. He begged somebody to help. And the man – the man – Mama, Daddy. Bobby screamed and begged and when the man wasn’t looking I ran away. I didn’t help. I ran away. And Bobby begged and begged”