

The Abduction

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Extract

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DAY ONE

4:59 A.M.

BEN BRICE opened his eyes to a dog needing to pee.
“Don’t worry, Buddy. I’m still alive.”

This man’s best friend slapped a wet tongue across Ben’s face once more just to make sure. Ben wiped the golden retriever’s saliva on the sheet and pushed himself to a sitting position. He groaned. Each beat of his pulse through the veins in his head felt like a ball-peen hammer pounding the inside of his skull. He didn’t remember finishing off the empty whiskey bottle sitting on the night table. But then, he never did.

He rubbed his bare arms against the chill of an April dawn and stood, but he had to grab the door to stay upright. He leaned against the wall until the world stood still, then he rode a hand-hewn pine log into the main room of the small cabin. He let Buddy out the back door and dropped down to the floor.

Lying face down on the coarse wool rug in his long underwear bottoms, he inhaled the Navajo scent that would forever inhabit the native weave. He closed his eyes and considered trying to sleep again, but he knew it would be in vain: a lifetime of hitting the deck at 0500 wouldn’t allow it. Resigned to his fate, he brought his legs together, placed his hands palms down under his chest,

inhaled deeply, and exhaled as he pushed. His triceps trembled as his rigid body rose from the rug. *One.* He dropped down hard and felt as if he might pass out. But he inhaled and exhaled and pushed his body up again. *Two.* Down to the rug. Pushed up. *Three.* Down. Up. *Four.* He reached a rhythm at twenty-five and finished at fifty.

He rolled over onto his back. He locked his hands behind his head, lifted his knees to a ninety-degree angle to his spine, contracted his abdominal muscles until his shoulders lifted off the rug, and twisted his torso to touch his left elbow to his right knee then his right elbow to his left knee. Then down. And up again and twist right then left and down. And up. Right. Left. And down. Fifty times.

He stood, steadied himself, and walked over to the kitchen sink. He stuck his head under the gooseneck faucet and turned the cold water on full; he braced himself as the well water traveled four hundred feet from inside the earth's gut and sputtered then gushed out of the pipe. His body shivered; it felt like he had plunged his head into a bucket of ice water. He dried off with a dishtowel then opened the refrigerator and drank orange juice out of the carton. He closed the door and paused to look at her—the blonde hair, the blue eyes, the bright smile. The refrigerator door was covered with photos of her, alone and with her family, the only blonde in the bunch.

Ben walked out the back door of the cabin and without looking dropped the empty whiskey bottle into the recycling bin filled with empty whiskey bottles. His breath fogged in the cold air. He was now wearing jogging shoes, sweats, and a baseball cap pulled down low to shield his blue eyes from the bright morning sun. The endless sky

was empty except for a vulture circling breakfast in the distance. He went over to the garden, picked a few weeds, and watered the neat rows with the sprinkler bucket. Buddy was barking, ready to get it on.

“Okay, boy, let’s go.”

They ran into the rugged terrain surrounding the cabin, Buddy leading the way, Ben lagging behind; his body ached from sixty years of life and thirty years of Jim Beam. He soon lost sight of Buddy in the sagebrush. But Ben knew he’d find his four-legged friend at the rock outcropping two miles out; and when Ben arrived, Buddy was there, sitting and waiting patiently for him to run up, bend over, and throw up, a morning ritual.

Ben spat out the last of the bile and wiped his mouth with a red handkerchief; he took a moment to gather himself. Only his hard breathing broke the silence of the land. All around him stretched the vast solitude that is New Mexico: the Taos Plateau bordered by the snow-capped peaks of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range rising tall into the blue sky, a land so beautiful and harsh that only an artist or a man running from his past would find it hospitable. To the north was Colorado, to the south Albuquerque, to the west Taos, and to the east the solitary cabin situated on a low rise, the metal roof reflecting the sun.

“Beat you back to the cabin, Buddy.”

Ben ran toward the rising sun and Buddy gave chase, delighted—this was the fun part.

Half an hour later, Ben had cleaned up and was wearing jeans, boots, and a corduroy shirt, eating a granola bar, and drinking a cup of coffee brewed from the strongest

beans available in Taos; they had come with a money-back guarantee to break through the haze of the worst hangover.

He walked outside, past the garden, and to the workshop. Inside, woodworking tools hung on the walls and what rich people in Santa Fe regarded as fine art in the form of furniture crowded the floor. He pulled a low stool next to the rocking chair he had fashioned out of mesquite, ran his hands along the arms, and began sanding the rough spots. Buddy spun around three times, plopped down in the doorway, and settled in for the day. The sound of sandpaper scraping over wood and Buddy's snoring soon joined in a melody of sorts, the only music of Ben Brice's life.

The sun's rays now angled low across the workshop floor, the only evidence that another day of his life had passed. Ben laid his tools down, stood, and stretched his back. He walked outside and around to the west side of the cabin porch and sat in his rocking chair where he would watch the sun melt and the sky over Taos turn orange, where he would listen to the coyotes' lonesome cries and sometimes he would answer them, where he would remain until the distant city lights dimmed and the night chill set in. His thoughts would then return to the past, always to the past that owned his life like a bank holding a mortgage that would never be paid in full. He would think of the life that might have been—a young man's dreams, the great adventure that was not, the death of the brother he never had, a wife who loved him but left him . . . and then he would think of his failures, re-visiting each one until he arrived at the failure that would forever haunt

his nights, and he would reach for the bottle. And so his life would go until one morning he would not answer Buddy.

But the day was not yet over and his thoughts not yet there. He whistled, and Buddy appeared and bounded up onto the half-sized rocking chair next to his. Ben reached over and scratched Buddy's neck then ran his fingers over the block letters carved into the seat back: GRACIE.

5:47 P.M.

SEVEN HUNDRED miles away a blonde-haired girl was sprinting down a soccer field in Texas.

“Run, Gracie, run!”

Gracie Ann Brice could run like a boy, faster than most boys her age, ten going on thirty, which made playing soccer against girls her own age seem almost unfair. But she was fun to watch, if your daughter was on her team.

She was driving the ball up the sideline, past the parents cheering in the stands and Coach Wally wearing a Tornadoes jersey and her dad filming her with the camcorder—she made a face for the camera—while shouting into his cell phone: “Cripes, Lou! Tell those New York suits it’s my killer app, it’s my company, it’s my IPO—and the price is gonna be thirty a share and not a freaking penny less!”

Multitasking, he called it.

Without breaking stride, Gracie drove the laces of her white Lotto soccer shoe into the ball, kicking it over the oncoming defenders’ heads and right to Brenda on the far side of the field. Then she pulled up and looked back at her skinny thirty-seven-year-old SO (Significant Other) on the sideline. He was now gesturing with the camcorder, swinging it up and down and videotaping the ground, the

sky, the ground, the sky, all of his attention on the cell phone. She couldn't help but shake her head and smile, the kind of smile grownups use on small children, but only those related to them by blood.

"God bless him," she said.

Her father was a total geek. He was wearing black penny loafers with white socks, wrinkled khakis, a long-sleeve blue denim shirt with the tail hanging out, a yellow Mickey Mouse tie (the one she had given him last Father's Day), and narrow black-framed glasses; his curly black hair looked like he had styled it by sticking his finger in an electrical socket. (Mom always said he looked like Buddy Holly with a blow dryer, but Gracie didn't know who that was.) All that was missing from this picture was a white pocket protector stuffed with mechanical pencils. John R. Brice was a doofus to the max, but Gracie loved him dearly, as a mother might love a child with special needs. He was now filming the parking lot.

"God bless him," she said again.

"Gracie, gosh darnit, we need a goal to tie! Quit foolin' around and score!"

Jeez, Coach, don't have a cow. Gracie turned away from her dad and focused on the game. Across the field, Brenda was losing the ball to number twenty-four, the Raiders' star player (she was eleven) and a real snot. Brenda was chubby and not much of an athlete. She hadn't scored a goal in the three seasons they had played together. Gracie grimaced as the snot charged Brenda and knocked her to the ground then stole the ball. Bad enough, but then the snot stood over Brenda like the football guys do after a big hit and snarled down at her: "Give it up, Fatty!"

Gracie felt the heat wash over her, the same as right before she had beaten up Ronnie down the street for

tripping Sam, a five-year-old alien who had taken up residence in their home. (They swear he's her brother.) Afterward—after running down the street to a safe distance, of course—Ronnie had yelled “lesbo” at her, which had seemed a particularly mean remark given that she was in love with Orlando Bloom like every other girl in fourth grade. She figured Ronnie had called her that because she was a tomboy and kept her blonde hair cut boy short, or because she had bigger leg muscles than him, or because she could bloody his big fat nose—or maybe because she wanted a tattoo for her eleventh birthday. Mom, however, said that her superior athletic ability threatened Ronnie's masculinity, always a fragile component of the male psyche. *Um, whatever.* The next time Gracie saw the little dweeb, she threatened his life and gave him a black eye.

“Gracie, she's on a breakaway! Stop her!”

The snot was now driving the stolen ball down the field toward the Tornadoes' goal, obviously suffering from some kind of—what had Mom called it?—oh, yeah, diminished capacity, thinking she could actually outrun Gracie Ann Brice to the goal. *As if.* Gracie turned on the speed.

“Watch out for number nine!” someone yelled from the Raiders' bench. Gracie wore number nine because Mia Hamm wore number nine. The select team coaches currently competing for her talents said that with proper coaching (by them), she could be as good as Mia one day. Mom said they were just blowing smoke up her skirt, saying anything to get her to play for their teams. Still, the thought of being another Mia Hamm and leading the USA team to World Cup victory, that was, like, way too cool to imagine.

“Gracie, block the shot!”

But maybe she'd better lead her team to victory in the girls' ten-to-eleven-year-old age bracket first.

Up ahead, the snot was slowing down and maneuvering for the best angle on goal; Gracie was sprinting up from behind and thinking, *You know, for an eleven-year-old, she's got a really big butt.* But she also had a really good shot opportunity at low post. The snot planted her left foot, kept her head down, and drove her right foot into the—

Air?

Nothing but air, girlfriend! Gracie thought as she slid feet first under the snot, executing the most totally awesome sliding tackle in the history of girls' youth soccer, clearing the ball from goal, and leaving the snot's foot kicking at nothing but air.

The crowd cheered!

But not the snot. "She fouled me!" she screamed, pitching a red-faced hissy fit right in the middle of soccer field no. 2. "She fouled me!"

But the referee shook his head and said, "All ball."

Gracie jumped to her feet and chased down the loose ball. She had the entire field and eight defenders between her and the Raiders' goal and not much time to get there. She decided on a sideline route—*duh*—but she first had to eliminate some of the defenders. So she dribbled the ball straight up the middle of the field, suckering the defenders in from their sideline positions—*come to mama, girls*—until five of the Raiders had congregated at the center line close enough to hold hands like the kindergartners on a class outing. Then Gracie exploded—*drive hard right at them, stop on a dime, spin left, and go, girl!*—and left them in her dust as she hit the sideline and turned on the speed, an all-out race down the chalk line, past the Tornadoes' stands, parents on their feet and shouting—

“Go, Gracie!”

“Run, Gracie!”

“Score, Gracie!”

—Coach’s arms windmilling her on as he ran down the sideline with her, his exposed belly jiggling like pink Jell-O below his jersey—*now that is like, majorly gross*—past her SO filming the other parents in the stands, God bless him, and to the Raiders’ goal and—*POW!*—blasting the ball past the diving goalie’s outstretched arms and into the net.

Tie game!

Gracie threw her arms into the air. She considered ripping off her jersey and throwing it into the air, too, revealing her stylish black Nike sports bra, but she decided against it because she wasn’t wearing a bra. Mom said her breasts might come in next year.

The other girls mobbed her and congratulated her and jumped up and down with her . . . but they all froze when those two words boomed out from the Raiders’ sideline, instantly silencing players and spectators alike and making Gracie feel as if someone had punched her in the stomach.

“Not again,” Brenda groaned.

They all turned to the Raiders’ sideline as the words rang out again—“Pa-a-a-a-nty che-e-e-ck!”—and hung over the field like a foul odor. The man had a megaphone for a mouth, the big creep! He was dressed in a slick suit, grinning like a fool and drinking from an oversized plastic mug—and from his red face he was drinking something stronger than Gatorade.

“Does he really think there’s a penis in your panties?” Brenda said.

“He knows you’re not a boy,” Sally said. “He’s just

jealous 'cause you're way better than his daughter, that little snot."

He was the snot's father and a big butthead, a football dad at a girls' soccer game, taunting the players from the sideline. Gracie bit her lower lip and fought back the tears. Coming from Ronnie the dweeb down the street was bad enough, but from a grownup? She wished she were bigger and older; she would run over and beat this guy up, too. She looked over at her dad, wishing he would—*Daddy, do something! Please!*

But he did nothing. He hadn't even heard the jerk. He was in his Helen Keller mode (deaf, dumb, and blind to the real world), facing away from the field, holding the phone to his ear with one hand and waving the camcorder around with the other like he was swatting gnats by the pool. Of course, what could he do anyway? The big butthead was twice his size; he would pound Dad's meat-ware (as he called his brain) into the turf. Gracie instinctively touched the silver star dangling on her necklace.

"Pa-a-a-a-nty che-e-e-ck!"

Sally said, "If your mother was here, she'd kick his big butt into next week."

Mom was definitely not one to turn the other cheek. She was one to rip your face off. *Don't get mad, get even.* Mom's words of wisdom. Not exactly "sticks and stones will break your bones, but names will never hurt you," but then, her mother *was* a lawyer. She wished Elizabeth Brice, Attorney-at-Large (as Dad called her behind her back), was here.

But most of all, she wished to die.

Over on the Raiders' sideline, the other parents were shaking their heads in disgust at the creep, but he was too big to risk saying anything and getting punched out,

always a possibility with a football dad. A mother, obviously the creep's wife, was pulling on his arm, desperately trying to move his big butt away from the field. He was protesting all the way: "What'd I do? I was just kidding, for chrissakes!" From Mrs. Creep's embarrassed expression, she had been there and done that with Mr. Creep before. Brenda shook her head and sighed.

"Another deranged dad at a children's sporting event."

Brenda's words brought the smile back to Gracie's face and another original country song by Gracie Ann Brice to mind. Facing the Creep family, she started singing, loudly, in her best Tammy Wynette twang:

"D-I-V-O-R-C-E,
Hey, lady, don't you see?
Your man ain't no Or-lan-do B.,
You best dump his fat ass A-S-A-P."

The girls laughed. The referee, a way cute guy about fifteen, smiled at her. The parents in both stands applauded. *Shoot, maybe she had the next hit single for the Dixie Chicks!* Gracie's spirits soared; the creep was now a distant memory, just another painful life experience for her to sing about. Like all the country girls say, you've got to experience pain in order to sing about pain, especially in front of fifty thousand screaming fans chanting *Gra-cie, Gra-cie, Gra-cie . . .*

"Gracie! Gracie!"

That was no screaming fan. That was a screaming coach. Gracie snapped; the whistle had blown to restart the game, and Coach Wally was spazzing out on the sideline, frantically pointing at his watch like he had just discovered time.

“Time’s running out! We need another goal to win! Gracie, it’s up to you!”

Focus, girlfriend!

Gracie’s official position was striker, but Coach had told her to play the entire field. That required extra running, but she could run the whole game. She could run all day. She was running now, to the sideline, to the ball—

—to the ground, face first, breaking her fall with her hands and elbows, hitting hard, sliding across the field, and eating dirt and grass.

“Panty check!”

A snarling voice from above. Gracie rolled over to see the snot glaring down at her. The snot had tripped her from behind, a flagrant foul and a real cheap shot, especially for a girl.

What a total hussy!

The snot ran off. Gracie spat out the gritty dirt and grass and vaulted to her feet; her teeth and fists were clenched and her entire four-foot-six-inch eighty-pound being was filled with an overwhelming urge to chase after the snot and thrash her right there in the middle of soccer field no. 2.

“Gracie, get a goal!”

But the victory was more important than introducing the snot’s face to Ms. Fist. So Gracie chased after the ball instead, barely noticing the blood and burning on her elbows.

Sally blocked a shot at goal and cleared the ball. Gracie anticipated Sally’s kick and thigh-trapped the ball. One quick fake and she was sprinting up the sideline toward the Raiders’ goal; the referee was keeping pace down the middle of the field, and the snot, her face screwed up with

anger, was closing down on Gracie. The snot had the angle, which meant Gracie couldn't simply outrun her. So Gracie slowed slightly, allowing the snot to catch up, then she took a big step forward, hoping the snot would think she was going hard up the sideline like she had on the previous goal. The snot went for the fake big time, taking one step that way to protect the sideline route, one step too many—and Gracie punched the ball between the snot's open legs, spun around the snot, and recaptured the ball. The snot tried to stay with her, but she lost her balance and hit the ground hard, right on her big butt, and rolled out of bounds. Gracie glanced down at her and said, "I'm so sorry . . . *Not!*"

Then she raced to the goal—a *breakaway!*—only the goalie standing between her and a last-second victory for the Tornados and glory for Gracie Ann Brice, the next Mia Hamm. The referee put his whistle in his mouth and checked the time; only seconds remained in the game. Gracie moved into position for her patented power kick—the goalie ran out to meet her this time, leaving the goal unprotected—aimed just inside the near post, planted her left foot, timed her kick perfectly, and—

—slotted a through ball to Brenda in the goal box behind the goalie instead. Brenda kicked the ball into the open goal just before the cute referee blew his whistle to end the game.

The Tornados' stands erupted in cheers!

The Raiders' goalie was now looking at Gracie with a stunned expression on her face, as if to say, *You passed off the game-winning goal?* Gracie shrugged. She figured Brenda needed the glory more than she did. Heck, Mia Hamm was a team player.

The other girls mobbed Brenda. Gracie was about to

join in when she heard a manly voice: “Number nine—you’re a player!”

The studly referee was walking past and pointing to her—and winking at her. *Oh, my God, I’m so sorry, Orlando, but I’m like, totally in love!* She stopped dead in her tracks and stared open-mouthed at the referee as he walked off the field; he was dreamy and she was dreaming of him coming to the house after the game on a Friday night like tonight and picking her up to go to a movie—of course, it would have to be rated PG because she was only ten, which might prove a bit of a problem but . . . she was rudely bumped back to reality by Coach Wally barreling past. His big belly was bouncing, his arms were spread wide, and he was blubbering like a baby. He scooped up Brenda and bear-hugged her like he hadn’t seen her in years. Coach Wally was Brenda’s dad.

The other dads were running onto the field and bear-hugging their daughters. But not her dad. Sometimes, like this time, Gracie wanted him to be more like a dad and less like a big brother who played Nintendo with her and took her and Sam to Krispy Kreme every Saturday morning and giggled until it hurt when Mom caught them throwing water balloons from the balcony off her bedroom at Ronnie and the other boys roller-blading down the sidewalk, and whose worst threat of punishment was to eBay her. Just once, she wanted him to be a real *father*, to scoop her up and bear-hug her like he hadn’t seen her in years—to be her grownup manly DAD, for Pete’s sake! She looked for him.

“Stupid, stupid rat creatures! Lou, you tell those brain-damaged bagbiters I’ll take my IPO and go home!”