

**STRAY
CONSEQUENCES**

BY

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TO IRENE SIDONIE, MY DARLING FRIEND,
SWEETHEART AND BELOVED PARTNER FOR
LIFE:

NO STRAYIN BECAUSE THERE'S NO NEED TO

CHAPTER 1

CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Sunday 1st February

It was, the kind of Sunday morning Joe Tolono felt made one happy to be alive and energetically healthy, touch wood. The air was cool and crisp, the weather slightly misty with not the slightest sign of rain.

Joe stood for a while by the large window of his tenth floor office, his lean tall frame pressed against the wall and his elbows resting on the windows support block.

The window's venetian blind was drawn apart allowing him to gaze with contentment at the vast pool of water, which stretched far into the horizon, until it vanished into the ocean.

Not a single canoe, boat, ship or any other type of vessel or human activity was there to disturb the beauty of the blue water's stillness.

Joe loved the Sunday morning graveyard quietness of his office and the scenery before him.

He loved the fact that he could come over in casual wear; a light blue T-shirt on dark loose fitting blue jeans, under which he had not bothered to put on underwear, left him feeling very comfortable.

In addition to enjoying his beatific surroundings, he also loved the emplacement of his office along the river's

edge of the non-residential area of Banana Island in Ikoyi.

The office always reminded him of how far he had come since four years back when he had teamed up with his bosom childhood friend Frank Madeke to drive their security company, Constant Watch Limited (CWL) from its small inconspicuous standing and location in Lekki to its current prestigious site in Banana and its high-profile stature in the society.

Joe looked back at those four years with a tinge of nostalgia. They were active, exciting and best of all financially very rewarding.

He had, after so many years of doing fairly well as a banker, managed to build a house in the upscale section of Lekki.

However, just four years after switching to co-managing a security services company he had along with his partner succeeded in moving the company offices to Banana Island; the most coveted part of Lagos city.

He had gone further by buying a two thousand square meters of land in the residential portion of the island and had built a lavishly furnished six bedroom house with swimming pool and a well-equipped gym; which he had unfortunately not had as much time as he would have liked to use in further developing his already well-muscle body.

Since landing in Banana, Joe had been going to the

office every Sunday morning for a few hours to laze around and leafing through major client files had become an addiction for him.

It had also become an excuse to avoid going to church every Sunday morning with his overly religious wife Clara and lovely five-year-old daughter Angel.

What next? Joe wondered, his mind going back once again to his days as a banker, a successful one until he had the misfortune of running into the evil couple that brought his career to an abrupt end.

Given the huge success he had since achieved as a co-owner of the security company, the thought occurred to Joe that fate must have arranged matters such that he would transit to his true calling of security management, rather than banking, when and in the manner he did.

Four years down the road he considered himself to be a successful security expert with the requisite credentials to lead a big security outfit such as CWL, which was thriving mainly due to his success in garnering and executing important contracts from high net worth individuals and corporations, as well as government agencies.

As with the period when he was in banking, his father in law's influence and long reach continued to facilitate the award of very lucrative security contracts to CWL.

This particular Sunday morning like other Sunday mornings when Joe happily spent some time in his office, he was suffused with a deep-seated contentment at how far he had come since the unfortunate affair of what seemed like ages ago but was only four years back.

Reluctantly returning to his desk, Joe leaned back on his high backed chair, with eyes closed and fingers interlocked behind his head. He stayed that way for about a minute before leaning forward to open the file in front of him.

CHAPTER 2

WHEN THE PAST COMES CALLING

Sunday 1st February

Of all the many major assignments that CWL was engaged in, Project AZ, as Joe and Frank had come to label it, was the most urgent, complex and time consuming.

One of the biggest multinational manufacturing companies in the country was being stolen blind. A significant portion of its imports of raw materials were disappearing as fast as they were arriving in the country and the thefts were clearly taking place within the company, which had without success done everything it could to get to the bottom of the nightmare.

Joe had right from inception, placed the financially rewarding AZ project under his direct supervision. He had put in more time and resources on the problem and although the rate and scope of the thefts had reduced dramatically, the problem was yet to be fully solved.

Much as he was reluctant to disturb his relaxed brief stay in the office on what had turned out to be one of the most beautiful Sunday mornings of the month, Joe decided to take a quick look at the findings of a team he had sent three days back to monitor the stock taking process of the manufacturing company.

He was just about to start reading the report of the team when his desk phone started ringing. Surprised he stared at the phone for a few seconds wondering who could be calling him at the office on a Sunday morning.

It surely could not be Clara or Frank as they both had his mobile phone number. All the major clients including the top management executives of the manufacturing company could also reach him on his mobile.

He looked closely at the phone; saw that the call was coming from the UK and picked the handset just as the phone was about to stop ringing.

“Good morning, CWL. How may I help you please?” He tried to make his voice as friendly as possible.

The voice that came back in reply sent chills up his spine. “Hi Joe, I’ll tell you in a minute how you must help me but first have you missed me?”

Joe’s heart pounded against his chest and his head suddenly felt very light. This could not be true. The voice on the line was no other than that of Nadine. A thousand years could pass and he would still remember the velvety texture of that voice.

But Nadine was dead or was supposed to be. The newspapers all carried the story of how she was gunned down at the Cotonou border and yet...

“Joe, are you still there...Joe?”

“Yes, yes I am. But....but,” Joe’s heart continued to race and pound mercilessly.

“But I’m supposed to be dead right?” Nadine’s follow-up chuckle compounded his confusion and fright.

“Yes. The press said you were killed.”

“As usual, the press was wrong. I’m still very much alive, out here in London, but that’s a story for another day.”

“What can I do for you?” Joe asked warily, still in a state of confusion and shock.

“Congratulations Joe. Your company has done very well under your capable leadership. You owe me at least a big thank you for forcing you to leave drab banking for more exciting security work.”

Joe remained silent and Nadine continued. “There’s a very important job that I would like CWL to handle for me under your direct supervision. It’s urgent and must be done within the next few days.”

“What job?” Joe asked still wondering how to handle the totally unexpected reemergence of Nadine in his life.

Nadine had killed someone and somehow escaped. It would be impossible for him to take on any assignment from her. Rather he should be contacting the police.

“Not that fast and certainly not over the telephone. Do you have a British visa?”

“No, why?”

“I see you still don’t know how to lie, Joe. I knew you have one because you were in London about two weeks ago.”

Joe remained silent and Nadine continued. “You have to catch the British airways flight to London tonight and call me tomorrow morning at 11am after you have checked into the Hilton at Paddington.”

Momentarily forgetting the odd situation on his hands Joe laughed. “Flight tonight, Hilton hotel... you’re joking right?”

“Absolutely not,” Nadine replied coldly. “You must carry out my instruction exactly as I’ve told you or else.....”

“Or else, what?” Joe cut in, suddenly angry at her hectoring tone. “You should be in jail and not in London trying to dictate your bizarre request to me.”

“Or else, my dear lover boy Joe, you never ever again get to see your darling wife and lovely daughter.”

For what seemed like eternity to Joe, time seemed to hang still and then he heard himself shouting crazily into the phone in his shaking hand as he leapt off his chair. “What did you just say... you’re threatening my family? My

family... I am asking you? I..."

"Yes I am," Nadine replied calmly. "As we speak Joe, you don't really have a family because your wife and daughter are not where you think they are. They're being quarantined somewhere and will only be returned back to you after you execute the job I have for you."

The impact of what Nadine was saying took a few seconds to sink in and then Joe was up and rushing to the door, the handset of the phone left dangling as he dashed out of the office and rushed towards the lift.

Joe was frantically trying to reach Clara by the time he raced up to his car and opened it with a shaking hand.

The phone rang for a while and then a voice informed him that the intended recipient was not responding. In desperation, he dialed Angel's line and got the same message after a while.

Joe had always wondered why some people drove in a manner that not only endangered their lives but those of others. Other than child delivery and life threatening medical reasons, what could, he had always wondered, be so urgent as to get a driver weaving his car at breakneck speed in and out of an equally fast-paced traffic?

As Joe raced in his car with his mind in turmoil, he was thankful to God that this emergency had arisen on a Sunday morning and that there was consequently very few

cars on the road.

The Catholic Church of the Assumption where Clara preferred to attend mass was at one corner of the ever-busy Falomo junction. Joe drove fast towards the church after first rushing to his new home in Banana and finding that Clara and Angel were not yet back. His fear mounting by the minute he continued to try their lines as he sped to the church.

Frank Makede was already in front of the church by the time he got there. Tall and muscular, Frank's dark and rugged face was creased with worry. "What the hell is this all about Joe," he asked as Joe was getting out of the car.

"I'm scared Frank. I am terribly scarred. Clara is not at home and her phone is now switched off. That of Angel also. I can't believe what's happening to me."

"Are you sure it was Nadine on the line?"

Joe stared numbly at him, fear written all over his face. "Definitely sure. It was her alright. She's not dead Frank and I don't know what she's up to."

"Calm down Joe. I know how tough this is on you but we need to think fast on what to do. I already talked to the priest and the gateman and they both confirmed that Clara left with Angel immediately after service. Clara was driving the Prado."

"I already checked at home and found it's not there.

I wish I had asked the driver to come in today. My God!”

“Listen Joe, we won’t be helping them by standing here worrying and doing nothing. Let’s hurry back to the office and work out what we should do. What we certainly shouldn’t do at this point is get the police officially involved. Let’s go Joe.”

Just as they were about to get into their cars Joe heard his name being called and they both turned to see Janet walking towards them with a broad smile on her face.

Janet had an ordinary looking face but a stunningly shapely figure which, even, her big shapeless gown could not hide. Janet was single and sometimes flirty with Joe when Clara was not around but Joe had determinedly resisted the urge to attempt any illicit affair.

“You must be looking for your wife,” she said teasingly.

“Yes, she must have been at the earlier service with my daughter. Did you see her?”

“Yes. She was with Angel and they left about an hour ago. She must be home by now. You couldn’t reach her on the phone?”

“I didn’t think of calling,” Joe lied. “I’m on my way home anyway. I’ll see her. Was she with anyone else?”

Janet hesitated briefly. “I saw a young man talking to

her, maybe her relative, but I'm not sure whether they left together or not. Is there any problem."

"No, not at all," Joe replied quickly to the relief of Janet who had started worrying about whether she had goofed in mentioning the young man. "I just wanted to know whether her cousin succeeded in meeting her here or went straight home. He must have joined her here then. Well see you soon, Janet."

Janet watched pensively as both men got into their cars and drove off. She had an uneasy feeling that something was not right. Joe seemed very nervous and Frank looked worried.

Somehow she couldn't shake off the idea that the young man with Clara could be more than Joe had tried to make her believe he was.

Was he really Clara's cousin? Although she was not very close to them, she had noticed that the man looked quite handsome and had made a mental note to find out from Clara if he was one she could go after.

As she walked back towards the entrance of the church Janet suddenly remembered that Joe always went to his office in Banana on Sunday mornings. If that was the case on this particular Sunday morning, why would he drive all the way from Banana to Falomo instead of making the short trip to his home in Banana to wait for her?

And how come Frank was also with him at the church?

So many unanswered questions Janet told herself. She looked forward to discreetly getting answers to them when Clara would visit her later in the day.

Back in the office, Frank hung up the dangling handset and got Joe to take a seat. He sat on the table facing him. “Do you have Nadine’s number?”

“I didn’t write it down but we can get it from the phone. She was calling from the UK.”

Frank checked the phone and wrote down the number. “Or she could be simply roaming with a UK number or call card,” he said dialing the number. “It’s imperative we get back in touch with her.”

Both men watched anxiously as the phone rang until it got into voice mail. Joe rushed to it. “Nadine. This is Joe. Please call me right back. I am still in the office. Please.”

He was about to hang up and then added. “In case you can’t reach this number here is my new mobile number please.” He gave the number twice and then hung up.

“From what Janet saw it seems they were kidnapped by only one man. He must have made things look like he was a friend of hers,” Joe said still visibly very agitated.

“Definitely,” Frank said. “He must have. Otherwise

there would have been a commotion and the involvement of the police by now.”

With not much else to say, they sat tensely, each preoccupied with his own thoughts for what seemed like an eternity to them but was in reality about two minutes and then just as Frank was about to speak, Joe jumped up at the sound of a message coming into his phone.

It was a text message from Nadine’s London number and the message was crisp. ‘Be unfailingly in London tomorrow morning and call me at exactly 11am from the Paddington Hilton or else....’

Frank stood up. “You have to leave tonight and see what Nadine is up to. I shall stay back for now to see if I can come up with anything on the whereabouts of Clara and Angel.”

“I hope they’re safe?” Joe asked hopefully, looking fearfully at Frank as if he knew where they were.

He dialed Nadine’s number as he spoke and they both waited until it rang off without being picked before Frank responded.

“They should be and you must insist on talking to them before acceding to any request of Nadine. They are her only leverage and I don’t see her doing anything foolish in that regard. Don’t worry brother, this nightmare will soon be over.”

Unknown to both men, the nightmare was only just beginning.

CHAPTER 3

Sunday 1st February

For Clara the nightmare had started exactly five minutes after Church was over.

As with most Sundays and especially just after church service, she was in a heavenly state.

Angel was intensely preoccupied with a game she was playing on her mobile phone and hardly noticed when Clara belted her down in the back seat and started doing the same to herself preparatory to starting the car.

Looking back she could not help but wonder whether matters may not have taken a different turn if she had acceded to the request of her friend Janet who had also gone through the church service and who on getting out of the church had walked up to her just as she was about to start the car.

“Where are you off to?” Janet had asked leaning against the car.

“Rushing home to get something ready for my man. He couldn’t make it to church today and should be back home in about an hour or two.”

“Well ok I came with a cab and if you were not in a rush I would have gone with you so we can stop and spend some time at my place,” Janet had said looking at her

expectantly.

“I can stop by later in the afternoon,” Clara had replied knowing that she was not going to do so and thinking that the last thing she wanted to do was to start driving all the way to Janet’s house in Festac.

“Ok let’s talk around 3pm. I think I’ll spend another one hour or so here to help Father Kobe with some of his Sunday chores. I have no one to rush home and cook for.”

Clara had watched her walk over to a group of women that were chatting by the side of the church building.

She had heard a slight tap on the window and turned to see a handsome looking young man smiling at her and motioning her to roll down the window on his side.

She switched the car on and pressed the window button.

The man had a bible in one hand and a cloth bag that seemed to be holding some books in the other hand. Clara wondered if he would be trying to get her to buy some religious pamphlets.

“Good morning Ma,” he said in a low but firm voice, leaning into the car and placing the bible on the seat beside Clara. He put his hand into the bag and casually brought out a frightful looking gun, which he held on to as he quickly put his hand, and the gun back into the bag.

“Don’t be frightened Ma. I shall not hurt you or your daughter if you remain calm and do exactly as I tell you.”

Clara was too stunned to speak. She tried to control her trembling as she stared dumbfounded at the young man.

When he realized that she wasn’t going to say anything, he continued. “I’m going to get into the car and you’re going to drive out of this compound without giving any sign that you’re in trouble. As I said all will be well if you do exactly as I tell you.”

The man opened the door and sat beside her all the while smiling and talking as if they were friends. As he banged his door shut, Angel looked up from her game.

He smiled broadly at her. “How are you, Angel?”

“Who are you?” Angel asked momentarily distracted from her game.

“I’m Uncle Harry and we’re all going to my place for a few days.”

“Will daddy be there?”

“No love. He’ll be away for a few days. He asked me to be with you and mama until he gets back.”

At his signal, she had started the car and driven slowly out of the church compound.

He gave her directions, which she followed while trying to sift through her tumultuous emotions and thoughts.

Few minutes into the journey, she had managed to control herself enough to start asking questions; the first being what exactly was going on and what did the man want? She had to speak in a low tone in order to keep Angel out of the drama that was suddenly on her hands and she was grateful to the young man for doing the same.

The man introduced himself as Harry and said he was working for someone that wanted her and her child held somewhere until her husband agreed to do something the person wanted him to do.

He was on the lighter side of brown, of medium height, slim, well dressed and looking very fit. Clara could not help noticing how handsome he looked particularly when he smiled and looked very friendly.

Harry assured her that he and his colleagues, who she would later meet, had been warned not to harm her and the child unless she tried something funny. The man seemed so likeable and reassuring that Clara began to calm down and to succeed in putting her thoughts together.

Her first worry was what the person, whoever he or she was, would be trying to get her husband to do.

Joe was stubborn but Clara could not see him

refusing to do whatever needed to be done to rescue her and Angel.

Unless of course they wanted him to commit a crime. Clara guessed that in that case he would try to outwit them. One thing she was sure of was that Joe and Frank would not rest until they succeeded in freeing them.

But how would they know where they were being taken to?

A few minutes into their journey, Harry had collected her two phones, searched through and returned her bag to her. He had then turned to Angel.

“What game are you playing Angel?”

Without looking up Angel had replied that it was Painting the Duck and happily announced that she had thus far succeeded in touching twenty-five as they flew around in circles trying to avoid the electronic feather that she manipulated with dexterous speed.

“That’s fantastic!” Harry had exclaimed with a wide smile. “Can I see how the ducks look like?” he said stretching out his hand.

Angel had beamed and handed over the phone to him. “I can touch very many quickly,” she had said with pride.

Harry had smiled. “I bet you can play better than

your mama and papa,” he said taking the phone from her and tapping his way to flight mode, which he activated. He then deftly opened the back of the phone and retrieved the Glo sim card, which he slipped into his pocket. He had made a comical show of trying to play the game and then shrugged in resignation as he handed the phone back to Angel.

“The ducks are moving too fast for me. I wonder how you’re able to get to them.”

Angel had happily taken the phone back and had returned to her game without the slightest hint that from that point on the only thing she could do with her phone was play games.

“Thank you,” Clara said under her breath to Harry who shrugged it off with a rueful smile.

Harry had directed Clara to go through the new Ikoyi to Lekki Link Bridge and all had remained quiet as they drove down the last stretch of Bourdillon Street towards the gleaming structure.

“Mommy I am trying to call Daddy but his phone is not ringing.”

Both Harry and Clara had turned in surprise to find Angel fiddling with the phone. Clara had thought fast and smiled reassuringly. “Don’t worry darling. Your phone has some problems and Uncle Harry will repair and bring it

back to you after we get to his house,” she had added nodding at Harry who smiled brightly at Angel and nodded his head vigorously.

The rest of the trip was carried out in silence as Clara navigated her way through the fairly moderate Sunday morning traffic of the principal Lekki highway.

She was glad that Angel was engrossed with her game but worried about how she would make her cope with the new development without her having an inkling of the problem they were in.

About one hour after leaving the church they turned into a wide tarred road in Lekki and drove down to a housing complex with the words ‘WELCOME TO EL DORADO ESTATE’ boldly written on the iron gates leading into the estate.

One of the six guards that were at the gate had waved Clara through as he smilingly gave thumbs up to Harry who had waved back in return.

The house that Harry had directed her to was in a secluded area in the southern part of the estate. It was at the end of a Close with a high fence and equally high bronze gates that together hid the low-rise six-bedroom villa from public view.

She had driven into a low ceiling garage, turned off the engine and unbelted Angel who reluctantly put her

phone back into her pink colored shoulder bag.

Two men were standing by the door of the villa waiting for them. Unlike Harry, both looked rough and were badly dressed.

The taller of the two walked down to the car, bent over and quickly scanned the interior. Satisfied he asked for the trunk to be opened and for Clara to give him the keys of the car. Clara pressed the appropriate button and the trunk of the car swung open. She hesitated on giving him the car keys, turning to look enquiringly at Harry who nodded affirmatively.

The man impatiently took the keys, hurriedly walked to the back of the car, peered into the trunk and then banged it shut without saying a word.

“May I have my keys back?” Clara asked stretching out her hand.

“You’ll get it when you’re leaving,” the man said gruffly and walked back towards the house.

Harry winked at Clara and smiled. “Don’t mind Chris. He was born in the jungle and hasn’t learnt how to treat a lady. Your car will be safe here.”

The third man standing at the door was short and muscular. He was coal black with a clean-shaven head and a black beard that ran around his chin and jutted out aggressively. Both Harry and Chris called him Shogun

which seemed to be a nickname.

Clara could sense that Angel who suddenly clung tightly to her may have reached the conclusion that the two new men were not as nice and friendly as Uncle Harry.

Clara tried very hard to put on a calm and reassuring demeanor. She was relieved to find that the villa was well furnished and air-conditioned. Both the room she was given and the very spacious sitting room had wide screen Sony TVs.

She saw a suitcase lying open on the bed and walked over to inspect it. She was surprised to find it filled with new sleeping gowns and a few dresses that she guessed would fit Angel and herself. The suitcase also had toothpaste and toothbrushes as well as two new towels.

As she riffled through the contents of the suitcase she had the sinking feeling that they would be held hostage in the house for some days, which she fervently hoped, would be very few.

She was however relieved to find that Angel was taking her new surroundings in stride. She fiddled with the TVs remote and within seconds was preoccupied with Cinderella on the Disney channel.

A few minutes later, a knock sounded on the door and Clara walked over to open it. She saw Harry standing there with an apologetic smile on his face.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” Harry began hesitantly. “I just thought I should show you what I’ve put in place to make your stay and that of Angel as comfortable as possible.”

“Ok thank you,” Clara said calmly and waited for him to continue.

“I can see you’re already going through the clothes that I bought. I hope they fit,” Harry said stretching his neck a little to look beyond her left shoulder. “Let me show you and Angel what I put in the compound for her.”

“What did you put in the compound for me?” Angel asked leaving her TV to walk up to them at the door, her face suffused with curiosity.

“It’s a secret,” Harry said jovially. “You have to find out yourself.”

Clara put her arm around Angel and they followed Harry through a side door of the sitting room to the compound, which was very large.

Clara noted that except for the road through which they had accessed and entered the house, all the other surrounding areas of the house were bounded by empty land from which several scattered and leafy trees had grown.

Angel saw a children’s bike and was rushing towards it when she noticed a swing in another part of the

compound and reversed course. Clara followed Harry to the swing and watched as he lifted Angel unto it and started a swinging session that left Angel shrieking with delight.

“I’m glad she likes her new surroundings,” Harry said as he gradually increased the range of the swing.

“For now yes, but it won’t take long before she starts crying for her dad. What’s next Harry?”

“I wish I knew,” Harry said wistfully in a manner that made Clara believe he was telling the truth. “My instructions are to make sure that no harm comes to you and the kid and the best way I feel I can achieve that is to try to make you both as comfortable as possible and keep the other guys at bay.”

As they continued talking Angel gave a sign to be let down and a few minutes later was bicycling from one end of the compound to the other.

Clara and Harry moved over to two chairs on the balcony and sat chatting until Angel got tired and got off the bike. Harry waited for mother and daughter to get into the house and then bolted and locked the door.

Not much happened for the rest of the day.

Clara and Angel were pretty much left alone by the three men who spent most of the time playing cards.

In the evening Chris went out and returned an hour

later with chicken and chips which he gave to Clara. He told her she could get drinks from the well-stocked fridge in the kitchen and went back to playing cards with Shogun.

Harry, with Angel happily sitting by his side, sat in another corner of the sitting room playing piano and singing a song, which he claimed to have written himself. Clara could not help noticing that he had a nice voice and that the song itself was a good one.

A few minutes after 9pm Clara collected a reluctant Angel and headed for their room telling her that it was well past bedtime.

Angel's mood changed into one of delight as she got into her new fanciful nightgown and got permission to spend another fifteen minutes playing a video game on her phone.

“Mommy, when will Daddy be coming to see us?” Angel's voice was plaintive as she abruptly sat up on the bed and waited expectantly for her mother's answer.

Clara Tolono turned with surprise from the TV she had been listlessly watching and tried to put on a reassuring smile. “Soon honey, very soon. Daddy has travelled but will be coming back very soon.”

“Will he be buying me a present?”

“Yes, darling.”

“What will he be bringing for me? I don’t want Barbie dolls anymore.”

Clara smiled wanly. A few years back Barbie was the rage but Angel was growing up fast and beginning to turn to other more mature toys.”

“He’ll bring something else but I can’t tell you what because it will be a surprise.”

“I want to go home, mommy. I want to see Daddy,” Angel said suddenly looking very morose.

“You will, love, very soon. In just a day or two, not more. Are you through with your game?”

“Yes mommy. I scored four hundred points.”

“Wow. You’re a real champion. Are you ready to sleep now?”

“No mommy. Can I watch TV for some time before sleeping? Please?”

“Just for 10 minutes darling,” Clara said turning on the TV set in the room. “You really must go to sleep now.”

Clara clicked through the channels of the TV until she got to one showing a cartoon about a boy who learnt to fly and was competing with birds. Angel became absorbed in a few minutes but her attention span was as usual very short.

“I’m ready to sleep now, mommy but can you tell me just one little story before I sleep?”

Clara sighed with resignation. This was a nightly routine which Angel seemed addicted to. “Okay. Here, let me hold you darling. Would you like me to continue the story about the giant bird that tried to steal a baby?”

“Yes mommy.”

It didn’t take Angel long to fall asleep listening to the long running saga of the giant bird and the baby girl that Clara called Cutie Pie. She made up the story as she went along and had reached the stage where the bird had begun to take a liking to the baby and becoming her protector rather than seeing her as a prey.

With Angel fast asleep, Clara turned her mind back to the problem on her hands. It all seemed so unreal but she had given up hoping to pinch herself and finding it was all a dream.

The kidnapping was real. It was no longer what she saw in the movies or read in the newspaper and wondered how the hostages must have felt.

She and her daughter were now the hostages and the feeling was nothing short of terribly frightening.