

CHAPTER ONE

CONTEMPT

1 Day Missing

It was a pleasant, harmless, sunny day in the Gold Coast on the North Side of Chicago—an elite neighborhood on the border of Lake Shore Drive, along Lake Michigan. I had moved into the condominium in 1993, with my two young daughters, from an apartment that was less than a block away. On the corner of Burton and State Parkway—a block from the Cardinal mansion on North Avenue, bordering Lincoln Park.

My recently ex-wife, Brigitte, had planned to take my two daughters to Kassel, Germany, to visit their grandparents, Emilia and Karl. Brigitte was a German and Swiss citizen, having been raised in both countries. The agreement for the vacation came after four long years of a contentious battle over custody of the girls. I ended up with physical custody, the girls living with me four days per week. Brigitte and I shared joint legal custody, however, so the girls were confined to residency in the United States.

I knew Brigitte entered the US on a green card, and maintained both of her foreign citizenships—but I had trust in the law to protect the girls and me. *Why not?* I had retained custody as the father, for what that was worth.

“Give your Dad a hug goodbye,”

The four of us stood on the steps of my condominium. I hugged Stephanie and Lia tightly at my waist, and, with that, my ex-wife took our girls, ages nine and seven, to the airport. United Flight 944, departing from Chicago O’Hare to Germany, June 30, 1997. Brigitte had scribbled their travel details on a piece of paper for me. “Will stay at Fau Schmidt, Im Tal 46, Schauenburg 2, Germany, PH: 056.”

Despite my objections, this vacation had been approved by my attorney.

“You can’t stop her. Legally, she’s entitled to vacation time with the girls—even to Germany.”

Mary Beth Powers was the attorney I’d selected to represent me in my divorce proceedings, to terminate my marriage with Brigitte. At the time, Brigitte was involved in a relationship with a foreign diplomat from Peru, so I had valid reason to worry. She had taken vacations with the girls before, but now that the divorce was final, would she return them to me? I felt uneasy, but what could I do?

When I called, regularly, to speak with them during their vacation, they answered each time. But a couple days before their return, no one picked up at their grandparent’s home, where Brigitte and the girls were staying. I let the phone ring for several minutes, with no response, and I called repeatedly, over the following days. No answer. There *had* to be a rational explanation, I thought. I couldn’t bring myself to believe they wouldn’t return.

On the day of their expected arrival, I did not receive a phone call from Brigitte, announcing their return to her apartment in Chicago. In fact, I heard nothing. I had returned home to my condominium after a long day at the office, faintly hoping to find my daughters in their bedrooms, working on their

artwork, reading, or just passing time. Instead, I found an empty condo on the fourteenth floor, facing the southwest of the city. I went numb, hoping this was all a mistake—that I had the return date wrong, that Brigitte had tried to reach me with a change in plans, that the plane was delayed somewhere, en route to Chicago from Germany. My thoughts spiraled, but I tried to keep the worst from my thoughts, as much as I could. However, my fear that Brigitte would not return loomed over me. A notion that felt more and more possible after our long struggle for custody. *Would this be her final triumph, to keep and raise the girls somewhere in Europe?*

Eventually, I buckled. I had to find out if they were on the plane that was due to land at O'Hare. Instead of driving all the way to the airport on the outskirts of the city, I recalled a United Airlines office on Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago. I reasoned that I could check to see if the girls and Brigitte were actually on board the scheduled flight. At this point, I was overwhelmingly anxious, worried, and I wanted answers. So I made my way there, along the same route the girls and I would take to shop on Michigan Avenue.

Michigan Avenue is a posh array of retail stores, mostly selling clothing, jewelry, and home items. Brooks Brothers, Tiffany's, Crate and Barrel were mainstays—shops I had taken Lia and Stephanie to, on many occasions. The streets were often clogged with traffic, heavily sprinkled with taxi cabs and buses, and long lights for pedestrians waiting to cross over the wide Avenue. The architecture was reminiscent of the glory days of Chicago—the city with a small-town heart and big shoulders, distinctively Midwestern. Connecting to the past, tour buses still carried gawkers to various attractions where they could, for instance, relive the inglorious days of Chicago's most infamous citizen, Al Capone.

I reminisced as I made my way to the ticket office. The girls and I had made many trips along Michigan Avenue to shop, sight-see, and get some exercise. We would walk south from our condominium along Lake Shore Drive, until we ended on the "Magnificent Mile," as it was spectacularly called. Rather than smile, reflecting on my time here with the girls, I was filled with dread.

On the east side of the street, a block away from the bridge over the Chicago River, was the United Airlines ticket office, where I was greeted by a pleasant attendant. I walked up to the counter in the small office:

"I'm trying to find out if my daughters, Stephanie and Lia Abraham, are on United Flight 277, from Washington Dulles to Chicago O'Hare, arriving at 6 pm today?"

She hesitated for a moment.

"Sir, I'm not supposed to give out that information, but since you're their father, I'll take a look for you."

She typed away for a moment on her computer, until her brow began to furrow, "I'm sorry sir, it looks like their seats are unoccupied, but the reservations are still there."

My heart dropped. "Any chance there's a mistake and they're on the flight?" I asked in a shaky voice.

"I don't think so," she said, with sympathetic eyes. "Is there anything else I can assist you with?"

In shock, I shook my head, thanked her, and promptly left.

Did they change plans? I tried, again, to reach them by telephone, but still, no one answered in Germany, after several attempts. I began to really worry, as the reality started to settle in. *Where are they?* Surely I'd hear from them soon. Brigitte had always returned them on time after visitation in the past. *Could she really do this to me? To our children?*