

CAPTURE

ROGER SMITH



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chapter 1

LATER VERNON SAUL WILL WONDER WHAT WOULD'VE HAPPENED IF HIS LEFT leg – the one crippled by the two bullets that ended his days as a cop – hadn't chosen that exact moment to give him grief, if he hadn't sat his ass down on that rock overlooking the private beach and seen what he'd seen. Fate, is what it was. Lady Luck reaching down and planting a big, fat kiss on him.

He'd hauled himself over the boulders, sweating, skin itching beneath the Kevlar vest all Sniper Security patrolmen had to wear on duty, when he felt a sudden spasm of pain behind the knee, like he'd been tasered, and he nearly fell. Cursing, he'd lowered himself to the rock, waiting for the pain to pass, lost in the long black shadows thrown by the dying sun.

Still sitting there five minutes later, massaging his wasted limb, invisible to the two white men standing on the beach that fronted the big house, windows kicking back the burst fruit colors of the sky. They were smoking weed – Vernon caught a whiff – the remains of a kid's birthday party on a table behind them.

The pain was easing and he was about to lever himself to his feet and get moving when he saw the child, maybe four or five years old, come running out of the house, blonde hair catching the failing light. She jogged up to the two men and tugged at her father's swimming shorts but he ignored her, deep in his dope-head conversation.

The girl gave up on him and went across to the toy sailboat floating in the water, the riptide pulling at it, choppy waves tumbling and churning on the shore, sucking back along the shelf that fell sharply from the beach.

The kid reached for the boat but it bobbed away, getting drawn toward the boulders on the opposite side of the little cove from where

Vernon sat. The girl turned to the men, shouting ‘Daddy!’, but they had their backs to her.

She ran over to the boulders and clambered up onto them, following the sailboat. Slippery as hell, those rocks, strands of kelp lying across them like a bald man’s comb-over. The kid nearly grabbed the boat, then it swirled away from her and she reached out even farther. She stretched, her fingertips almost touching the mast. And then she slipped and she was in the water. Fucken cold, nut-shriveling water. Got her panicking and fighting and splashing.

She went under.

Vernon watched as the kid surfaced, her mouth wide open, then a wave smacked her head against the rocks and she disappeared and didn’t come up for a few seconds, her one hand grabbing at the air. The water dragged her under again.

Vernon rose, ready to shout to the men – who were still unaware of what was going on behind them – about to hurry down there and make like a hero. Then he stopped himself, crouched again, like a lizard in the shadows.

Let this play out a while, brother.

Let it play out.

chapter 2

NICK EXLEY WOKE EARLY ON THE MORNING OF HIS DAUGHTER'S BIRTHDAY, eager to get her into his studio, but first he had to escape his wife, who lay sprawled face down beside him as if she'd plunged from a height. He edged out of bed, desperate not to rouse Caroline. He needn't have worried. She snored on, poleaxed by the meds that kept her, in the optimistic jargon of her psychiatrist, high-functioning.

Exley stepped into a pair of board shorts and pulled on a T-shirt. He lifted his glasses off the dresser and slid them onto his nose, bringing the bedroom of the rented house into focus: a study in browns and beiges, as impersonal as a hotel suite. Caroline, face creased by sleep, moaned but she didn't wake, a bubble of saliva fat as a tick at the corner of her mouth.

Exley left the room and clicked the door shut, only the distant whisper of the ocean intruding on the silence of the morning. He took a large box, gaily gift wrapped, that leaned against the wall of the carpeted corridor and went to Sunny's room. The door stood ajar and she lay on her stomach, surrounded by a tumble of toys. He kissed her forehead and she smiled up at him, eyes still closed.

'Happy birthday, Sunny,' Exley said, the wrapping paper rustling as he sat down on the bed.

'What's that?' she asked, opening her sleep-smearred eyes, stretching for the package.

He held it just beyond her reach. 'You'll see. First there's something we have to do.'

'What, Daddy?'

'What we always do, baby. What we always do.'

Exley scooped Sunny up out of the bed, her body warm and sweet-smelling beneath her pajamas, and carried her and the gift

downstairs to the latest incarnation of the studio he'd kept in all their homes over the years – too obsessed with his work to be separated from it.

He slid the tinted glass door closed and the hiss of the surf was replaced by the white noise of the air-conditioner. Screens stared at him blindly and the sleek dermis of a workstation gleamed in the wash of hidden spotlights. He booted up the computer, hearing the bushfire crackle of static as the monitors awoke.

Exley undressed his daughter, then squeezed her wriggling body into a skin-tight black outfit – the first motion capture suit he'd had especially tailored for her. He'd taken delivery of it only yesterday.

When Sunny turned one, in Paris, it had been a Babygro that housed the constellation of sensors, forever capturing her clumsy, lurching attempts at walking. A pair of Donald Duck pajamas did the job on her second birthday, celebrated in a townhouse in Santa Monica, and a tight T-shirt and leggings on her third, as she imitated Fiona from *Shrek* in their London apartment.

What remained constant was the latticework of tiny, weightless digital trackers dotted across her body, the nervous system of the motion-capture device that had made him a wealthy man (sold in scores to animators, special effects houses and developers of computer games) and brought him out here to Cape Town for three months.

These sensors, alive to the slightest movement – even the birdlike flutter of her heart – translated the essence of Sunny into thousands of digital impulses, fed into the computer that hummed gently in the background. The monitors, giving a real-time display, showed a skeletal wireframe figure, moving as Exley's daughter moved. Later he'd replace the wireframe with the 3D model he was building of her, realistic and complete down to every hair follicle and pore of skin on her body.

Exley sat at the computer, the digitized image of Sunny reflected in his glasses, his hands moving across the keyboard with easy familiarity, the soft mouse clicks rising above the murmur of the hardware.

'Dance for me, baby,' he said, aligning the streams of optical input, finessing the quality of the capture, as his daughter – with heartbreaking

solemnity – became a clumsy ballerina, twirling, arms held aloft, toes on point.

Sunny enjoyed the process, which was as familiar as Exley reading her a story at bedtime. These capture sessions weren't restricted to her birthdays, although Caroline's recent objections (inspired, Exley believed, by paranoid jealousy, a by-product of her condition) had limited his access, but there was more of a sense of ceremony on these occasions, a marking of time that had passed. In the way that another father stood his child against a wall or door-frame and fixed its height with a pencil, calibrating its growth since the previous year, Exley had evidence of the increased bodily coordination, fluidity and strength in his daughter.

He'd done this a thousand times before, with countless subjects, and even though he was an avowed heathen Exley couldn't shake the sense that there was something almost metaphysical at work here, that he was capturing the thing that his mother – battling dementia on the New Mexico ashram where he'd ended his childhood – would call Sunny's *atman*.

Her soul.

Sunny's enthusiasm for the dance was flagging, her eyes drawn to the gift-wrapped box sitting near the door. 'What did you get me, Daddy?'

'You'll see in a minute. Just lay a few more of those moves on me.'

She completed a listless pirouette and stood knock-kneed, wriggling, squirming inside the suit, tugging at the fabric, her patience exhausted, the digital skeleton a mirror of her frustration. 'Daddy, I want to open my box. Now!'

Laughing, Exley saved the data and crossed to Sunny, peeling her free of the clinging Lycra and dressing her again in her pajamas. He slid open the door, revealing the absurd beauty of a Cape Town summer's day, and the sun, flaring off the ocean beyond the living-room windows, flooded the studio.

Sunny grabbed the gift and flopped down onto her backside, tongue peeping through her lips as she tore at the wrapping paper, the sunlight turning her hair to flame. She fought the box open, exposing a model

sailing ship complete with masts and rigging.

Her eyes widened. 'Daddy bought me my boat!'

'It's from Mommy, too.'

She stared at the sailboat, transfixed. An unlikely gift for a small girl but she'd desired the ship with a single-minded passion since she saw it at a toy store at the Waterfront.

'Can we sail it, Daddy? Please?'

'Sure. Go and fetch your swimsuit.'

Sunny ran back upstairs and Exley carried the boat out onto the deck that overlooked their small beach, where Caroline, straw-hatted and swathed in layers of cloth to keep her pale, freckled skin safe from the African sun, was laying a table for the birthday party.

Arranging plates and napkins, she didn't look up. 'You do realize that creepy thing you do to her is a kind of identity theft?'

Keeping things light, Exley said, 'Caro, even you know that identity theft is something different.'

'Christ, don't be so bloody literal, Nicholas. I'm trying to make a fucking point here.' Looking at him now, shaking her head. 'I think we spoke about this?'

'No, you spoke about it.'

'True. You stayed mute and aloof in your emotional igloo, didn't you?'

Caroline used her plummy English voice as a weapon. A voice that had once enchanted Exley, so different from his own with its unplaceable accent. Brits thought he was American, Americans assumed he was Canadian and a TV commercial director from Toronto recently mistook him for an Irishman.

Caroline shook her mid-brown curls. 'I'm wasting my bloody breath, aren't I, trying to get through to you?'

Exley walked past her out into the sun, trying to stay calm, but tension knotted his shoulders as he felt Caroline's eyes on him. He was retreating – again – from his wife's rage, a rage so massive that it seemed to exist as a separate entity from her.

What was the reason for this rage? There was no reason. It was

not reasonable. When chemicals in her brain produced a toxic soup of paranoia, Exley and Sunny were there to pay the tab for all the world's slights (real and imagined), made apocalyptic by some misfire in Caroline's synapses.

Of course, there were the few good days when she woke up happy and the skin seemed looser and plumper on her skull and her eyes shone rather than sucked in light and she was girlish and flirtatious and patient with their child, indulgent of her interrogations about flowers and animals and clouds, manufacturing answers to unanswerable questions.

But today was not one of the good days.

Waiting for Caroline's shadow to fall on the sand beside him, Exley crossed the small inlet that was enclosed by high boulders on each side, forming a channel, the Atlantic lying still as a mirror, so placid and unthreatening this morning, reflecting the bowl of golden mountains and the seamlessly blue sky.

The water was icy on his toes as he set the sailboat down in the water. No matter how hot the day, the ocean stayed frigid. He risked a look behind him, relieved to see that Caroline had disappeared into the house and it was Sunny skipping toward him in her swimsuit, laughing and splashing, singing a little song in her high, sweet voice – '*Sun-ny Ex-ley is having her birth-day*' – repeated over and over like a nursery rhyme as she sent the model ship skimming across the shallows.

The day hadn't started so good. Vernon Saul had been plagued by bad dreams the night before – his mind churning up images of pain and torment from his childhood – and woke up covered in sweat, the stink of his long-dead father like a live thing in the airless bedroom.

He felt tired and edgy the whole day and by late in the brutally hot afternoon, jammed behind the wheel of the cramped Ford pick-up, his head pounded with a familiar headache and he was in no mood to deal with the new dispatcher giving him grief about his tardy overtime records.

'Your mother's cunt,' Vernon said into the microphone that spiraled

from the radio mounted on the dash, hoping the dispatcher, a fat white bitch with zits and hair dyed the color of pus, caught this before she signed off.

She did. 'What you say?' Her voice shrill through the static.

'You fucken heard me,' Vernon said, holstering the mike, laughing as he imagined her froth of consternation back in the Sniper HQ down in Hout Bay.

He took a couple of painkillers from the glove box and dry-swallowed them, tasting acid on his tongue, like he'd licked a battery terminal. He needed a break, to stretch his legs, take a piss and have a smoke. Check in on one of his projects.

Vernon smacked the red Ford into gear and rocketed off from where he was parked on the shoulder of the road switchbacking down to Llandudno, this suburb of palatial houses that clung to the slope of the mountain and danced a conga line along the shore. A place nobody could spell and half the people in the Cape Flats ghettos – where he came from – couldn't even pronounce. And who could bloody blame them?

As he passed the wooden Sniper sentry box that guarded the road Vernon leaned on his horn, startling awake the fat darky who dozed inside, wagging a thick finger in warning as the uniformed man leaped off his stool and came to attention in the doorway, like Idi Amin inspecting his troops.

Vernon drove to the ocean below, passing glittering confections of stone and glass hunkered down behind high walls and electric fences, most of the houses wearing the red signage of Sniper Security.

It was Saturday, which meant that hundreds of cars clogged the streets; people from all over the Cape Peninsula come to swim at Llandudno beach, popular with picnicking families and surfers and body-boarders. Parking bays down near the beach were limited and the day-trippers ended up blocking the driveways of the rich bastards, who phoned Sniper to sort things out.

Vernon had just about got used to the plummet in status from being a police detective to a rent-a-cop, but he couldn't handle being a

glorified traffic warden, hassling these sunburned whities to move their cars, and he had no intention of sticking around here. He waved at a couple of Sniper patrolmen who manned the boom that stemmed the flood of cars and drove along the shore until the road narrowed and the houses dribbled away, and there was just one glass box out there on its own. With the ocean and the sky reflected in the windows, the house looked like it was floating, ready to drift out on the tide.

A clutch of Benzes, Beemers and chunky SUVs cluttered the road outside the house and, as he eased the truck between them, Vernon saw a little parade of white families – well-fed men in their thirties, their gym-crazy wives and pale kids – exiting the Sniper-branded front gate, getting into their cars and driving away into their perfect lives.

The house disappeared in his mirror and the road ran dead, rocks and scrub blocking the view of the ocean. Vernon parked the Ford behind the granite boulders that flanked the house, forming one side of the small bay that opened from the private beach.

Easing his bulk out of the Ford, his withered leg stiff from the hours behind the wheel, Vernon felt the sweat on his chest and around his balls. He ran a hand through his dark, wavy hair, leaving his palm and fingers wet. With his mid-brown skin and straight nose he was almost handsome until he removed his fake Ray-Bans and revealed his khaki eyes, too small and set too close to his nose, like they were retreating into his skull. Pitbull eyes. He wiped the sunglasses clean and slid them back on.

Vernon took a warm can of Coke and an uneaten Big Mac, still in its Styrofoam container, and left the truck, the radio muttering as he walked away. He adjusted the hang of the Glock at his hip and limped up onto the rocks, in shadow now that the sun was low, his dun-colored uniform blending with the boulders. The rocks were slick with kelp and he stepped carefully, finding purchase for his boots.

Walking along the ridge until the ocean came into view, he looked down at the private beach and saw a small group of whities gathered around a table, all festive with balloons and empty bottles.

Slowly, Vernon descended to the water, the rocks blocking the house

from sight. There was no beach here, not like on the other side, just a shelf of rock, where a black man, bare-ass naked, was on his hands and knees, matted dreadlocks dangling into the ocean. The Rastaman shouted and moaned like a wild beast.

‘Hey! Hey, Bob Marley!’ Vernon yelled.

Vernon had no idea of the lunatic’s name but the darky answered to this one now and looked up and smiled a gap-toothed smile.

‘Cover up your stinking ass. Quick, quick.’

The darky stood and pulled on a torn pair of khakis over his dangling balls. His naked torso so thin that his ribs pushed out at his flesh like xylophone keys.

‘Here,’ Vernon said, setting down the Coke and the Big Mac on a rock.

The Rasta clasped his hands, bowing. Vernon had never heard an intelligible sound come from his mouth. Reckoned the fuckhead couldn’t speak. Suited him. Heard enough bullshit from the world, day in and day out. The darky went at the food like an animal, stuffing it into his mouth.

Vernon turned his back, unzipped and drilled a stream of piss onto the rocks, releasing a long sigh of relief, working his shoulders to loosen some of the tension. He zipped and sat down, stretched his bad leg out in front of him, shook a Lucky Strike from the pack in his pocket and fired it up, letting the smoke do its magic as he stared out toward the horizon. The tide was ebbing, and the hot breeze whipping off the mountain drove waves into the shore.

The darky had inhaled the food and was washing it down with the Coke, his pitiful belongings spread out around him. A torn blanket. A few shopping bags full of fuck-knew-what. A pile of old newspapers, pages waving in the breeze. A row of plastic Coke bottles filled with sea water. They drank it, these darkies, as a purgative.

When Vernon had first seen the Rastaman sneaking down here a few weeks back, he’d been of a mind to kick the shit out of him and run him off. But something held him back. Some intuition. And Vernon was a man who trusted his intuition, knew all too well that not