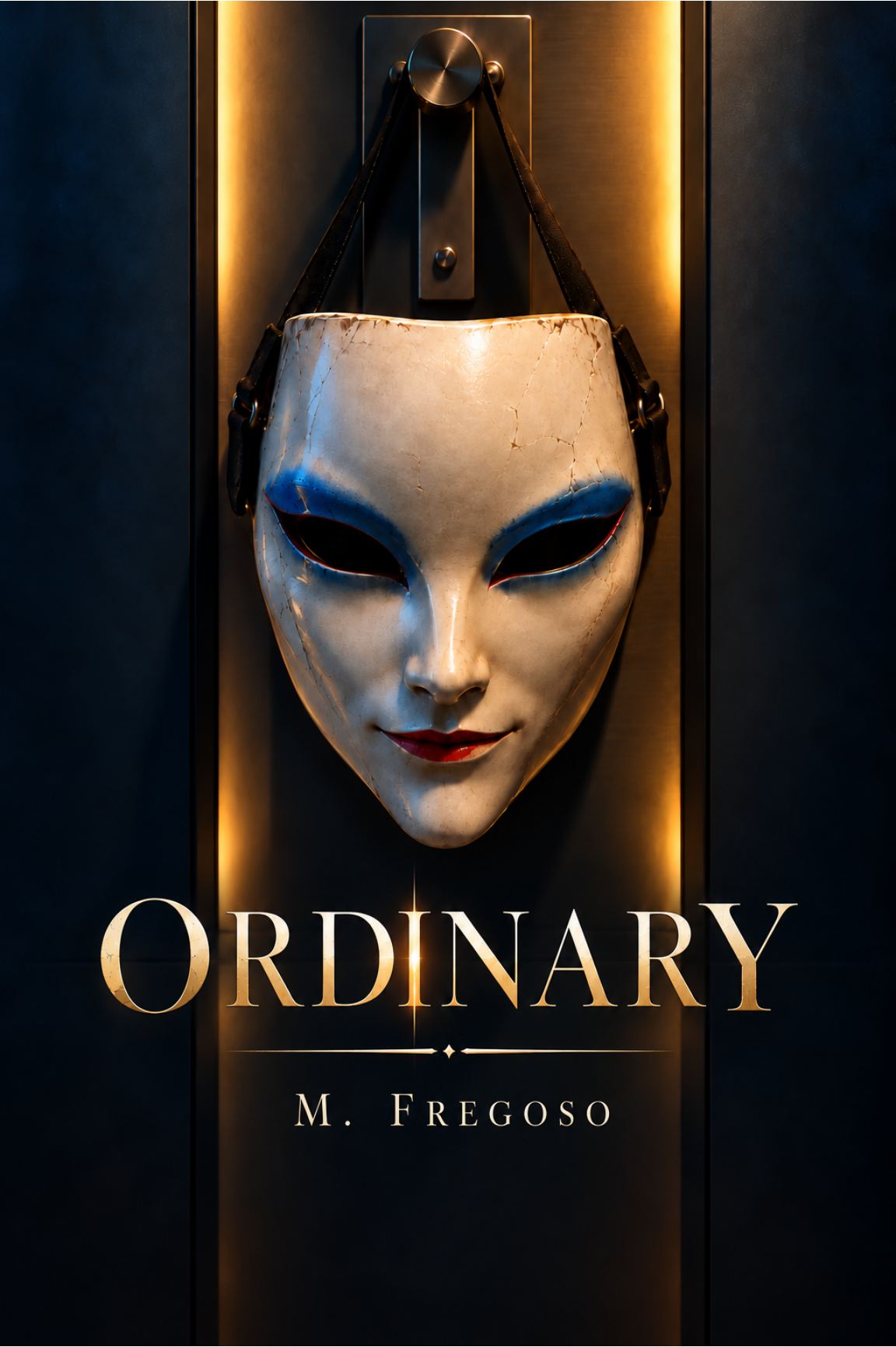

ORDINARY
M. FREGOSO

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A 3DX digital edition

Content advisory: Captivity, psychological and physical violence, torture, and murder.

This is a work of fiction. Characters and events are presented for narrative purposes.

CHAPTER 1

The Prisoner

The first thing he felt was the cold: a draft swept across his naked body, making him shiver. He tried to curl up, but something held him in place. He shifted his shoulders, then his legs. Nothing. He opened his eyes.

It made no difference.

He blinked several times, waiting for the darkness to clear; then he felt the pressure of fabric against his face and realized his eyes were covered. He pulled at his arms, but something held his wrists in place. He tried his ankles and got the same result. He was sitting in a rigid structure, probably made of metal, his back and head pressed against a cold surface. Beneath his thighs, there seemed to be a gap in the seat. He took a deep breath and pulled at his wrists again, harder this time. The restraints barely gave, and the metal rattled beneath his weight.

"Hello?"

He waited.

"Is anybody there?"

His voice disappeared into the darkness. He tried to remember how he had ended up here. All he could piece together were vague images, fragments with no clear sequence connecting them. None explained why he was naked and tied to a chair.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Who's there?"

Nothing.

He listened to his own breathing. It sounded far too loud in a place that seemed so quiet. He strained against the restraints once more. The skin beneath them burned, but he couldn't move his wrists more than a fraction of an inch.

"Goddammit!"

Fear began to mingle with anger. He didn't know who had brought him here or why, but there had to be an explanation. A kidnapping, maybe. Someone he'd offended. A case of mistaken identity. Money. Any of those possibilities made more sense than the silence. He was trying to put his memories in order when he heard a scream.

He froze.

It was a man's voice. Distant, though not so distant that he could mistake it for something coming from outside. The scream came again. This time he could make out broken words. Someone was begging them to stop. He held his breath, trying to hear more clearly.

"Hello?" he called. "Can you hear me?"

There was no answer. The voice kept pleading, growing more desperate. At times, the words dissolved into shrieks, followed by ragged gasps and fresh pleas. He couldn't understand everything the man was saying, but he didn't need to. Something about the way he screamed made his skin crawl.

"Hey! I'm here!" he called again.

The stranger didn't answer. He tried to imagine what might be happening somewhere beyond the darkness. Maybe someone was beating the man for information. Maybe it was an interrogation. If they'd mistaken both of them for someone else,

surely they could clear things up. He needed to believe it would be that simple.

"Listen to me!" he shouted, not knowing where to direct his voice. "I don't know what's going on, but we can talk about this!"

Another scream swallowed his words. For several seconds he sat rigid, teeth clenched, waiting for someone to answer. He wanted to cover his ears, but he couldn't even lift his hands. The screams began to weaken. First they became groans, then uneven sobs that seemed to demand an enormous effort with every breath.

Finally, they stopped.

He waited, listening for any sign of life.

"Are you still there?"

No answer.

"Hey!"

Nothing.

The absence of that voice unsettled him in a different way. While the stranger was screaming, at least he'd known the man was conscious. Now he had no way of knowing what had happened to him. An unmeasurable stretch of time passed before he heard footsteps. At first they were faint. He might not have noticed them if he hadn't been listening so carefully to everything around him.

Then came a metallic sound. A brief clink, like a small object falling onto a hard surface. Another followed. He clenched his fists.

"I know you're there," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I don't know what you want, but we can talk."

Another clink of metal.

"I have money. I can get more if that's what you need. Just tell me how much."

Nothing.

"Answer me, goddammit!"

His shout seemed to fill the entire place, but nobody responded. He waited, muscles tense, until it occurred to him that whoever was there might have no intention of speaking to him at all. That only made him angrier. He could understand someone wanting money. He could even imagine them trying to frighten him into paying. But this indifference made no sense. They hadn't even told him what he was supposed to do.

He tried turning his head. The restraint barely allowed it. He couldn't see, stand up, or reach anything with his hands. He didn't even know which direction to speak in. What infuriated him most wasn't simply being restrained. It was knowing that someone else could decide how long he'd remain that way without bothering to offer a single explanation. The metallic sounds stopped. He heard footsteps again, firmer this time.

Coming closer. He realized he was breathing through his mouth and tried to control it. He didn't want whoever was there to hear him panting like a cornered animal. He considered shouting again, then changed his mind. If the person was approaching, maybe he'd finally get a chance to speak to them.

The footsteps reached him. He raised his head slightly, waiting for a voice, a hand on his shoulder, a blow—anything that might help him understand what was happening. Nothing came. He felt a faint movement of air against his chest. Someone was close. He was certain of it.

"What do you want?" he asked quietly.

The footsteps resumed. He listened as they moved away, unhurried, as though his presence meant absolutely nothing.

"Wait!" he shouted. "You can't just leave me here!"

The footsteps didn't stop. A short while later, he heard a creak. A door, he thought. The sound ended with a dull thud.

He waited.

"Hello?"

Nobody answered.

Had they left?

The thought brought an unexpected feeling. Part of him was grateful that the presence had gone away. Another part wished it had stayed, even if only to insult him, threaten him, or demand money. Anything would have been better than being ignored. He tried to think clearly. If this was a kidnapping, they'd have to contact someone eventually. His family must have noticed he was missing by now. Maybe they'd even called the police.

The possibility that someone was looking for him brought a measure of relief. He couldn't let fear take over. He needed to stay calm, listen, and wait for an opportunity. He tried moving the fingers of both hands, one by one, until he was satisfied he could still feel them. It was stupid, but that small movement gave him some comfort. At least he could still do that. He strained against the restraints again, trying to work out what kind they were, but his fingers couldn't reach them. The backrest held him rigid, and every effort made the metal press harder against his body.

He gave up.

He was thirsty.

He had no idea how long he'd been sitting there. His arms were starting to go numb, and the cold had become a constant discomfort, impossible to ignore. He began counting his breaths to keep his mind occupied. He reached forty-three before losing count. He started over.

Then he heard a voice.

"Is... is someone... there?"

He went still. It was a man's voice, barely louder than a whisper. Every word seemed to require an enormous effort.

"Yes! I'm here!" he answered. "Can you hear me?"

A long pause followed.

"Th... thank... G... God."

The stranger began to cry. He tried to hold it back, but every breath came in ragged bursts. The prisoner felt the muscles in his neck relax. There was someone else. He didn't know what condition the man was in or whether he'd be able to help, but for the first time since waking up, someone was willing to answer him.

"Easy," he said. "Listen, I'm tied up. Are you?"

"Y... yes."

"Do you know where we are?"

No answer.

"Did you hear me? I need to know if you saw anything. Do you recognize this place?"

"N... no."

"Okay. How long have you been here?"

He heard the stranger trying to respond, but all that came out was a muffled groan.

"Are you hurt?"

"P... please..."

"What is it?"

"I... I don't want him... to come back."

The prisoner's stomach tightened.

"Who?"

"N... not again..."

The voice broke. For several moments, all he could hear was frantic breathing, as though the other man were struggling to keep himself from crying.

"Listen to me," he said. "I don't know what they did to you, but we have to stay calm."

"I... I can't..."

"Yes, you can. You're talking to me, aren't you? That's good. We can help each other."

The stranger made a peculiar sound, somewhere between a strangled laugh and a sob.

"You... you don't understand..."

"Then explain it to me."

"I don't want... to rem... remember..."

"All right. You don't have to tell me anything right now."

He swallowed.

"But I need to know if you saw anyone. How many are there? Did you hear any names? Anything?"

Only an unintelligible murmur came back.

"Hello?"

"I'm... still here."

"Good. That's good. Listen, maybe they've mistaken us for someone else. Maybe they want money. If we can talk to them, we might be able to work something out."

"No..."

"We don't even know what they want yet."

"No... please..."

"I'm just saying there has to be an explanation."

The stranger began breathing faster.

"I don't want... him... to come back..."

"Easy. He's not here now."

"No... don't... say that..."

The prisoner fell silent. Those words disturbed him more than he'd expected. He hadn't heard footsteps since the door closed. He had no reason to believe anyone was still there. But he had no way of knowing for sure, either.

"All right," he said at last. "We won't talk about that. Tell me your name."

No answer.

"Can you hear me?"

"Y... yes."

"Then tell me your name. We have to start somewhere."

The stranger seemed to attempt a reply, but his voice broke again.

"Forget it," the prisoner said quickly. "It doesn't matter. We can talk about something else."

He waited for the man's breathing to settle.

"Listen, there has to be a way out. Someone must be looking for us. They can't keep us here forever."

The stranger let out a sob.

"I... I used to... think that too."

Those words unsettled him more than all the silences that had come before.

"What do you mean?"

No answer.

"Hey, listen to me. Whatever's happened, we're still here. We don't know how long we've been locked up or who's behind this. We can't just give up."

He waited.

From somewhere in the darkness came a faint breath.

"There's... only one thing... I c... can tell you."

"Tell me."

The stranger tried to continue, but his voice dissolved into a groan.

"We... we're..."

"What?"

"We're... fucked."

The final word broke apart in a sob. The prisoner opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came. Until then, he'd been afraid of what they might do to him. Now he was beginning to wonder

what they had done to the other man to make him believe there was no way out.

CHAPTER 2

Just Another Day

Ernesto had always enjoyed the early hours of the morning. There was something pleasant about going outside while most people were only beginning to wake up. The streets were quiet, the air still held a trace of the night's chill, and for a little while he could forget about everything he needed to get done that day. That morning, he left the house wearing shorts, a workout shirt, and a pair of sneakers that were starting to show their age.

He walked several blocks until he reached a public soccer field. The grass grew unevenly, some patches were little more than bare dirt, and one of the goals had been missing its net for months. Even so, every Sunday the place filled with neighbors willing to spend hours arguing over a soccer ball. Ernesto smiled as he remembered the last match he'd watched. Two men had ended up shouting at each other over a foul that none of the spectators had actually seen.

He did a few stretches, checked that his shoelaces were securely tied, and started jogging around the field. He wasn't particularly fast, nor did he have the build of a professional athlete, but he made an effort to stay in shape. He enjoyed the feeling of finishing a demanding workout and heading home knowing he'd already done something worthwhile with his day. He varied his pace for about forty minutes, then did several sets of squats and push-ups until fatigue began to settle into his arms. He stood up, rested his hands on his hips, and took a deep breath.

That was enough for today. He started home as the neighborhood gradually came to life. A couple of businesses

were raising their shutters, cars moved slowly through the streets, and a woman swept the sidewalk in front of her house. A few blocks from home, he noticed that Laura's produce shop was already open.

He stopped.

He'd left the house intending to buy some lettuce for breakfast, and he knew himself well enough to expect María to tease him about his terrible memory if he came home without it.

"Ernesto! Good morning!" Laura called as soon as she spotted him.

"Morning, Lau. How's everything?"

"Oh, you know. Surviving."

Ernesto chuckled.

"That doesn't sound very encouraging."

"You know how it is. Between the shop and my kids, there just aren't enough hours in the day."

Laura was a talkative woman who had been running the little store for years. She knew most of the neighbors and made a habit of asking about their families, though the conversation usually ended up turning to her own.

"What did they do this time?" Ernesto asked.

"Can you believe my oldest has decided he doesn't want to stay in school?"

"Really? Why's that?"

"Says he wants to get a job. Says he's old enough to start making his own money."

"Well, that doesn't sound entirely unreasonable."

Laura gave him a look of exaggerated outrage.

"Don't you start taking his side! He's fifteen."

"Ah. Well, that little detail changes things."

"Exactly! But you know how teenagers are. They get an idea in their heads and suddenly think you don't understand a thing."

Ernesto nodded, amused.

"I've still got a few years before I have to deal with that."

"Enjoy them while you can. Although your little girl is such a sweetheart. I'm sure she doesn't give you nearly as much trouble."

"Not yet," he said with a smile. "But I don't want to get too comfortable."

"How old is she now? Seven?"

"Seven. And lately she seems convinced she knows more about dinosaurs than any adult she's ever met."

"That's such a lovely age."

"It is. Although now I have to memorize names I can't even pronounce just to keep up with her."

Laura laughed.

"Well, enjoy it while she still wants to tell you everything. They grow up, and before you know it, you can barely get a word out of them."

"I hope we've got a long time before that happens."

Laura glanced toward the entrance and suddenly remembered how much she still had to do.

"Look at me, standing here chatting when I haven't even finished sweeping. What can I get you?"

"A small head of lettuce and a cucumber, please."

Laura selected the vegetables and placed them on the scale.

"That's eighteen pesos."

Ernesto took out the money and handed it to her.

"Here you go. Good luck with your son."

"Thanks. And if you ever figure out how to talk some sense into him, let me know."

"If I discover the secret, I promise you'll be the first to hear about it."

They said goodbye with a laugh. As he resumed his walk, Ernesto thought about Alma. It was difficult to imagine her at fifteen. It hardly seemed like any time had passed since she'd learned to walk, and now she could spend half an hour explaining the differences between a Tyrannosaurus and an Allosaurus. He smiled to himself. He still had plenty of time before he needed to worry about boyfriends, parties, and teenage arguments.

When he got home, he found María in the kitchen. She'd returned from dropping Alma off at elementary school and was making breakfast. A glass of orange juice and a cup of coffee were waiting for him on the table.

"Good morning again, ma'am," Ernesto said, coming up behind her.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her cheek. María wrinkled her nose.

"Ugh, Ernesto! You're all sweaty."

"Nice to see you too."

"Go wash up. You taste salty."

"I thought you liked men who work out."

"I like them better after they've showered."

Ernesto laughed and set the bag of vegetables on the table.

"I brought you the lettuce."

"It's a miracle! You actually remembered."

"I'm starting to think you don't appreciate my efforts."

"Oh, I appreciate them very much. Especially when I don't have to go out and buy whatever you've forgotten."

She gave him a quick kiss before gently pushing him away.

"Come on. Go wash up."

Ernesto went into the bathroom and turned on the faucet. The cold water felt good after exercising. He splashed his face several times, then raised his head to look in the mirror. His hair was short, although a few strands insisted on sticking up no matter how much he tried to tame them. He ran a wet hand over them and managed to keep them in place for a few seconds.

Then one sprang back up.

"Have it your way," he muttered.

He dried his face and returned to the kitchen. María had started chopping the lettuce and cucumber. Ernesto sat down, drank some orange juice, and checked the notifications on his phone. There were a few unimportant messages, a post he found amusing, and a reminder about something he needed to look into later. He set the phone beside his coffee.

"Honey, I'm probably going to be late tonight."

María kept chopping the vegetables.

"Again?"

"Looks that way."

"You've been awfully busy lately."

"I know. But I'm almost done."

She glanced at him over her shoulder.

"That's what you said last week."

"And I'm still very close to finishing."

"How convenient."

Ernesto smiled.

"I'm not going to promise you a time. You'll just get mad at me if I don't make it."

"I don't get mad at you."

"Of course not."

"I simply remind you when you say you're going to do something and then don't."

"An extremely important distinction."

María tried to maintain a serious expression, but eventually smiled. It wasn't the first time they'd gone through a stretch like this. Ernesto worked as a contractor, and his projects tended to demand a great deal of his time for relatively short periods. He didn't keep conventional working hours. Some weeks he could spend almost all his time at home; during others, he had to be away for entire days. Early in their marriage, the irregular schedule had caused arguments. María had even suspected there was another woman.

They'd fought about his absences more than once. Eventually, they'd agreed that Ernesto would let her know when he was busy and make an effort to set aside time for María and Alma. They'd managed to settle into a routine that worked for the

three of them, although that didn't mean María enjoyed seeing him leave so often.

"Once I finish up what I'm working on, we can do something together," Ernesto suggested. "How about going to the movies?"

María set the knife on the cutting board.

"All three of us?"

"All three."

"And you'll let us pick the movie?"

Ernesto narrowed his eyes.

"That sounds dangerous."

"Then we don't have a deal."

"All right. But if I end up sitting through a three-hour romance movie, I'm getting a large popcorn."

"You can get two."

"How generous."

María burst out laughing.

"Once we know what day you're free, I'll tell Alma. She'll be thrilled."

"Just don't let her make me promise a trip to the toy store, too."

"You'll have to negotiate that with her."

"I'm doomed."

María placed the salad in front of him and sat down with her own cup of coffee; for a few minutes, they talked about everyday things. Alma's school was organizing an activity for the following week, María needed to buy a few things for the house, and Ernesto wanted to use one of his upcoming days off to work on the garden. He also remembered seeing an advertisement for

a dinosaur exhibit and thought he might take Alma once this busy stretch of work was over. A bush had been growing across the walkway for far too long, and several flowers needed to be moved into larger pots.

"Oh, by the way," María said, "what are we having for lunch on Saturday?"

Ernesto looked up.

"I'm not sure yet. I was thinking of making something different."

"Different how?"

"I found a recipe a few days ago that I want to try. I need to pick up a couple of ingredients, but I think it'll turn out pretty well."

"Another one of your recipes that takes all morning?"

"Good things take time."

María smiled.

"You always say that."

"Because I'm always right."

"Of course you are, honey."

Ernesto laughed. He liked cooking when he could take his time. He enjoyed choosing ingredients, preparing them, and discovering how small changes in a recipe could produce different results; there were dishes he made again and again for months until he got exactly the flavor he was looking for. María liked to say he had more patience in the kitchen than anywhere else.

"Well, you still have to fix up the garden on Saturday," she reminded him.

"I know. That bush looks like it's trying to get inside the house."

"Then the garden first, and your experiments afterward."

"Deal."

Ernesto finished his salad and picked up his plate.

"I'll wash it," he offered.

"Leave it. I've still got a few things to do in here."

"You sure?"

"Yes. You'd better go take a shower before you're late."

Ernesto leaned down to kiss her again.

"I love you."

"Love you too. But I still prefer you freshly showered."

He smiled and left the kitchen. Half an hour later, he came downstairs wearing jeans and a clean shirt. His hair was somewhat more cooperative than before, although one stubborn strand was already beginning to rise above his forehead. María was looking over some papers at the table.

"Heading out?"

"Yeah, honey."

"Drive safe."

"Always."

"And let me know if you're going to be really late."

"I'll text you."

She stood to say goodbye. Ernesto wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her.

"Give our princess a kiss for me when she gets home from school."

"I will."

"And tell her we still owe her a trip to the movies. But this time she has to let me eat my own popcorn."

María laughed.

"No promises."

Ernesto picked up his keys, slipped his phone into his pocket, and left the house. Before getting into the car, he glanced at the garden. The bush beside the walkway was badly in need of trimming. He made a mental note to take care of it as soon as he had a free morning.

Then he opened the car door, started the engine, and drove away. The day was just beginning.

CHAPTER 3

Pleasure

The man sat motionless, listening to the stranger cry. We're fucked. The words kept circling through his mind. No. That couldn't be true. It didn't have to be. The other man was hurt, terrified. Whatever he'd been through, it was understandable that he'd lost hope; that didn't mean they were both doomed. There had to be a reason they were being kept here. And if there was a reason, there had to be some way to negotiate.

"Listen," he began.

He never finished; the creak of the door silenced him. Somewhere in the darkness, the other man stopped making a sound. Footsteps approached. They were the same ones he'd heard before: steady, unhurried, without the slightest hint of urgency.

"Hey!" he called. "I need to talk to you!"

The footsteps continued.

"I don't know why I'm here, but there must be some kind of mistake."

No answer.

He heard fabric rustling, followed by a series of movements he couldn't identify. Then came the sound of several metal objects knocking against one another.

"I'm talking to you!"

Another noise interrupted the silence. Something like the crinkling of plastic.

The footsteps moved toward one side of the room. The man turned his head as far as the restraints allowed.

"What are you doing?"

No answer.

Metal struck metal again; something was placed on a hard surface, then something else. A chill ran through him. Until then, he'd imagined he was dealing with a kidnapper, perhaps someone trying to get information or money out of him. But he was finding it increasingly difficult to understand why this person refused even to speak.

"Listen," he insisted, struggling to control his breathing. "I have a family. We can work this out. I just need to know what you want."

The footsteps returned. They stopped directly in front of him. The prisoner raised his head slightly.

"Please."

Someone took hold of his right hand. The contact startled him. Fingers covered in something smooth moved along his wrist, checking how tightly it was secured.

"What are you doing?"

The gloved hand separated his index finger from the others. He tried to make a fist, but couldn't pull free.

Then he felt something cold against his fingernail. He understood too late.

"No... Wait!"

He tried to jerk his hand away.

"No, no, no! Please!"

The pain came before he could finish begging.

He screamed.

His entire body strained against the restraints. The chair rattled beneath him, and for several seconds he couldn't think of anything except the unbearable sensation.

When he finally managed to catch his breath, he was crying. His index fingernail had been torn off.

"Please! Don't do it again!"

The pressure disappeared. He heard a small metallic sound.

Then the gloved hand selected another finger.

"No! Wait! I'll do whatever you want!"

The stranger ripped out another nail. The second scream was even more desperate. He fought against the restraints, trying to close his fists and pull his arms away. Nothing worked.

"Stop! Please, stop!"

The man continued without saying a word.

When he finally stepped away, the prisoner was left gasping, tears covering his face. Something was set down on the table.

Then silence.

"Why?" he asked between sobs. "What did I do to you?"

He waited.

"You don't have to do this. I can get you money. Anything you want."

The footsteps returned. Someone took his hand again.

"No..."

An awful pressure concentrated in one of his fingers. He heard a sharp crack, and the pain made him writhe. The

stranger had just broken it. The man screamed until he ran out of breath.

Then came another injury, followed by more desperate pleas.

At some point, he lost count of how many fingers had been hurt. All he knew was that his hands—the same hands he'd used to test his restraints and reclaim some small sense of control—had become a constant source of suffering. He couldn't remember when he'd started trembling; the muscles in his arms ached, and his hands were so sensitive that the slightest movement drew a groan from him. He'd screamed until his throat burned.

After an amount of time he couldn't measure, the stranger began tending to some of his wounds. It confused him: he felt something cold being applied to his hands, followed by pressure that sent fresh stabs of pain through them. Then came the sensation of material being wrapped around his fingers.

"Are... are you going to let me go?" he managed to ask.

No answer.

"Please..."

The man continued working.

When he finished, he gathered the objects he'd used and moved away from the chair. Footsteps crossed the room.

The door creaked.

Then came the dull thud. The prisoner waited.

One, two, three...

He counted silently to twenty, then fifty; when he reached a hundred, he started over. Nobody returned. He allowed himself to breathe a little more slowly. He'd survived. He clung to that

thought. He didn't know why they'd hurt him or what they hoped to accomplish, but he was still alive. Maybe it had been a warning. A way of showing him what they could do if he refused to obey. The problem was that nobody had told him what he was supposed to obey.

He woke with a start. At first, he didn't know what had awakened him. His head had fallen forward against his chest, and his hands hurt even when he held them perfectly still.

Then he heard the scream. The same voice. He raised his head as far as he could.

"Hey! I'm here!"

Another scream made him shudder.

Then he heard a plea so broken that he could barely make out the words.

"Leave him alone!" he shouted into the darkness. "Stop it!"

Nobody answered. The screaming continued for an impossible length of time. He called out to the stranger several times, but his own voice was swallowed by the sounds coming from somewhere beyond him. Occasionally he caught fragments of words: a plea, a groan, something that sounded like a refusal repeated over and over. The prisoner clenched his teeth. There was absolutely nothing he could do. He wanted to cover his ears, but his hands remained restrained.

He tried focusing on his breathing, counting the seconds, thinking about anything else. He couldn't shut the voice out.

When the screaming finally stopped, he waited for some sign of life.

"Can you hear me?"

Silence.

"Hey!"

Nothing.

He had no idea how long he remained that way, head raised and muscles tense, waiting for someone to answer.

Then he began wondering whether the stranger was still alive. Until now, he'd tried to push that possibility out of his mind. He forced himself to listen. If the other man was breathing, maybe he could hear him. But no sound came.

For the first time, he understood that he might end up completely alone in this place.

"Is... somebody... there?"

The voice came after a stretch of time he couldn't begin to measure. He lifted his head.

"Yes!"

He tried to speak louder, but his throat hurt.

"I'm here."

He heard uneven breathing.

"Did... did he hurt you?"

The prisoner's eyes filled with tears.

"That son of a bitch..."

He clenched his teeth.

"He ripped out my nails. And I think he broke several of my fingers."

A sob came from the darkness.

"I can't move my hands properly," he continued. "And he didn't say anything. Not a single word."

Ragged breathing.

"I... I know..."

The prisoner raised his head.

"Did he do that to you too?"

A pause.

"Y... yes."

"I heard you screaming earlier. I thought..."

He couldn't finish. The stranger began to cry.

"I thought you weren't going to answer me again," the prisoner admitted.

"Me... too..."

"What do you mean?"

The voice broke.

"I thought... I wasn't... going to..."

The man closed his eyes.

"It's over now," he said, though he wasn't sure that was true. "We're talking again. That's good."

They remained quiet for a while.

"What does he want from us?" he finally asked.

No answer.

"He has to want something."

"I... I don't know..."

"Well, it has to be something! Nobody does this for no reason!"

The stranger began crying again. The prisoner felt a stab of guilt.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didn't mean to yell at you."

"It... doesn't matter."

They fell silent. The prisoner tried adjusting his hands, but the pain stopped him.

"How many times has he come for you?"

He heard the other man trying to answer.

"I... I don't... remember."

"Have you been here long?"

"I don't know..."

"Days?"

The stranger made a strangled sound.

"Weeks?"

"P... please... don't..."

The man closed his mouth. He wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer.

"All right," he finally said. "I won't ask anymore."

He listened to the stranger breathe. There was something peculiar about the way he spoke. He didn't sound merely frightened. Some of his words came out distorted, as though he couldn't move his mouth properly.

"Did he hurt your face?" the prisoner asked.

The stranger took a long time to answer.

"My... mouth..."

The prisoner's stomach tightened.

"What did he do to you?"

No answer.

"Hey..."

He heard a sob.

"My... t... teeth..."

The word was barely recognizable. The prisoner sat perfectly still.

For the first time, he understood that the stranger's difficulty speaking might have a far worse explanation than he'd imagined. He remembered the screams he'd heard when he first woke up. The way that voice seemed to break with every word. He felt sick.

"You don't have to tell me," he said quickly. "It's okay. Don't say anything else."

The stranger kept crying. The man closed his eyes. He wanted to imagine it was an exaggeration. Maybe the other man was confused. Maybe the pain was keeping him from remembering what had actually happened. But the voice was still there. And every word seemed to contradict him.

At some point, he fell asleep again.

He woke with the sensation that someone had just touched him. He tried to sit up, but the pain in his hands forced him to stop. He heard no footsteps. No creaking door. He waited, motionless.

Nothing.

Had it been a dream?

He couldn't know. He began mentally reviewing everything he could remember since first waking up in the chair. The screams. The voices.

The footsteps. The pain. He had no idea whether all of it had happened on the same day. Maybe hours had passed. Maybe longer. Without light, there was no way to distinguish one

moment from another. There were no mornings or nights, only stretches of silence that blurred together. The thought unsettled him. He couldn't tell how long he'd been missing. Whether his family had reported his disappearance. Whether anyone was looking for him.

He tried to find something he could use as a reference. He remembered counting to a hundred after one of the visits. But how many times had he repeated the count?

He didn't know.

He decided to start again. One. Two. Three. He reached thirty-seven before he heard the door creak.

The footsteps returned with the same maddening calm as always. His breathing began to quicken.

"Wait!"

The movements continued.

"I understand now," he said, though he had no idea what he was supposed to understand. "I won't fight you anymore."

He heard the rustle of plastic.

Then the sound of instruments.

"Just tell me what you need."

Nothing.

The person approached the chair. The prisoner began to tremble.

"Please..."

A gloved hand took hold of his left arm. He tried to pull away, but the restraint prevented it. He felt pressure near his shoulder.

Then a sharp pain made his entire body strain against the metal.

He screamed.

For several moments, he couldn't understand what was happening. All he could feel was a terrible sensation spreading through his arm.

Then he realized the man was tearing the skin off. The knowledge horrified him almost as much as the pain itself.

"No! Please, no!"

He tried to pull his arm away, but the restraints held him in place. His attacker continued. The prisoner screamed until he had no breath left. He couldn't see what was being done to him, and because of that, his mind began to imagine what his arm would look like when it was over. He didn't want to think about it anymore.

"Stop! Please, stop!"

The stranger didn't answer.

When he finally moved away, the man could barely keep his head upright. His left arm burned even when he wasn't moving it. He refused to imagine what it looked like. He heard several objects being moved around on the table.

Then someone touched his arm again. He flinched. The pain intensified for a few moments as the stranger tended to his wounds. He no longer asked why. He didn't have the strength. He simply waited for it to end.

The door closed again. The prisoner remained motionless. He'd stopped crying, although tears were still gathering beneath the blindfold.

"Are... are you awake?"

The stranger's voice surprised him.

"Yes."

He barely recognized his own voice. It was hoarse, and he could hardly raise it above a whisper.

"I thought... I thought you'd gone," he said.

The other man took a while to respond.

"We... we can't... leave..."

The prisoner clenched his jaw.

"Don't say that."

Silence.

"There's still a chance someone will find us."

The stranger let out a sob.

"I... I used to... believe that..."

"You already told me."

The words came out harsher than he'd intended.

"Sorry," he added. "It's just that I can't think the way you do."

He heard the other man's labored breathing.

"I don't want to believe this is all we have left."

The stranger said nothing. The prisoner thought of his home. His wife. His daughter. He imagined someone opening the door to the place where they were being held. He'd hear a different voice, someone announcing that it was all over. He wanted to hold on to that image. But he could no longer summon the same confidence.

"It has to end sometime," he murmured.

The other voice didn't answer.

He waited.

"Did you hear me?"

"Y... yes."

"Then tell me something."

A pause.

"What... do you... want to know?"

The prisoner swallowed. There was a question he'd been trying to avoid for some time. One that had lingered in his mind since their first conversation.

"What else did he do to you?"

The stranger began breathing with difficulty.

"N... no... please..."

"I need to know."

"I... don't want..."

"I need to know what's going to happen to me!"

The shout hurt his throat. A groan came from the darkness. The man closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry... Again."

He needed several seconds to catch his breath.

"I just want to be prepared."

The stranger remained silent for so long that the prisoner thought he wouldn't answer. Finally, he heard his voice.

"I... I hope..."

He stopped.

"What?"

"I hope... I'm still... alive..."

The prisoner's blood ran cold.

"What do you mean?"

The reply barely made it out.

"F... for... when..."

"When what?"

A sob.

"When... you get..."

"Get where?"

The stranger broke down crying.

"To... the nose."

The prisoner didn't answer. He remained motionless, his hands aching and his left arm burning beneath its bandages. He thought about the stranger's distorted voice. The teeth. The things he hadn't dared to ask about. Until then, he'd tried to convince himself that each act of violence was a warning, some brutal way of forcing him to cooperate. But the man who kept entering that room still hadn't asked him for anything.

And that realization was beginning to terrify him far more than the pain. He wanted to say they'd find a way out. That someone would come looking for them. That none of this could go on forever. He opened his mouth. But he couldn't bring himself to say a single word.

CHAPTER 4

Ice Cream

Alma had spent the entire week talking about dinosaurs. Ernesto couldn't remember exactly when her fascination had begun; maybe it had been a movie, a television show, or one of the books they'd bought her. Whatever the reason, for the past several weeks his daughter seemed to have decided that no other animal deserved nearly as much attention. She had drawings taped to her bedroom walls, several plastic figures arranged on a shelf, and an illustrated book she insisted on taking with her whenever they went out.

Ernesto had learned to recognize a few dinosaurs just to keep up with their conversations. Others remained a mystery, especially the ones whose names seemed specifically designed to test his pronunciation. So when he discovered that an amusement park had an exhibit featuring animatronic dinosaurs, he thought it would make a wonderful surprise. He didn't tell Alma. On the morning of their outing, while María finished getting a few things ready, Ernesto found his daughter sitting in the living room, leafing through her book.

"Ready, princess?"

Alma looked up.

"Where are we going?"

"Out for a little while."

"Where?"

"If I tell you, it won't be a surprise."

She closed her book.

"Are we going shopping?"

"Not necessarily."

"Are we going to the movies?"

"Not today."

Alma regarded him suspiciously.

"Is it a good surprise?"

"I hope so."

"What if I don't like it?"

Ernesto pretended to consider the question.

"Well, then I guess I'll have to keep the surprise all to myself."

"You can't!"

"Then I suppose we'll have to take our chances."

María appeared in the living room with her purse.

"Are you two finished with the interrogation?"

"Your daughter wants me to tell her everything," Ernesto replied.

"Because you won't tell me anything!" Alma protested.

"Which is precisely why it's called a surprise."

The girl let out an exaggerated sigh and got up from the couch.

"Fine. But it has to be a really good surprise."

"No pressure, then."

A little while later, they left the house; during the drive, Alma tried to guess their destination. She asked whether they were visiting her grandparents, going to buy toys, getting

hamburgers, or heading somewhere with animals. Ernesto responded to every possibility with the same smile.

"We'll see."

Eventually, María stepped in.

"Alma, if you keep asking questions, your dad's going to run out of answers before we get there."

"But I want to know!"

"We've definitely figured that out," Ernesto said.

Alma crossed her arms, determined not to ask another question. Her determination lasted less than five minutes.

When they reached the amusement park's parking lot, she still had no idea exactly where they were going; she got out of the car and looked around. Voices and music drifted from the entrance, along with the distant sounds of the rides.

"An amusement park?"

"Looks that way," Ernesto answered.

Alma smiled.

"Can we go on the rides?"

"Whichever ones we can, of course."

María took her daughter's hand, and they walked toward the ticket booths. While they waited in line, Alma noticed an enormous poster near the entrance: it showed a Tyrannosaurus with its jaws wide open, surrounded by vegetation and advertising a prehistoric exhibit. The girl went still.

Then she slowly turned toward her father.

"Dad..."

Ernesto pretended not to understand.

"What is it?"

Alma pointed at the poster.

"Are we going to see dinosaurs?"

"Well, since we're already here..."

He couldn't finish. Alma let out a shriek of delight and threw her arms around his waist, hugging him as tightly as she could.

"Thank you, Daddy!"

Ernesto stroked her hair.

"You're welcome, princess."

She immediately pulled away.

"Come on! Come on!"

"We have to buy our tickets first."

"Then hurry!"

María burst out laughing.

"I think she likes the surprise."

"I'm getting that impression."

Once inside the park, there was no need to ask where they wanted to go first; Alma walked several steps ahead of her parents, constantly looking back to make sure they were following. The entrance to the exhibit was decorated with artificial plants, rocks, and an enormous sign announcing a journey through the world of dinosaurs. Roars came from inside, making the walls vibrate slightly. Alma stopped in front of the first animatronic.

An enormous Brachiosaurus stretched its neck high above the visitors, slowly moving its head while producing deep, rumbling sounds. Her eyes widened.

"Look, Dad!"

"That's pretty big."

"It's a Brachiosaurus!"

"So it is."

"It ate plants."

"At that size? It must've needed an awful lot of salad."

Alma looked at him seriously.

"It didn't eat salad, Dad."

"Oh. Sorry."

"It ate leaves from trees."

"Well, then it must've needed some pretty big trees."

Satisfied with that conclusion, Alma nodded and continued walking. Farther along, they found an Ankylosaurus swinging its tail from side to side. Alma approached to examine its armor and began explaining to María what the enormous structure at the end of its tail was for. Ernesto listened to part of the explanation before an especially loud roar startled several children nearby. Alma turned her head. At the far end of the exhibit, a Tyrannosaurus was slowly opening its jaws.

"Now that one I know!" Ernesto declared.

"Everybody knows that one," Alma replied.

María burst out laughing.

"She sure told you."

"I'm beginning to think neither of you appreciates my knowledge."

Alma approached the animatronic, keeping a cautious distance. She studied its teeth, its tiny arms, and the movement of its head.

"It was a carnivore," she explained.

"That means it ate meat, right?" Ernesto asked.

"Yes. Like the Allosaurus."

"And the ones that ate plants were called...?"

"Herbivores!"

"Very good."

Alma smiled proudly. For the rest of the tour, she moved from one dinosaur to another, her excitement seemingly renewed with every discovery. Some of the creatures were familiar from her books. Others inspired fresh questions. Ernesto and María followed along as she explained everything she remembered, corrected her father's mispronunciations, and stopped to read the information signs.

When they finished the exhibit, Alma wanted to go back to the beginning.

"We can come back later," Ernesto promised. "There's still plenty more to see."

"Really?"

"Really."

They spent much of the afternoon on the rides. At first, Alma chose the ones that seemed least intimidating, but as the day went on, she began pointing toward bigger and bigger attractions. After one of them, Ernesto stepped off with his hair completely disheveled and an expression that kept María laughing for several minutes.

"It wasn't that intense," he insisted.

"Of course not," she replied. "That's why you were screaming."

"I was just trying to make sure Alma didn't feel alone."

The girl laughed.

"I didn't scream that much!"

"Then next time you'll have to look after your dad," María said.

By the time the sun began to sink, all three of them were tired. Alma walked more slowly now, hugging a small dinosaur figure they'd bought at one of the park's shops. Before leaving, she looked back toward the exhibit.

"Dad, can we come back another day?"

"Of course we can."

"Soon?"

"How about you let us recover from today first?"

Alma seemed to consider that a reasonable answer. On the way home, they stopped for tacos. As they ate, she went over her favorite moments from the outing and debated with Ernesto about which dinosaur would have been the strongest. María occasionally joined the conversation, although she eventually admitted she didn't know enough about dinosaurs to choose a winner. Alma promised to lend her one of her books.

By the time they finally got home, the girl could barely keep her eyes open. She kissed her parents goodnight and went to bed, taking her new dinosaur figure with her.

The following day, Ernesto finished his work on the computer shortly after Alma got home from school. He found her sitting on the living room floor, surrounded by several toy dinosaurs.

"What are you doing, princess?"

"They're looking for food."

Ernesto examined the little collection of figures.

"I hope they find some soon. A few of them look pretty hungry."

Alma picked up one of the dinosaurs and placed it beside a plastic plant.

"This one eats leaves."

"And that one?"

"Meat."

Ernesto nodded.

"Then we'd better keep them apart."

Alma seemed to consider his comment.

Then she rearranged the figures.

"Dad, are we going out today?"

"I was thinking we could go get some ice cream. Would you like to come with me?"

Alma immediately abandoned her toys.

"Yes!"

"Then go get your shoes."

A few minutes later, they were walking together toward a nearby park. Beside it stood an ice cream shop they visited regularly. The place had several tables near the windows and a counter where customers could choose different combinations of flavors and toppings. Alma sat down at one of the tables while Ernesto went to order. He didn't need to ask what she wanted. His daughter always chose the same thing: frozen yogurt with strawberries at the bottom, strawberry jam, and chocolate sprinkles.

Ernesto, on the other hand, liked trying different combinations. That afternoon, he ordered one with carob, chocolate syrup, and cookie pieces. He returned to the table carrying both desserts.

"Here you are, miss."

Alma accepted hers with a smile.

"Thanks, Dad."

Ernesto sat across from her and took a spoonful. For several minutes, they ate in silence, concentrating on their ice cream.

Then Alma looked up.

"Dad, what's in yours?"

"Carob, chocolate, and cookies."

"Is it good?"

"I like it."

She studied his ice cream with interest.

"What does carob taste like?"

Ernesto thought for a moment.

"It's a little like chocolate, but different."

"Oh."

Alma returned to her ice cream. A moment passed.

"Dad..."

"Yeah?"

"I had an idea yesterday."

Ernesto rested his spoon on the edge of the cup.

"Let's hear it."

"I was thinking about dinosaurs."

"Well, that's a surprise."

She ignored the comment.

"The ones that ate meat couldn't be friends with the ones that ate plants."

"Why not?"

"Because they might eat them."

"That could be a problem."

Alma nodded seriously.

"But I was thinking that if the carnivores had tried other things, maybe they would've liked eating plants."

Ernesto looked at her.

"You think so?"

"Yeah. Because sometimes you don't know if you like something until you try it."

"That's true, although I'm not sure a Tyrannosaurus could've lived on lettuce."

Alma frowned slightly.

"But it could've tried."

Ernesto was about to explain why carnivorous animals couldn't simply change their diets because they discovered a new flavor. But his daughter wasn't finished.

"And then I thought maybe I'd like other things too."

Ernesto glanced at his ice cream.

Then at Alma's. He was beginning to understand where this conversation was going.

"Other things like what?"

Alma discreetly pointed at his cup.

"Like carob."

Ernesto suppressed a smile.

"I see."

"Because I've never tried it."

"That's true."

"And you always say we should try new things."

"That's true too."

Alma looked at him with an expression of carefully rehearsed innocence.

"So maybe I should try your ice cream."

Ernesto rested his elbows on the table.

"And what should we do with yours?"

The girl examined her own cup as though the problem had only just occurred to her.

"You could eat it."

"What an excellent solution."

"That way neither of us has to go without ice cream."

Ernesto burst out laughing. His daughter had constructed a remarkably elaborate argument to get what she wanted. The funniest part was that she seemed genuinely convinced she'd found a solution that benefited them both.

"All right," he said. "Let's trade."

Alma beamed. Ernesto slid his ice cream toward her and took the cup sitting in front of her. He wasn't particularly fond of strawberries, but he didn't mind eating them now and then.

"Now you have to try it," he reminded her.

"I will!"

Alma took a spoonful containing chocolate, cookies, and a little carob. She put it in her mouth and spent a few seconds considering the flavor.

Then her eyes widened.

"It's so good!"

Ernesto laughed.

"I'm glad you like it."

She took another bite.

"It tastes different!"

"I told you."

"Dad, next time I want one of these."

"Then I'll have to find something else for myself."

Alma looked at him over the rim of her cup.

"Or we could get two of the same."

"That's an option too."

They continued eating as they watched people passing by outside. Alma returned to the subject of dinosaurs and asked whether they could someday visit a museum with real skeletons. Ernesto told her they could look for one when he had some time off. She seemed satisfied with the promise.

When they finished, Ernesto collected the empty cups and stood.

"Ready to head home?"

"Yep."

"Then let's go. We still have to bring something back for your mom."

Alma stopped.

"Ice cream?"

"Sounds like a good idea."

"What flavor?"

Ernesto smiled.

"I think we'd better ask her."

They bought an ice cream for María and started home. Alma walked beside him, holding his hand as she explained that perhaps dinosaurs could have lived together if they'd learned to share their food. Ernesto listened to her all the way home.

CHAPTER 5

Broken

He had stopped counting. At first, he'd tried to measure time by the intervals between visits; then by the number of times he managed to sleep and, later, by the sounds coming from beyond the door. None of it had worked. The room remained wrapped in the same unchanging darkness, without mornings or nights he could recognize. Sometimes he woke convinced he'd been asleep for hours, only to discover he'd barely changed position. Other times, he felt as though he'd closed his eyes for a moment and opened them an eternity later.

He'd lost track of the days. Maybe there hadn't been that many; he wasn't sure it mattered anymore. His hands hurt even when he kept perfectly still. The bandages had hardened in places, and several of his fingers were so swollen he could barely move them. His left arm was worse. Ever since the man had torn away part of its skin, any movement that pulled at the wounds sent pain shooting through his shoulder.

Between some of the visits, he'd been given water and something he could barely manage to swallow. He also remembered hands changing his bandages, though he couldn't always distinguish one visit from another. After that, nothing. He didn't know how much time had passed since then. He was still thirsty. The man with the unhurried footsteps had returned several times. He never said anything. He would arrive, prepare his instruments, and do whatever he'd decided to do. Then he'd tend to some of the injuries and leave.

At first, the prisoner had tried to anticipate what would happen next. Now he only listened. The creak of the door. The

rustle of plastic. The faint clinks of metal against the table. Certain sounds triggered an immediate reaction. Sometimes he began trembling before anyone even touched him. He'd learned to recognize the pain of old injuries and distinguish it from the pain that announced a new one. The distinction did him no good.

"Are you there?" he asked.

He waited.

"Can you hear me?"

No answer.

The stranger hadn't spoken to him in a long time—or at least he thought it had been a long time. He'd awakened several times since their last conversation, but he no longer trusted each awakening to mark the beginning of a different stretch of time.

"Hey..."

The silence continued. Maybe the man was sleeping; maybe he didn't have the strength to answer. The prisoner considered calling out again, but his throat still hurt. He decided to remain quiet. After a while, he began wondering whether the other man was still alive.

The door opened when he least expected it. His body went rigid before he could even think.

"No..."

The footsteps crossed the room. He heard several objects being set on a hard surface.

Then came the familiar rustle of plastic.

"Please," he murmured. "Let me rest."

Nobody answered. He felt a gloved hand near his head. He tried to pull away, but the movement sent a stab of pain through his left arm.

"No... not there..."

The hand gripped his left ear. He began struggling. He'd learned to fear being touched long before he understood what was about to happen. He felt cold metal.

Then a sharp pain.

He screamed.

The stranger had cut away part of his ear. The prisoner tried to jerk his head back, but firm pressure held it in place. He felt something wet running down his neck, and the pain began spreading across that side of his face.

"Stop! Please!"

His captor didn't say a word.

When he finally stepped away, the man was left trembling. He heard someone handling different materials. Then he felt fresh pressure against the wound. He couldn't understand why they kept treating the very injuries they'd inflicted. At first, he'd interpreted it as a sign that they wanted to keep him alive. Now the possibility terrified him.

The door closed again. He remained motionless. He didn't know how much of his ear had been cut away. He was afraid to discover what it looked like. Afraid to discover what had become of his entire body.

"Are you... still awake?"

The man lifted his head. For an instant, he thought he'd imagined the voice.

"Is that you?"

"Y... yes..."

Relief washed over him so intensely that he nearly cried.

"I've been calling you."

No response.

"I thought something had happened to you."

The stranger let out a groan.

"I... couldn't..."

His voice broke off.

"It's okay," the prisoner replied. "You don't have to explain."

They fell silent. He was surprised by how badly he'd wanted to hear that voice again. He didn't know the stranger's name. He had no idea what his face looked like, and he knew almost nothing about his life. But he was the only person he could talk to.

"I've been thinking about my wife," he finally said.

The stranger didn't answer.

"She must be desperate. I'm sure she's called everyone we know. The police, too."

He spoke the words and waited for the comfort they used to bring him. It never came.

"I'm... married... too," the other man murmured.

The prisoner raised his head slightly. It was the first time the stranger had mentioned anything concrete about his own life.

"Really?"

"Y... yes."

"Do you have kids?"

A pause.

"A... little girl."

The prisoner swallowed.

"Me too."

For a few moments, he forgot about the pain running through his arm.

"How old is yours?"

The stranger took a long time to answer.

"I... don't want... to think..."

"That's okay."

The prisoner lowered his head.

"Mine's still little. She always waits for me when I get home. Sometimes she runs over to hug me before I can even close the door."

He remembered her arms around his waist and the way she always seemed to have questions for him precisely when he was too tired to answer. There had been a time when those interruptions had exhausted him. Now he would've given anything to hear just one of them.

"I miss her," he murmured.

A sob came from the darkness.

"Me... too..."

The prisoner fell quiet. It was strange to feel that he knew a little more about the stranger and, at the same time, regret discovering that the man had a family waiting for him.

"We have to get back to them," he said.

The words sounded less convincing than he'd hoped. He waited for an answer. None came.

"Did you hear me?"

Silence.

"Hey..."

He listened for a few moments, then let his head fall forward. He didn't know whether the other man had fallen asleep, whether talking had exhausted him, or whether he simply didn't want to continue. He wished he'd at least said goodbye.

He woke convinced he was home. He'd heard his daughter calling to him from somewhere nearby.

"I'm here!" he answered before realizing where he was.

The silence brought him back. The chair. The restraints. The pain. He stayed motionless. For several seconds, he tried to return to the dream, to hear that voice again, to imagine getting up and walking into his daughter's bedroom. He couldn't.

"What... happened?" a voice asked.

The man raised his head.

"Nothing."

He swallowed.

"I was dreaming."

No answer.

"About my daughter," he added, although nobody had asked.

He waited.

The stranger didn't speak again. This time, he didn't insist. He couldn't bear waking up and discovering the room was still there. He never heard the door open. He only woke when

someone seized his jaw. The shock made him struggle immediately.

"Wait!"

Something held his head in place.

"No, please!"

The touch of an instrument against his teeth filled him with a terrible certainty. He remembered what the other prisoner had said. The mouth. The teeth. He tried to close his lips, but the pressure forced him to keep his mouth open.

"No!"

His captor began pulling out his teeth. The pain made him scream.

Then came another assault, and he tried to wrench his head away so violently that he hurt his neck. Tears streamed from beneath the blindfold.

"St... op!"

The word disappeared between a sob and another scream. He had no idea how many teeth had been taken.

When the stranger finally stepped away, his mouth was full of blood, and his jaw ached in a way he'd never experienced before. He tried to swallow. Even that was difficult. His captor remained nearby for a while, handling objects the prisoner couldn't identify.

Then came footsteps and the creak of the door. As always, there was no explanation. Not even a word of farewell. He tried to breathe slowly. He wanted to ask for water.

"W... w..."

He stopped.

Tried again.

"W... water..."

The word came out distorted. His mouth was swollen, and his lips hurt. He couldn't move his tongue properly, and some sounds seemed to escape through the gaps where his teeth had been. He fell silent.

Then he remembered his first conversations with the stranger. The way he spoke. The unfinished words. The pauses.

For the first time, he understood something he'd only imagined before. And that realization frightened him more than it comforted him. He didn't know how long he'd been trying to speak to the other man.

"C... can you... hear...?"

He waited.

"Are... you...?"

Silence.

He tried again, but his mouth hurt too much. Eventually, he rested his head against the back of the chair. It was absurd. He'd spent so long listening to the stranger's voice, and now, just as he was beginning to understand what it meant to speak through injuries like these, he couldn't communicate with him. Maybe he hadn't been able to understand him, either. Maybe the other man had tried to tell him things he simply couldn't pronounce.

The prisoner closed his eyes.

For the first time, he wished the stranger would answer even if it was only to tell him to stop calling.

The next scream came while he was half asleep. He recognized it immediately. He straightened up as much as he could, forgetting the pain in his arm for a moment.

"H... hey!"

Another scream answered from somewhere he couldn't pinpoint.

Then came a plea. He recognized several words between the sobs, though the voice was so distorted that he struggled to understand them.

"Le... leave... him!"

He tried to shout louder. His mouth hurt, and the sound that came out was barely recognizable as his own. The screams continued. At times, he heard ragged breathing, a repeated refusal, and something like the weeping of someone who no longer had the strength to raise his voice. The prisoner tried to distinguish footsteps. He couldn't. Everything seemed to blur together in the darkness. He wanted to stand. To break free.

To do something. The restraints prevented it.

"P... please..."

He didn't know whether he was begging for the other man or for himself. After a stretch of time he couldn't measure, the screams stopped. The prisoner listened carefully. He waited for a word. A groan. The sound of breathing.

Nothing.

"C... can you... hear?"

Silence.

He kept waiting until exhaustion began weighing down his eyelids. He didn't want to sleep. He was afraid he'd wake up and

discover that the voice would never return. But eventually he fell asleep.

At some point, someone allowed him to drink water. He couldn't remember hearing the door. All he had was the fragmented memory of a container being brought to his lips and a voice he thought he'd heard before losing consciousness again. Maybe he'd dreamed it. Still, his throat didn't burn quite as badly anymore. He wondered how much time had passed. He tried to remember the last time he'd been completely awake.

The injuries to his mouth. The other man's screams. The water. He wasn't certain they'd happened in that order. It surprised him to realize he was beginning to forget the sequence of events. Not the injuries. Not the fear. Only the order. As though all those moments were becoming one endless memory.

"Are... you... there?"

No answer.

He'd stopped calling to the stranger so often. Talking hurt. And the silence that followed his questions was becoming worse than not knowing. He tried to concentrate on his breathing. He thought about his wife, his daughter, and all the things he'd promised himself he would do when he got home. At one point, he'd imagined that if he escaped, he'd stop complaining about insignificant things. He'd work less. Spend more time with them.

Learn to enjoy ordinary afternoons. He'd made so many promises that he was beginning to forget them. He wondered who they were meant for. At first, he'd tried to pray. Later, he'd prayed only when he heard footsteps. Now he didn't even know what to ask for.

The next visit came after a silence that seemed particularly long. He recognized the footsteps. He began to tremble.

"No... p... please..."

His captor prepared his instruments. The prisoner heard metal clinking near his head. Someone gripped his face. Fear overwhelmed him before the pain arrived. He remembered the warning.

When you get to the nose. He tried to pull away. He couldn't. He felt intense heat near his face.

"No!"

The burn tore a scream from him. For several seconds, he lost all awareness of what was happening around him. There was only pain, difficulty breathing, and a desperate attempt to pull his face away from the source of heat.

When the contact ended, he leaned forward as far as the restraints allowed. His nose burned. Breathing through it had become painful. The smell of scorched skin made him gag. He wanted to cry, but every movement of his face increased the pain. His captor stepped away. He heard several objects moving across the table.

Then footsteps.

The door closed again. The prisoner remained motionless. He didn't try calling the other man. He wasn't even sure he wanted to hear him anymore.

When he woke, his head was tilted to one side. He'd lost the feeling that his body belonged to him. His hands seemed foreign. His left arm burned. His ear, mouth, and nose hurt. Every part of his body reminded him of something different. The problem was that he could no longer separate those memories. Sometimes he believed he was about to suffer an injury that had

actually happened long before. Other times, he woke expecting to hear a scream that never came.

Pain seemed to have settled into his body permanently. He no longer needed someone to enter the room to feel afraid. Remembering that someone could was enough.

"Are... are you... still...?"

The voice was so faint that it took him a moment to recognize it. The prisoner raised his head.

"H... hey?"

"Y... yes..."

He felt relief. But it wasn't the relief he'd felt before. It was something smaller. More exhausted. Like discovering that something he'd thought was lost was still there.

"I thought... you..." he began.

He couldn't finish. His jaw hurt too much. The stranger remained silent.

"I... I don't think... I can... do this anymore," he finally murmured.

The prisoner closed his eyes. He wanted to tell him not to talk that way. That they had to hold on. That someone would eventually find them. The words came to mind, but he couldn't make himself say them. He wasn't sure he believed them anymore.

"Me... neither," he answered.

He barely recognized his own voice. The stranger began to cry. They remained silent. After a while, the prisoner tried speaking again.

"At... f... first..."

He struggled to breathe.

"I... thought... I could... talk him... into..."

The effort sent a stab of pain through his jaw. He waited before continuing.

"That... he wanted... m... money..."

The other man didn't answer.

"Th... then... I thought... I just... had to... hold on..."

He stopped.

Speaking was exhausting. He remembered the first times he'd shouted, demanding explanations. They felt like someone else's memories.

"B... but... he... always... comes... back..."

The stranger let out a sob.

"Al... always..."

The prisoner lowered his head. For a while, all they heard was each other's breathing.

"I... don't... want... to..." he finally murmured.

He couldn't finish. The other man said nothing. The prisoner remained awake for a long time. He'd waited for that answer for a length of time he couldn't measure. Now that he'd received it, he discovered he had nothing more to say. The creak of the door woke him. He didn't know whether he'd slept for a few minutes or several hours.

The footsteps approached with the same calm as always. His body reacted immediately. His muscles tightened. His breathing quickened. He felt his heart pounding against his chest.

"No..."

The word barely came out. He heard the rustle of plastic.

Then the instruments. His captor approached. A hand rested briefly on his shoulder. The prisoner began to cry. Not because he'd already been hurt. Because he knew he was about to be.

"P... please..."

The hand withdrew. He heard more movement. He tried to straighten up, but his injuries prevented it. The first pain struck his torso. The prisoner screamed. His voice came out distorted by the injuries to his mouth. Another assault made him writhe against the restraints. He tried to pull away. He couldn't. He'd endured that chair for so long that he knew the exact limits of his movements. He knew how far he could tilt his head.

How much he could tense his shoulders. How far he could move his legs before the restraints dug into his skin. None of it helped him escape. His captor continued. Pain spread across his chest and side. The prisoner began to sob.

"St... op..."

No answer.

"P... please..."

The man stepped away. For several seconds, the prisoner heard nothing but his own breathing. He waited for the footsteps to head toward the door. They didn't. Instead, he heard the instruments moving again. And that was when he understood that it could continue. Not this visit. Not this assault. Everything. The man could leave and come back later. One more time. And another. There was no promise that it would ever stop.

It didn't matter how much he screamed. It didn't matter what he offered. It didn't matter that he could no longer speak properly.

The door would open again. Always. He felt a hand approaching his body. He wanted to pull away. He didn't have the strength.

Then he said something he'd managed to keep out of his thoughts until that very moment.

"K... kill me!"

The words hung in the air. Beneath the blindfold, the man's eyes widened. For an instant, he seemed startled by his own voice. He'd spent so long trying to survive that he could scarcely comprehend having said those words. His captor remained silent.

"K... kill me... now!"

He tried to scream, but his voice broke. Tears streamed down his face.

"P... please..."

No answer.

"I... can't..."

The plea dissolved into a sob. The man lowered his head. He couldn't go on. He'd stopped searching for explanations. Stopped waiting for someone to appear. Stopped promising himself he could endure a little longer. He only wanted it to end. His captor moved a few steps away. The prisoner heard several objects being moved across the table. He didn't lift his head. He didn't want to ask what would happen next.

Part of him still expected another injury. But he no longer had the strength to beg.

The footsteps returned. A hand rested briefly on his head. He didn't pull away. He felt something cold.

Then a sudden pain made him shudder. His breathing became irregular. He tried to fill his lungs, but he couldn't draw air the way he had before. He didn't understand exactly what had been done to him. He only knew something had changed. The sounds in the room began to seem distant. He could still feel pain, but he could no longer distinguish it clearly from the other sensations moving through his body. He thought of his daughter.

It wasn't a complete memory. Just an image. Her standing beside the front door of their home, smiling, her arms open wide. He wanted to go to her. He couldn't. He tried to say her name. His lips barely moved. The darkness remained unchanged.

Then he stopped hearing.

The man stood in front of the chair for a few moments. The body no longer moved. It had taken longer than he'd expected, but he was satisfied with the result. He walked away and sat down at the computer. Messages from the viewers were still appearing on the screen; some were saying goodbye. Others wanted to know when there would be another livestream. He checked the latest contributions.

He smiled.

It had been a good session. He ended the livestream and leaned back in his chair. He remained there for a while, enjoying the silence. He remembered the man who, during the first few days, had insisted that someone would find him. He'd begged, negotiated, and made threats. Later, when he no longer knew what to do, he'd begun seeking comfort in a voice coming

from the darkness. The man remembered one of those conversations.

"I... I used to... think that too."

He repeated the words softly, using the same awkward, halting pronunciation he'd used back then.

Then he let out a brief chuckle. He stood up and removed his mask, holding it in his hands for a few seconds before hanging it in its designated place on the wall. It was a face of almost flawless ivory white. Its thin lips, painted dark red, seemed to suggest a smile. Subtle blue and crimson markings surrounded the eyes. Its proportions were almost human.

Almost.

There was something unsettling about that expression, something difficult to identify. From the front, it looked peaceful. From certain angles, the smile seemed to take on a different character. The man gazed at the mask.

Then he looked toward the chair. There were still things to be done. He switched off the desk lamp. For the moment, all he wanted was to rest. In the darkness, the white face remained hanging on the wall, holding that smile that never quite managed to form.

CHAPTER 6

Family

When Ernesto arrived home, María had just returned from dropping Alma off at school.

"Well, look who finally showed up!" she exclaimed as he walked in.

"Good morning, honey."

"Good morning. Aren't you going to get any rest today either?"

Ernesto set his things down on a chair.

"Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

María looked at him curiously.

"What happened?"

"I finished the project."

Her eyes widened.

"Finally?"

"Finally."

María walked over and wrapped her arms around him.

"That's wonderful! I was starting to think I'd have to make an appointment just to see you."

"I hope you'd at least give me a discount."

"For you? I'd charge double."

Ernesto laughed.

"How generous."

María kissed him and stayed in his arms for a few moments.

"So how did it go?" she asked.

"Pretty well."

"How well?"

Ernesto smiled.

"Let's just say we can afford to treat ourselves a little."

María leaned back slightly.

"Does that mean we can go shopping?"

"I knew you were going to ask that."

"Of course! You've been disappearing for days, and now you tell me everything went great. What did you expect?"

"For you to congratulate me on being such a hardworking man."

"I already congratulated you. Now I'm thinking about how we should celebrate."

Ernesto shook his head, amused.

"All right. We can go out this weekend."

"All three of us?"

"Of course."

"Alma's going to be so happy."

María kissed him again.

"We missed you."

"I know."

"And I don't want you starting another project tomorrow."

"I'm not planning to."

"I hope not."

Ernesto pulled her into another embrace.

"For now, I'm all yours."

María smiled.

"I like the sound of that."

They spent part of the morning together, having breakfast and talking about the things they'd been putting off over the past several days. María wanted to take Alma somewhere over the weekend. Ernesto suggested finding a place where they could spend the afternoon and eat out. They also talked about the garden. María reminded him that he'd been promising to trim some bushes for weeks.

"I haven't forgotten," Ernesto assured her.

"Of course not. You're just waiting for them to grow so tall we can get lost in them."

"Then we could have an adventure without even leaving home."

"I prefer adventures that don't involve calling a gardener."

Ernesto laughed.

After breakfast, he helped clean up the kitchen. María watched him as he put the dishes away.

"Aren't you tired?"

"A little."

"Then you should lie down for a while."

"That's not a bad idea."

She walked over, gently took the dish towel from his hand, and set it on the table.

"Go take a shower."

Ernesto raised an eyebrow.

"Are you telling me I smell bad?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you're thinking it."

María smiled.

"I'm just saying you could use a little time to relax."

He wrapped his arms around her waist.

"And what are you going to do?"

"Maybe join you for a little rest."

Ernesto returned her smile.

"Then I'd better not take too long."

A little while later, Ernesto came out of the bathroom. María was waiting for him in the bedroom. She'd left her phone on the nightstand and let down her hair, which fell over her shoulders.

"I thought you'd fallen asleep in the shower," she said.

"I was enjoying my vacation."

"Well, come enjoy it over here."

Ernesto approached and kissed her; María wrapped her arms around his neck. For a while, they didn't talk about projects, shopping, or any of the things they still needed to take care of. After they made love, they lay together, enjoying the quiet of the house. Ernesto settled in behind María and wrapped an arm around her waist. She took his hand and intertwined their fingers.

"I've missed this," she murmured.

He kissed her shoulder; María nestled a little closer as Ernesto buried his face in her hair. He'd always loved the way it smelled. María took good care of her hair and used products that left it with a sweet, slightly fruity scent. It was a fragrance Ernesto

knew well. He breathed in deeply. Closed his eyes. The smell reminded him of the inside of his mask. He'd hung it up a few hours earlier, after finishing his latest project.

He remembered the white face, the red lips, and that motionless smile. He also remembered the screams. The voice of the man who had spent nearly two weeks begging him to let him go. And the satisfaction he'd felt when he finally managed to hear the words he'd been waiting for.

Kill me!

A faint smile touched Ernesto's lips. María shifted in his arms.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

Ernesto opened his eyes. He lifted his face from her hair and kissed her cheek.

"That we should make the most of these next few days."

She turned to look at him.

"Doing what?"

"Something together. You, Alma, and me."

María smiled.

"A trip?"

"Maybe."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course."

She kissed him.

"I'd love that."

Ernesto stroked her cheek.

"Then pick somewhere you'd like to go."

"Anywhere I want?"

"As long as we don't have to sell the house."

María burst out laughing and settled against him again.

"I love you," she murmured.

Ernesto held her close.

"I love you too."

They stayed that way for a while.

Then María began talking about a few places she'd like to visit. Ernesto listened and discussed the different possibilities with her until they both agreed it would be better to decide once Alma got home from school. They still had time. For the moment, he didn't need to work; he could stay home, cook for his family, and enjoy the days ahead.

As though he were just like anyone else.

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A Note on the Creative Process

This work was developed under the creative direction of M. Fregoso, with AI assistance in drafting, revising, and editing the manuscript, as well as adapting it into English.

The narrative concept, creative decisions, thematic direction, and final approval remained under the author's responsibility.

At 3DX, we see artificial intelligence as a collaborative tool that expands creative possibilities without replacing the human vision and judgment guiding each project.