

Chapter 1

Esse Fuentes stood at the busy edge of a Miami street and looked both ways, just as her parents always told her to do, just as she always did. She aligned the toes of her pink sneakers with the edge of the curb and waited for a break in traffic.

If all little ten-year old girls are cute, then Esse Fuentes possessed an undeniable beauty. Adults would observe her and remark, “She’s going to be a real looker when she grows up.” Her features had been formed by a master craftsman obsessed with symmetry. Her coloring had been applied by an artist with an eye for striking contrast. Her youthful smile could outshine the sun. Nothing was out of place; nothing was out of line. She was the perfect child.

Even today, pale after being sick at home for nearly a week, everyone noticed her. Who wouldn’t notice the beginnings of a young woman? The plumpness of youth had suddenly disappeared, replaced by angularity and budding promise. To the confusion and prepubescent snickering of her male classmates, she was the only girl in her fifth grade class to wear a bra.

Esse’s grandmother had been watching her while the girl’s parents worked. A small apartment, made even smaller by the three neighborhood children she regularly watched, the four charges were a handful. Seeing that the fever had disappeared, and that the child had grown restless in the small apartment, Esse’s grandmother had

assured her that she would be along shortly, and that Esse could go to the park on her own.

A marvelous January day unfolded in Florida's largest city. Puffy cotton ball clouds scuttled across a deep azure sky. A breeze blew in from the Atlantic, ruffling Esse's long, thick hair and whipping her short skirt around her legs. Snowbirds from Iowa and Alberta moved slowly along the streets, white-haired drivers amazed that while their neighbors back home shivered in endless winter cold, they breathed the magic air of a Florida winter.

The light at the corner changed and Esse again looked both ways. Seeing a break in the traffic, she skipped across the street to the park, happy to be free, out of the apartment, confident that her grandmother would be along in a few minutes.

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Cletus and Daryl Yoder, former mental patients from Logansport, Indiana, had been waiting in the shadows of a large magnolia tree since early morning for just the right child. They botched an abduction in Ocala earlier that week, barely escaping capture when the young girl became suspicious and started screaming. All this morning Cletus had worked on his younger brother Daryl, convincing him that they could pull it off, reminding the younger Yoder of what they would do once they had a little girl. This morning, there would be no screaming. That would come later.

Cletus was four years older than his brother. By the time Daryl entered high school in rural Indiana, Cletus had already served a term for attempted rape in Indiana's Michigan City penitentiary. To celebrate his release, Cletus took Daryl out, stole a car, and picked up two young girls in Sycamore Grove, twelve miles up the state highway from their father's farm. They drove the unsuspecting girls to a remote spot at the Indiana dunes where they raped, murdered, and buried them beneath the pristine sand at the shore of Lake Michigan.

That was eight years ago. The girls were never found while the Yoder brothers moved inexorably south, doing what harm they could, eluding authorities by cunning and luck until finally they landed in Miami, looking for their next victim.

Cletus Yoder was muscular but without the work-hardened appearance of an athletic farm boy. His muscles were the product of jailhouse weight lifting. Anyone who has served time knows the difference. Jailhouse buff easily turns to post-penitentiary paunch and Cletus Yoder was working on a roll around his waist that strained dirty jeans at least two sizes too small.

Daryl Yoder was different from his brother. He was smaller, and shy, fair of skin and thin—as if he'd missed more than one meal. Both men were resourceful, certified sociopaths. Still, if there were an ounce of brains between the two Yoder brothers, the thimbleful resided entirely between Daryl's ears. Only he was so scared of big brother Cletus that no one ever noticed.

“Look over there,” Cletus said when he spotted Esse crossing the street.

“Oh my,” Daryl said, his voice breaking. “She’s sweet.”

Cletus smiled and licked his lips. “A little young, maybe, but I do like my meat dark.”

“You see any adults?” Daryl asked, worried, straining to see if anyone had accompanied the little girl to the park. “Maybe we should wait. Maybe someone will see us.”

“She’s alone, dickwad,” Cletus said, getting up from the picnic table where they’d been waiting, adjusting the growing pressure on the crotch of his jeans. “She’s the one. Let’s go.”

“It’ll be like you told me, right?” Daryl pleaded, hurrying to catch up. “We get to keep her, right. This one’s going to be mine?”

“Whatever you want, little brother,” Cletus said, digging a cloth bag out of his back pocket. The bag looked like it was going to be just the right size.

They stopped at the edge of the park, still in the shadows, and looked around, making sure no had followed the girl. Esse was spinning on a metal merry-go-round, leaning back, her eyes closed, her face turned skyward with a smile of pure, innocent pleasure. She had the look of a child simply happy to be out of school, at the park, on a beautiful day. Not a care in the world.

Cletus winked over his shoulder at Daryl as they approached out of the shadows. “You just have to promise to leave some for me,” he whispered.

Daryl didn't say anything. All he could do was follow the little girl around in circles, mesmerized by her dark locks flowing in the breeze like the mane of a racehorse, streaming in the wind. Daryl's heart hammered in his chest as he studied the shape of a youthful body straining against her clothing as she held onto the spinning wheel.

When Esse came around on the merry-go-round Cletus jumped toward her and threw the bag over her head in a single motion, stifling her cries of alarm with his beefy arm. In one movement, he pulled her into the air and over his muscular shoulder. Daryl scanned the park for anyone who might be looking their way. No one. He quickly followed Cletus into the protection of the trees.

No one heard a thing.

No one saw the Yoder brothers carry Esse Fuentes back into the shadows.

Moments later, little Esse's grandmother stood at the edge of the empty park screaming her name as the merry-go-round spun empty. The scream stopped the cars from Iowa and Alberta, puncturing perfect vacations, ruining a perfect Florida day.