

Body of Truth

Chapter 1

Haydon stared out through the rain-spattered windshield of his car, past the uneven, foggy margins that had formed around the edges of the glass in the cold January afternoon and waited for the woman to gain control of her emotions. She was not a woman who showed her feelings easily, nor was she inclined to invite demonstrations of tenderness from others, so that even in her grief, which for so long she had refused to disclose, Haydon did not feel free to comfort her. Until now, her dejection had been a closely held sorrow, a concealed anguish. As he sat beside her in the front seat, his hands on the cold steering wheel, wishing for a cigarette, though he hadn't smoked in years, he imagined that their closeness in the car, his intimate witness to her loss of self-control, must be costing her dearly.

Germaine Muller was fifty-six, ten years older than Haydon himself. He had known her and her husband exactly three months to the day, having met them when he investigated the disappearance of their daughter, Lena, who had gone to the Rice University campus, not far from where they were now sitting, to meet a friend. She did not come home.

Lena had graduated from Rice three years before she disappeared. She had majored in philosophy and six months after graduation had joined the Peace Corps and spent two and a half years among the Ixil Indians in northwestern Guatemala. She had completed her term of

service in the Corps and had been home only six weeks when she disappeared. Germaine and George Muller were convinced that their daughter had gone to the university campus to meet a young free-lance journalist she had gotten to know in Guatemala named John Baine, an American who traveled throughout Central America. He had shown up at the Muller home unannounced five or six days earlier. They said their daughter seemed to have been upset by his visit, and when he showed up again the next day, George Muller had told him to leave and had threatened to call the police. Baine had left, but only after a bitter quarrel between Lena and her father that George Muller blamed on John Baine.

The investigation had been an awkward one from the point of view of satisfying Lena's parents. After a lengthy inquiry, Haydon had come to the conclusion that there had been no foul play. In fact, Haydon believed that Lena had disappeared voluntarily, probably with John Baine. It had not taken Haydon long to learn that George Muller and his daughter had a complicated relationship, one that—before Lena had left for the Peace Corps—had come full circle from inseparable (and, some had said, "unhealthy") to intolerable. Lena's disappearance had all the signs of flight, not abduction.

George Muller, however, could not abide this reading of his daughter's disappearance. As abrasive a man as his wife was stoic, Muller insisted from the beginning that the Houston Police Department was misreading his daughter's disappearance. He was convinced she had been murdered. He had badgered them, tried to pull political strings, tried to put pressure on everyone in the department, from the chief on down to Haydon himself. He had written letters to the editors of both major dailies complaining about incompetence and neglect within the homicide division. He was certain John Baine was a murderer, despite the total absence of any evidence. Muller was outraged that his daughter's disappearance could not be resolved, and in the fog of his own frustration he found fault with everyone.

Because of Muller's high-profile protest and the lack of a conclusive resolution to Lena's disappearance, the story had a long run in the newspapers and the television nightly news. Lena Muller was a pretty girl, her parents were well-to-do, the university from whose campus she had

disappeared was a prestigious, private institution. In a way, from the media's perspective, Lena's disappearance was even more intriguing than if her body had been found. It had all the ingredients of a melodrama. In fact, this morning both Houston dailies had done follow-up stories: **THREE MONTHS LATER—WOMAN STILL MISSING**, and **MULLER'S DISAPPEARANCE STILL A MYSTERY**.

Germaine Muller opened her purse to get tissues, and a faint, sweet smell reached Haydon in the close confines of the car. He had opened the purses of many women over the years, and most of them had had in common something of a similar fragrance, the subtle hint of cosmetics. A strawberry blonde going gray, Germaine was an attractive woman, always well dressed, always ready, her dove pale eyes prepared for any jolt. She did not like being caught by surprise. Lena had been her only child. Haydon waited, looking across the manicured lawns of the university campus, the wet winter day foreshortening the distances of the heavily wooded grounds with a veil of suspended mist. He took a hand off the steering wheel and touched his moustache. It was three weeks old, just getting to the point that it reflected to its best advantage the crisp, clean lines that he wanted it to have. It was darker than his hair, which had been going gray at the temples for several years. He didn't know why he had decided to grow the moustache. One morning he simply had looked at himself in the mirror and didn't shave his upper lip.

Germaine's raincoat made a muffled crinkling noise as she moved in the leather seat, wiping at her nose, clearing her throat, digging in her purse for something, he didn't know what, something she needed. He had no idea why she had called him at home on this drizzly afternoon and asked him to meet her here. When she had pulled up behind his car as he waited for her at this isolated campus drive, she immediately had gotten out of her car, walked up to his Jaguar, and got in. She had said, "Thank you for coming. I'm sorry to get you out on a Sunday. I really ought—" and then she suddenly, uncharacteristically, had broken down, and for the next ten minutes he had listened to her weep uncontrollably. It was a long ten minutes, every minute a full sixty seconds, and she had slumped over against her door, leaning her head against the window as she hunched her left shoulder defensively as if she thought he might be moved to touch her,

as if this was a gesture to keep it all to herself.

Haydon was uncomfortable. Anyone in this much pain easily evoked his compassion, and he usually said what he felt, did what came naturally, a firm hand, empathetic words. But Germaine Muller was complex. He did not want to offend her, and he wasn't sure that she might not find such a gesture too intimate, somehow unwarranted.

He waited as she began to regain her composure, and he wished for some other sound to concentrate on other than the detailed ones of her poignant effort to recover her demeanor of equanimity, a practiced behavior that he imagined she had used all her life to keep the world at arm's length. Haydon thought about the odd phenomenon of self-image, about how so many people had it wrong, and about what it did to the lives of those who were slaves to it. Germaine Muller lived her life by it and, sadly, had tried to mourn by it.

"Jesus God," she managed to say, her voice thick with emotion and tears. "This was masochistic. I could have met you anywhere."

It was like her to believe she was being masochistic, rather than sentimental, to have asked him to meet her so close to where her daughter had last been seen. He looked at her.

"You're too hard on yourself," he said. "It's been a stressful three months. You owe yourself a little self-indulgence, even a lot of self-indulgence."

Her head was bowed and her eyes began to flutter, and he thought she was going to start crying again, but she didn't. She steadied herself. She hadn't looked at him since she'd gotten in the car.

Haydon's eye caught a movement in the rearview mirror, and he looked up and saw a girl on a bicycle approaching them from behind on the narrow lane. She was wearing a forest green plaid skirt and a pastel yellow sweater and high socks pulled past her calves, and when she saw them in the car she stopped pedaling and let the bicycle coast. Just before she got to the car she began pedaling again and looked at them as she passed, the wheels of her bicycle making a swishing sound on the wet pavement, her breath a vaporous streamer trailing from her mouth. Germaine had not known the girl was coming and flinched as she passed them, then kept her eyes fixed on the cyclist as she rode calmly around a

curve and disappeared into the mist and woods. Haydon wondered what the girl must have thought they were doing. An affair, probably. She must've been close to Lena's age. Could possibly have known her. Rice wasn't a large university.

Germaine Muller continued to stare at the swirling mist where the girl had vanished.

"I know you must've seen the papers," she said.

"I did, yes."

"That was bad," she said, turning a little in her seat now. "I wasn't prepared for that. Oh, they called. The reporters called, but I couldn't talk to them. So I knew what they were doing. Still . . . it was . . . shocking."

The word sounded quaintly outdated, though it was entirely consistent with her personal moral rectitude, a frame of mind that seemed so out of place in the last decade of the twentieth century when so few persons had the time, or the innocence, to be "shocked" by anything. Haydon almost wished the word still meant for society what it meant for Germaine Muller.

She held the wad of tissues to her nose and tilted her head back for a moment in a gesture of emotional exhaustion. Then she straightened it in resignation.

"Apart from all the . . . heartbreak,"—Haydon was surprised at this word too—"the publicity . . . the loss of what was ours being ours alone, has been unnerving."

Haydon had no way of knowing how much the Mullers had known about their daughter's personal relationships, but the newspaper reporters, every one making an "investigative" effort to bring the story alive on their paper's pages, had made it abundantly clear that Lena Muller had been a child of her times. Her sexual involvements while she was at Rice could have been described as promiscuous, though that word, too, had lost some of its potency and had fallen into disuse in the wake of the sexual revolution.

"You must have found us to be odd people, George and I, during these past months," she said. "We've felt odd, to tell you the truth. Not ourselves. It's . . . been humbling. For me. George, of course . . ." She shook her head, her shoulders moved, the beginning of a shrug that never

developed. "Being affluent, well, you can afford to isolate yourself from so much, can't you, from the disarray that seems to characterize so much of other people's lives. You believe you are someone who avoids the stupid muddles other people get themselves into, you avoid scandal and tawdry episodes. You begin to believe that you do this all by yourself, because you are better educated, more intelligent, wiser. If you think like that long enough, keep it up for decades, most of your life, you actually begin to believe you're . . . above the foibles of others. You know, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men. . . .' Maybe you don't come right out and say it, but you believe, deep down, that you're somehow superior." She was pensive, and then she whispered, "Such . . . hubris . . ."

Haydon looked at her profile against the fog on the window beside her face. Germaine Muller was a woman in confrontation with the immutable frailties of human nature and with the realization that she, after all, shared them with everyone else.

"I've read every word printed in the newspapers about us during these past months," she continued. "Secretly. George didn't know it. For him, I've pretended to be above it all. Aloof. But I read all of it. I've clipped every snippet, however minute, even those Crime Stopper things that appeared from time to time. I was hypnotized. It was as if I were seeing myself from outside my body. A very peculiar experience. There were times when it seemed that I was reading about someone else, while at other times it was clear I was reading about us—George, myself, and Lena—but we didn't seem . . . distinctive. Our names easily could have been interchangeable with anyone's name. There was nothing there, inherent in our lives—and the reporters seemed to have discovered a great deal about us—that distinguished us from anyone else. In fact, we, our lives, seemed terribly common. We could have been . . . anyone."

She stopped, suddenly aware of how much she had been talking. Haydon said nothing. What could he say to such a surprising monologue? Nothing was expected of him.

"I imagine that sounds strange to you, maybe even naive, coming from a woman my age," she said, looking down at her hands, but then returning her attention to the foggy lane in front of them. "But it was so . . . revelatory, and so sad. For Lena, all they wrote about her. They shouldn't

have. She was a child, really, at twenty-one, all of them are children. Her work in the Peace Corps didn't seem to carry as much weight with them, not as much as the way . . . she lived in college." She shook her head wearily. "Something is out of proportion, isn't it. The way we see things, the way we think, the way we live, what we require of others and of ourselves. Too much, too little. Ill-proportioned lives."

Germaine Muller had undergone a sea change during the ninety days since her daughter had disappeared, but Haydon would have been hard pressed to say whether it was a slow turning toward something finer.

"Lena's alive," she said bluntly, without prelude. "George has found them."

Haydon was caught off guard. When Germaine had said "George" had found them, she was referring more precisely to her husband's obsessive resolve. The person who actually had found them was a private investigator named Jim Fossler, whom George Muller had hired almost three weeks earlier.

"In Guatemala?"

She nodded. "But Mr. Fossler says they are not living together. He doesn't believe they ever did." This was an important point for Germaine Muller, a kind of evidential furtherance of the fact that her daughter was not an obsessively sexual creature. And it had merit, coming from Jim Fossler. He was a good man, an ex-cop, a forthright, persistent investigator who was proficient at what he did.

"When did you hear from him?"

"He called me last night."

"You?"

"Yes, he called on my line. George never answers my line. He doesn't know yet." To explain, she turned toward Haydon for the first time, her colorless eyes swollen from the crying, her face drawn. Fifty-six was not old, but Haydon could see the old woman in her skull, the one she would one day become. Grief, as it so often did, was giving him a glimpse of the future.

"At the very beginning, when George hired Mr. Fossler, I met with him privately," she said. "He's a perceptive man, not that you need great perception to see what kind of man my husband is. It's because of how he

is that we've come to this. Everyone knows that but George. That's why he has so much antipathy for you. You told him that right up front, in so many words. You'd . . . you'd think that after a young girl had gone through college, after she had spent two and a half years in the Peace Corps, with all the self-assurance that requires, you'd think that after all that she would be able to claim some independence. But you don't gain independence from a man like him. When she came home, he was all over her again . . . I'm sorry. God."

George Muller was the wealthy founder of a petrochemical company, a man who knew what he wanted and what was required to get it, and whose forceful and unyielding personality had made him a fortune. He was greatly admired by other successful men, men who were like him and who saw something of themselves in Muller's strong-willed triumphs. But George Muller's insistence that his self-centered will should never be denied, neither in his professional nor his private life, had not been without a price, a price that must have caused him much dark pain in those secret moments that occur in all men's lives when they confront the naked reality of their own culpability. His preoccupations with himself had withered his wife's love and alienated his daughter forever.

"Anyway, I resolved that if we ever again made contact with her I wouldn't let him . . . ruin it. I went through all this with Mr. Fossler, a long, honest, detailed conversation. He seemed to be very understanding. I simply asked him to let me know first.

"And he called you last night."

"Yes. He said . . . he said that there might be a chance of persuading her to come home."

Might-be-a-chance. Haydon studied her. Desperate people could sustain themselves on such airy nourishment.

"But, apparently, he's concerned about something," she said. Germaine Muller's voice quavered slightly, and she leaned her head back against the window and took a deep breath before going on. "He said he thinks she's in some kind of trouble. That she and that boy are in some kind of trouble."

In the entire time Haydon had known her, Germaine Muller had never said the words, John Baine. He was always "that boy" or "him" or

"that young man." Something primitive in her kept her from saying his name. George Muller, on the other hand, spoke it all too often, spitting it out like a curse word, "Baine . . . Baine . . . Baine." He was bedeviled by "Baine."

"What are their circumstances?" Haydon asked. "You said they're not living together?"

"Lena is living with an American woman in Guatemala City, someone she met during one of her weekend leaves in the Peace Corps. Apparently they had become close friends."

"And Baine?"

"I don't know. He's just on his own, I guess."

"What kind of trouble?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. He said Lena was fine, she's safe, but something . . . Frankly, I was angry with him—Mr. Fossler—for being so vague, but he said he could be all wrong. He said he wanted to talk to you but wanted to clear it with me first."

"Why me?"

"When I had that first conversation with him and I recounted everything that had happened during the investigation, how helpful you had been despite George, he said he knew you. He had good things to say about you, that he respected you. I guess when he ran into something unexpected . . . you had handled the investigation."

"You know that if he contacts me, I'll be dealing with him in an official capacity," Haydon said. "I'll have to write a supplement to the investigation into Lena's disappearance. This can't be off the record."

"That's what he said you'd say. That's why he was asking me, wanting to know if I wanted to keep it unofficial. I understand that. I'd like to have your help."

Haydon looked at Germaine Muller's tortured eyes. She was looking at him, too, wanting some kind of reaction. His blessing, maybe. Or guidance, or simply assurance that she was doing the right thing. He hated to think what the Mullers' lives must have been like since their daughter's disappearance. Westerners, at least those of Anglo and Germanic stock, weren't given to dramatics in their grief, not the kind of wailing, flailing exorcism of sorrow one sometimes sees in other cultures. Their psychology

demanded a gravity that concealed, rather than revealed. In their own way, George and Germaine Muller were still in the calamitous throes of their loss. It had been a mighty lamentation of silence.

"Did Fossler say how Lena was feeling about being found?"

Germaine turned around in her seat and looked out the window again, but it was too foggy for her to see anything. She looked through the windshield to the wet, leaf strewn lane where the girl had disappeared into the mists

"I asked him that," she said. "He said she was upset. He said that she had cried. But . . ." She looked down at her purse, saw her hands gripping the wadded tissues. Slowly opening her fingers, she turned over her hands and regarded her rings, the diamond cluster, the emerald, the costly black pearl, with a detachment that reduced their value to smoke. "He said—and I was struck by his sensitivity to this—he said he wasn't sure how to "understand' it."

Haydon watched her, sensing her discomposure more than actually seeing it. It was as if he were witnessing an emotional implosion.

"You haven't the remotest . . . inkling . . ." she said hoarsely, stopping to swallow as she raised her gaze to the window again, her empty eyes on the gray beyond the glass. "You haven't the remotest inkling of the desolation I felt when he said that."

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