

DEAD GAME

By Jennifer Chase

Chapter One

Tuesday 2300 Hours

The cold Monterey Bay quickly surrounded her petite body as she eased herself further into its icy grip. She unconsciously took a deep cleansing breath and slowly let out an exhalation.

Fog deftly floated across the boat harbor at Gulls Landing, and then headed east with the usual paranormal flair. The atmospheric ghost continued to gradually suffocate the masts of nearby boats until they were no longer visible.

Her vision was obscured only by the heavy coastal evening weather, but she knew the direction she needed to swim. A child's life depended upon her expertise and there was no time for any mistakes. It was entirely up to her now.

Emily Stone moved expertly, almost silently, through the water. The eerie sound of silence pounded in her ears as it tried desperately to confuse her equilibrium. She felt a slithering chill try to penetrate her tight wetsuit, but she continued to glide effortlessly, pulled by an unknown evil force. A faint clank reverberated through the many boat slips as they gently rocked back and forth from the subtle changing tide.

A single light reflected through the fog at the end of the last pier. Emily knew it was from the boat that doubled as a prison for eight-year-old Mandy Alvarez. She had been snatched from her safe Salinas front yard only a few days earlier. Mandy had been innocently playing with several of her favorite dolls on the front lawn, when the predator approached and made his bold move. He had watched her for more than a week and studied the neighborhood's habits. It was easy when the time was right. He grabbed her, picked her up, forced her into his car, quickly restrained her with waiting handcuffs, and sped away. It took only an instant, and then she was gone.

Emily, experienced with criminal profiling and intense investigative techniques, was able to close in on the list of probable suspects and found Simon Gafferty to be one of particular interest. There were several registered sex

offenders within six blocks of Mandy's house, but Simon seemed to fancy eight-year-old girls with long brown hair. He had been suspected of several failed attempts to abduct little girls from the Stockton, California area and now he was residing in coastal Monterey.

The boat was registered to a mutual friend that was serving ten years in Soledad prison for armed robbery, and it would serve Simon well as a safe hideout for his evil deeds until he moved the girl to another location, killed her, and dumped the body. He would then be free to troll again for his next victim.

Emily adjusted her remote headset and softly said, "I wish I could trade places with you right now."

A quarter of a mile away, at the end of a deserted shipyard, a black Ford Explorer was tucked in next to a decrepit sailboat with peeling blue and yellow paint, which had once been shiny and brilliant cruising on the bay. For just a moment, there was a slight flicker of light from a reflection obscured in the night. Then an outline materialized of a man sitting in the driver's seat.

Rick Lopez smiled and said, "I'd trade places with you for this cold any day." He sniffled dramatically as he looked at his laptop computer. A dark green blinking cursor moved across the screen.

Rick continued, "Where are you?" His chiseled jaw tightened with concern as he studied the screen.

Emily made her way toward one of the docks as a shortcut. She whispered in response, "In the water."

Rick replied, "Funny. What's your ETA?"

"About four minutes give or take a few seconds."

"You are just going to take identifying photos, *right?*" He emphasized.

Emily didn't answer.

She patted her waterproof pocket that contained her small cell phone and underwater digital camera. She felt exposed and vulnerable without her two firearms, her usual Glock 17 and a Beretta Bobcat that she always carried tucked tightly against her body and in her ankle holster.

"I know you heard me." Rick waited for her to answer and absently adjusted his headset in anticipation. His dark eyes seemed to grow even darker as he waited for her to answer. He sipped his already lukewarm coffee and imagined a warmer and more comfortable place to be instead of this mission.

Finally she responded, "Of course."

Rick knew Emily could be impulsive at times and she took too many dangerous chances, but he loved her spirit and he wouldn't dare do anything that would extinguish it.

Emily could see several large boulder-like outlines along the closest pier and squinted her eyes trying to make out the shapes, but she couldn't ascertain what they were. The gate entrance was locked and secure, and everything else seemed quiet.

Suddenly, something hooked her left foot, and for a brief instant, she panicked. Her breathing became shallow and her heart rate pounded like an erratic jackhammer. She twisted in the water, which caused her arms to flail with rapid splashes. To her dismay, a rogue piece of seaweed had wound itself around her left ankle. Easily, she untangled the intrusive sea vegetation and continued her cold swim, feeling a bit annoyed with her hasty reaction.

Emily's thoughts returned to what the little girl must be thinking at this critical moment and how everyone had abandoned her in her time of need. The little girl must have been afraid for her life at every moment, and imagined the evil practices that this man was going to do to her if she wasn't rescued in time.

Emily moved closer among the pilings beneath the boats. She could barely make out the names painted on the sides of the carefully tended sailboats that read "The Sea Urchin" and "Lil' Cindy".

More movement caught Emily's eye. She waited a moment to try and focus her sight on the large outline.

Nothing.

It was quiet and still as the fog continued to drift over the harbor.

Now, she wished that Rick had accompanied her. Maybe it was just her nerves because of the eerie fog cover in the middle of the night, and the fact that she was all alone that seemed to cast an eerie atmosphere.

Rick tapped his finger with nervous energy on the laptop computer. Movement shifted in the back of the Explorer. A large black Labrador retriever head emerged and pushed a wet nose at Rick's face.

"Hey Sergeant. You worried too?" He scratched the large dog behind the ears. "You know your mom, she can be so pigheaded sometimes." The dog seemed to agree with him and started to calmly pant in anticipation.

Emily counted the boat slips that led up to the child abductor's boat.

There were now only six.

It was deserted on the pier and particularly still. The light began to brighten on her target and she was almost there.

Splash.

Emily froze.

She slowly turned around in the water.

There was a large ring of ripples in the water and it headed straight toward her. Her eyes were now accustomed to the darkness and unsettling fog cover. The large outlines that she had seen previously on the dock were a group of sea lions snoozing quietly on the pier.

One curious large male sea lion weighing in at about 750 pounds approached her at attack speed. She suddenly felt a hard glancing bump on her right side as the aggressive sea mammal quickly hit, changed direction and then faced Emily head-on. He positioned himself ready for a battle.

Chapter Two
Tuesday 2320 Hours

Headlights switched off. A weary business executive in his early forties exited his luxury Lexus, grabbed his briefcase and sport coat from the passenger seat. He punched the button to close the garage door of his comfortable home in Santa Clara. He caught a quick trace of the unseasonably warm California evening. It was well into September, but the chill of fall had not yet dominated the climate.

Scott Chambers dropped his briefcase and jacket on the floor in the hallway. He didn't bother turning on all the lights because he would be rudely reminded that he was indeed alone. He finally switched on one light in the spacious kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Light spilled into the spotless gourmet kitchen with dark grey granite counter tops and revealed only five bottles of St.

Pauli Girl beer, a few condiments, and take-out containers of Chicken Chow Mein from the local Chinese restaurant.

He immediately grabbed a bottle of St. Pauli Girl, flipped the cap off with the opener that was always left on the counter, and moved into the living room.

Scott was alone.

It wasn't by choice or preference, or even by accident.

Scott was alone because his wife of nine years decided that she wanted to be with Reynaldo. Every time he thought of that part time masseuse and ambulance chasing criminal lawyer, it made him seethe with anger. He still couldn't get that disturbing image out of his head.

He had come home from a business trip a day early to surprise Larissa. He thought that they could spend a romantic evening together, just the two of them, drink some wine, and explore all the possibilities of what they could do alone together.

Instead, he walked in to find it completely dark. He headed up the stairs to the bedroom and he could hear soft music playing and there were flickering candles.

Just in time, he had thought.

He slowly opened the bedroom wider only to see Reynaldo's muscular naked body kneeling on the bed giving

Larissa a deep massage with his hands, and occasional kisses and romantic nibbles on the back of her neck.

At first they didn't realize that they weren't alone. Scott watched in horror as Reynaldo kneaded and stroked Larissa's body, as she lay stretched out on her stomach glistening with massage oil. She moaned with pleasure from his carefully placed handiwork.

They didn't even appear to care that Scott had walked in on them as they slowly covered their naked bodies. It was over, plain and simple. Reynaldo even made more money than Scott. What was the use dredging up something that wasn't ever going to change? At least he could keep the house. A small blessing, he aptly considered. He also thought he might get a dog. It would be there to greet him every evening and wouldn't run off with someone else.

Scott loosened his tie and took another long drink of beer. It tasted good, cool and burning at the same time. It would take several more beers to deaden the way he felt. He took a deep breath to begin putting his extremely long day behind him. He thought about going into work late tomorrow.

The spacious living room was even emptier now that Larissa had taken most of the furniture. She had even taken the drapes from the windows. Scott moved across the

room feeling the comfortable thick carpet beneath his feet. He had bought a small computer station and placed it in the corner facing the large picture window that looked out into the dense garden.

Scott seated himself in front of his computer screen. He stared a moment at his own distorted reflection. He could see that he looked tired and there were dark circles beneath his hazel eyes. His light brown hair could use a trim too. He ran his fingertips through his neatly trimmed beard and sighed.

"What the hell are you doing, man?" he said aloud.

He pushed the power button on the monitor. A bright screen instantly illuminated and made him squint, but he saw that he had new email.

"Ah, a little ray of sunshine."

Quickly he clicked on the new email. He knew it was another clue to *EagleEye* because it also had text messaged him on his cell phone earlier in the day. He was never much of a computer game person, but he loved the idea of playing out as a spy in an interactive game, even if it was only make believe. It took his mind off reality for short periods of time.

His mission was to find out important information that could save another agent in the field. There were puzzles

along with red herrings. He was given many places to look including clever clues from classic literature and online web sites. He began to lose himself in the game and before he knew it almost a half hour had passed.

There was a soft whoosh that seemed to come from the garage area, but Scott was too engrossed with his new online clue to stop. He didn't hear anything except his own heartache and his own musings about where to look next for another important clue.

Something caught Scott's eye in the reflection of the computer screen and before he could turn around to investigate, a plastic bag was roughly placed over his head cutting off his oxygen. He instinctively grabbed for the two strong hands that were placed around his neck and began to fight with every ounce of energy he had, but he wasn't successful. Air escaped his lungs with a strange wheezing sound in his head that rattled against the plastic. Goosebumps rose up on his skin and there was a strange sensation bouncing around in his head. The living room began to spin sideways and everything seemed to slowly disappear as if he was looking down a long hollow tunnel. He tried desperately to keep his eyes focused on anything in the room. He gently fell unconscious. Everything went dark.

Chapter Three
Tuesday 2355 Hours

Emily began to pump her legs faster in the water to get away from the fierce creature. She still faced the animal because she wanted to know when her next attack was going to hit. She barely tipped the scale at 118 pounds and was obviously no match for a three quarter ton speeding torpedo.

California sea lions were known to eat squid, fish, and octopuses. They take their territories very seriously and had no problem defending themselves in any situation. Emily seemed to sense she had been invading his personal space. This particular sea lion, with massive blubber, smooth skin, thick whiskers, and dark flippers that propelled him through the water at great speed and with amazing agility, was trying to run her off.

Static crackled in Emily's ears.

She breathlessly reported in her headset that she had a problem, but there was no response from Rick. Apparently, her only communication on land was of no use. The sea lion expertly circled her and made another attack like a shark in a tank at feeding time. This time she saw his large teeth and prayed that they wouldn't make contact with her body. He head butted her and she felt a strong flipper drag across her wetsuit. She was breathless and panic driven, fearing that she was going to be ripped wide open and drown in the process.

There was another splash followed by two more consecutive splashes.

Rick tried to adjust his Motorola hands free walkie-talkie. There was nothing.

There was an ear-piercing static and then it went completely dead.

He contemplated his next move.

Sergeant let out a high-pitched whine as if to say he was concerned too.

Rick knew that Emily was more than capable, like so many times before in even worse situations, but it still worried him. He opened the car door and peered out to where Emily had first disappeared into the water. He could barely make out the bridge and boat harbor much less where

Emily's exact location was in the fog. He thought he heard some splashing sounds, but he wasn't sure. He got back into the Explorer and tried to regain communication with her.

Emily decided it was now or never. Her adrenalin gave her the physical boost to swim as fast as she could away from the sea lions. She kept her head down and made progress farther away from the animals. She stopped a moment to rest and then dared to turn around to see if her stalkers were still in pursuit. The water appeared calm with only a couple of ripples. She could see that the big sea lion had retreated and taken his rightful place back on the pier.

It was a reprieve.

Emily relaxed and refocused.

"Em? Em? Emily are you there?" Rick's voice repeated in her ears.

"Yeah." She was breathless. "I'm here."

Rick closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He continued, "What's going on?"

"I'm just about to send you some photos." She said as she hoisted herself up onto the dock.

Emily carefully took out her cell phone and quickly snapped some photos of the boat in question from different

angles. It was named "My Girl" and that seemed to ring out so many spine-chilling thoughts through her mind. She could see some bags of garbage filled with fast food containers on the deck along with some toys. The scene unnerved her.

Emily moved slowly to get a better perspective of the boat and took more identifying photos. She could see a man move back and forth, his greasy blonde hair was pulled back in an unkempt ponytail. She moved even closer, careful not to make any unnecessary movement on the dock. A thin little girl with long brown hair sat on a chair with her hands in her lap and head hung low. Emily wanted to charge the boat and put a bullet in Simon Gaffney's brain. No muss, no fuss.

And who would really care?

Expertly, Emily sent the photos to Rick at command central from her phone. The photo properly identified the missing little girl and she knew that Rick would forward it to the appropriate authorities right away. The little girl would be home in a matter of an hour.

Within seconds, Rick viewed the photos identifying the missing girl and the suspect. He matched the identification and attached in an email to send to all police patrol vehicle computers in the county. Simon

Gafferty was a registered sex offender. He had a warrant for his arrest for failing to register on his last birthday several months ago. It was a mission accomplished. Rick smiled as he quickly scrolled through the newest information.

Rick pressed the enter key and the information was flying out over the wireless airwaves.

He said into the headset, "It's done, get your butt back here."

Emily watched Simon pace like a wild animal; he stopped and stroked Mandy's hair and caressed her face. The little girl cringed in terror. Emily couldn't sit and watch this predator hurt this little girl.

"I'm going in."

Rick abruptly said, "No, you're not. The cops will be here in minutes."

"She can't wait that long."

"Emily you both could get killed. Just wait for backup."

"I'm sorry Rick." She disconnected the communication wire.

Communication went dead.

"Shit!" Rick slammed his headset against the dash. The last thing he needed was to answer questions from the cops.

Emily crept closer to the boat. She had a clear view of them. She decided that she was going to get the girl out safely no matter what. Her wetsuit made a slight squeaking noise as she eased down the wooden pier still dripping with water.

Police sirens sounded in the distance and were approaching fast from the Highway 1 freeway, which was a little over two miles away.

Instantly, Simon snapped his head around in Emily's direction.

She knew that she had to strike immediately.