

PLAY THE DOG

Chapter One

John Barnes was a bad kid and nobody knew it. Oh, sure, people had suspected that maybe John was a little left of center his entire life but nobody knew anything more than a strange aura of *different*. Growing up John had seemed like a really sweet kid, a vessel that could never be filled with enough attentions and affections, and who always seemed to give back more than he received. A loveable little kid. As he grew older and his behaviors didn't change so much as evolve and his parents, in their simple ways, thought he might be gay. Not the way they'd have planned it but having only one child they were determined to be accepting, understanding and, most of all, loving.

When John brought home his first girlfriend at the age of twelve, his father was very quietly ecstatic. She was only around for a few weeks before he brought home another. A parade of pre-pubescence. Kids didn't mate for life at twelve, did they? It was normal behavior, wasn't it? Nobody dug any deeper than appearances.

John's father died during his junior year in high school and the family dynamic shifted. John was no longer intimidated by a secure and stable male influence and the line between his fantasies and reality became a little blurred. Then opaque. Then the line disappeared forever. Johnny went from being a strange but loving kid to a breathing perversion.

Little Heidi Connor's parents walked into the office at a little before noon on a Wednesday. The door said *Sanford Thomas* in two-inch letters across the top the door and *Investigations* in one-inch letters beneath it. The door was out of place. It was made of wood with a frosted glass insert that was half the size of the door. Every other door in the hall of the office complex was made entirely of glass with another window right along the side of it. The window next to the door at this office had been painted black.

Passing through the door was like walking into the past. It was like stepping from a Technicolor reality into a black and white movie set. The office door opened into a room

that was dark with wood paneling, dark with green window blinds and dark with green carpeting. Along two walls were placed eight empty antique wooden file cabinets and at the junction of the other two walls sat a battered, leather covered love seat and matching chair in both the color of coffee with cream and the color of new duct tape. Another door directly across from the first was marked *PRIVATE* and was closed.

Mr. Connor shut the first door and called out: “Hello?” and from behind the private door he heard a crash and “Holy shit.”

Footsteps padded softly and the door opened on the smiling face of Sanford Thomas, Private Detective.

“Hiya,” he said. “Are you lost?”

“Are you Mr. Thomas?” Mr. Connor asked.

“Yeah,” Sanford said. “I am.”

The Connors looked at each other before Mrs. Connor spoke.

“We need your help,” she said.

“Holy,” he said. “Shit.”

Sanford looked at them for moment before he spoke. A long look into both faces. He could see that there was confusion and he could see that there was hurt. He could see, and was surprised as hell to see it, that there were honest to God clients standing in his waiting room.

“Come into my office, have a seat.” He said.

Mr. and Mrs. Connor sat in two identical stretched leather office chairs with worn oak arm rests. Sanford sat behind a giant antique oak desk in an old, worn brown leather executive chair. The desk was decorated with a green-shelled accountant’s lamp, a desk blotter and a pen set. A nameplate announced that the man behind the desk was, in fact, Sanford J. Thomas.

“I feel like I’m in Bogart film,” Mr. Connor remarked, looking around.

“That’s it,” Mrs. Connor remarked. “I was trying to find the words.”

“Thank you,” Sanford smiled. “That’s almost exactly the look I was going for.”

The Connors smiled uneasily and nodded.

“What were you going for, exactly?” Mr. Connor asked.

“Philip Marlowe, actually.”

“You certainly made your point,” Mr. Connor remarked. “Still, though, it’s a little too nice for Marlowe, isn’t it?”

“Marlowe never had a wealthy uncle die.” Sanford lied sadly. “Leaving a nice sized estate to pass onto his only nephew.”

“Ah, I see,” said Mrs. Connor.

Mr. and Mrs. Connor nodded and Sanford smiled at them. Time passed.

“Look, whatever it is that brought you here must be pretty bad. I don’t want to rush you; I just need to let you know that I’m aware of it. You set the pace, so to speak.”

“Are you Christian, Mr. Thomas?” Mr. Connor asked.

“Call me Sax.” Sanford smiled and considered the question. “I’m not much of anything, really.”

“Sax?”

“A guy my size, you can’t call him Sandy.” Sax gestured to himself with both hands like a game show prize girl. Taking a closer look you knew he was right. Sax Thomas stood six foot four and an easy two fifty. He looked to be in good shape and he was. His hair was brown and his eyes were blue and his nose bent a little to the right. A slight scar ran along his jaw line from the corner of his mouth to the bottom of his sideburn. It did nothing to detract from his overall presence. To his own horror and consternation Sanford J. Thomas, Sax to his friends, was pretty. Not handsome, much more than that, he was pretty. He hated being pretty but more than that; he hated being told he was pretty. If you looked into his eyes, past his face, you could tell that there was an awful lot more going on behind those good looks but it didn’t take away from the fact that he was *very* pretty.

“Why do you ask? About being Christian?”

“I don’t know, Mr...err...Sax, why I asked.”

“How long have you been doing this, Mr. Sax?” Mrs. Connor interrupted.

“It’s just Sax, ma’am,” Sax said. “It’s been almost a year.”

“How many cases have you had?” she asked.

“Three,” Sax answered, “including yours.”

“I’m being very nosy, aren’t I?”

“It’s no problem. Why don’t you tell me what you’re doing here?” Sax smiled.

Mrs. Connor looked at the floor and tried on a snuffle to see how it fit. The snuffle fit quite well. So well in fact that she combined it with a choked sob and made a strangled

sound so piteous that Sax fought the temptation to wrap the woman in a hug. Mr. Connor tightened up his jaw and stared fixedly out the window behind the desk. Silence filled the passing time and no one spoke. Sax decided that the smile was inappropriate and arranged a look of friendly concern onto his face. It took a moment for the players to don their proper masks and the silence became uncomfortable before someone spoke.

“We believe,” Mr. Connor spoke in a determined tone, “that our daughter has been, may still be-um-molested.”

With that statement out of his mouth Mr. Connor’s face drained of all color, as if by saying it aloud, telling a stranger, he’d finally accepted the truth of the situation. Mrs. Connor began to sob quietly, her shoulders shaking with the effort. The room was still.

Sax glanced at the wall calendar behind his first clients and mumbled to himself.

“Hell of a way to start the merry, merry month of May,” he breathed before looking into the eyes of Mr. Connor. “Let’s try to fix this, shall we?”

May 15th broke with a stunning sunrise, at 6:22am, accompanied by scattered dark clouds that lit with vibrant reds, oranges and purples. So magnificent was the sunrise that people commuting to work on Denver’s bits of I-25 and I-70 became caught in slower-than-usual traffic. Slowing caused by those commuters further up the road that had run into their fellow commuters’ vehicles by taking long looks into sky to catch a glimpse. One tiny shred of beauty before the day’s doldrums began and WHAM; your premiums go up and fuck the sunrise.

Sax missed the beauty of the sunrise. He was being interviewed by a police detective in the Connor’s living room.

He had fallen asleep in his Chevy Blazer parked down the street from the Connor’s house, his head listing onto his left shoulder, resting against the window. The black fabric under the window and his arm, on the left armrest, were as damp as his chin from nocturnal drool. He started awake and blinked his eyes, trying to figure out what was different and what had startled him awake.

The evening before had been chilly, as Denver nights often are, and Sax had fired up the truck to run the heater. His last memory was of two in the morning and he remembered thinking: *Christ, I’m bored.*

It was the quiet that tipped him off.

The truck wasn't running though the key was on. The dash wasn't lit, either. He tried the key and sure enough, the battery was dead and he was out of gas. Glamorous.

He checked his watch. 5:03am. Just great. Super.

Sax climbed out of his truck thinking about the last two weeks and wondering what he'd missed. Not a damn thing, he thought. Under the guise of a School District Investigator, arranged quietly with the District Superintendent, an introduction arranged by his father, he'd interviewed all of Heidi's teachers and was forced to come to the conclusion that they all seemed pretty harmless.

He'd interviewed the school principal; one Mr. E.M. McAfee, and decided that he was the most likely suspect. McAfee was a slimy, balding, overweight fidget of a man. He was short. McAfee practically vibrated with fear when he was left alone with Sax. The level of discomfort on display during their meeting caused Sax to *think* that he had his man and that it would be just a matter of time before he wrapped this up and little Heidi Connor could begin her long trek through the land of therapy.

He'd interviewed the school counselor; one Mr. John Barnes and had left Barnes' office feeling confused. The man was friendly, contrite and almost likeable. His discomfort with the interview could almost be written off as concern for a nameless student having an unmentioned problem that he'd not been invited to help with. *Almost*, Sax thought. The guy was almost likeable. Almost. Sax had left the office with the *feeling* that ants were crawling up and down the back of his legs.

Both pretty good suspects, really.

The first ten days after the interviews were spent a block and half down from the Principal's house, watching no suspicious behavior *at all*, and had convinced Sax of only one thing: McAfee was not his guy.

McAfee's wife was a monster of a woman in almost every sense. She was a good six inches taller than McAfee and had eighty pounds on him, as well. Her voice was deep and shrill at the same time, an effect that, even given the distance and shotgun mike, gave Sax the willies. Twice every night, at one and at four, McAfee stepped into the yard, a cocker spaniel leashed to his hand, and shivered while the dog sniffed in circles around the yard. This guy never slept through the night, Sax thought. No wonder he's twitchy.

After the ten-day stakeout and subsequent uttered oaths concerning the swearing off of marriage for all time, Sax knew that he'd been skunked. He returned to his office for a nap and a phone call.

Eight hours later he left his office to begin the stakeout of Mr. J. Barnes. As he reread the address he'd written on a post-it note he felt his heart sink into his colon. The guidance counselor lived just two doors down from the Connor's. *This is the guy!*

Four days later with a total of six hours of sleep Sax was starting to doubt not only his name but also his ancestry. He had nothing. More than nothing. No-damn-thing. He should go to the front door to tell the Connor's that he was out of tricks and that, maybe, they change their mind about the hypnosis the family therapist had recommended. *Family therapist?* Sax grunted, shut the truck door quietly and took a couple of steps down the street to talk to the family and arrange a jump-start and a gallon or two of gas.

Stewing in his own frustration and embarrassment he almost missed it.

He stopped, looked at the house and stared, trying to decode what his brain had told him that he didn't understand. What was it? Little Heidi Connor's window was open. Shit!

Sax checked under his arm for his piece while he dropped his other hand to check the back-up pistol in its ankle holster and headed for the house at a full run.

He hit the front door with his shoulder, dropped and fell into the house when the door exploded off its hinges. His brain said: *That never happens*, as he rolled to his feet and sprinted down the hall. He heard Mrs. Connor scream and Mr. Connor swear.

"It's me," he yelled, opening Heidi's door and seeing her empty bed. His mind sucked in information too fast for him to compute. He saw faint imprints in the carpet by the window, to and from the bed, his brain telling him: *Adult size*. Something wrong with the imprint. Too smooth for shoes or boots and the wrong shape for bare feet. His nose was begging for attention and his brain boomed: **Chloroform.**

"Heidi's gone!"

"Oh my God," he heard Mr. Connor say over his wife's screaming before saying something that Sax didn't hear. He was already out of the bedroom and pounding down the hall, everything on automatic.

Out the front door, down the street and up the stairs to another front door, Sax hit this one the same way, felt the door fly open and sensed that his left arm was numb. He heard a noise of surprise and headed deeper into the dark and unfamiliar house. Down a

hallway toward a light escaping under a doorway, Sax could hear someone moving quickly, the sounds frenzied. He kicked open the door and stepped into the room.

The guidance counselor was in the act of hastily pulling up his pants. He stopped at the sight of Sax in the doorway. Sax took in the room and saw Heidi lying unconscious on the bed, her nakedness a white shock against black sheets. Her sleeping face looked confused. Sax felt the world slow.

He looked back toward the man and his thinking, which had been running much slower than the rest of him, had caught up and explained what was going on. John Barnes; Junior High Guidance counselor, shitbird child molester. Sax looked back to the bed then down to the floor onto the slippers resting by the dresser. A few pieces of grass clung to the leather stitching. Bingo, shithead, evidence.

Sax looked again at John Barnes.

“Pull your pants up.” He said.

John Barnes pulled them up and buttoned the top, working the zipper.

“Hold this for me, will you?” Sax threw Barnes the little gun.

Barnes caught the gun and held it in his hand with one finger on the trigger, placing his prints in all the proper places. Barnes looked at the gun, a question forming on his tongue and when he looked up to ask it; Sax shot him in the forehead, right between the eyes.

Sax put the gun back in his shoulder holster and stepped over to the bed. He wrapped Heidi Connor in the black sheet, picked her up with his right arm, in a sort of fireman’s carry, and stepped over John Barnes without looking at him.

As he carried Heidi back home he became vaguely aware of a throbbing pain in his left shoulder. He felt his energy wash away, making room for grief he felt for this little girl. He wanted to lie down. He wanted to sleep. He walked up the drive and shoved silently past Mr. Connor as he came through the door. Sax placed Heidi in her bed, still sleeping, and covered her over with her quilt. He placed a teddy bear in her arms and she absently hugged it closer to chest, grunting in drug-induced contentment.

Mr. and Mrs. Connor hurried into the room. Sax put his finger to his lips and pointed out the door. The Connors exited with Sax following silently behind. He pulled the door closed behind him and followed them to the living room.

“Sorry about your door,” he said. “Call the cops, get an ambulance.”

“What the hell is going on, Mr. Thomas?” Mrs. Connor asked.

“He had her.”

“What are you talking about?” Mr. Connor asked.

“Who had her?” Mrs. Connors asked.

“Barnes.” Sax answered as he fell into a chair. Impacting with the chair, his shoulder protested in loud and violent language. Sirens could be heard from a couple of blocks away. “I shot him.”

“You shot him?”

“I killed him,” Sax nodded, “he had gun, see?”

With a wry smile on his face, Sax passed out.

Hours later, under a differential sunny sky, Sax sat quietly, his left arm slung in a triangle bandage, on the back patio of the Connor house. The morning had been full of shouting officers, hurried paramedics with nothing more to do than sling his arm, focused crime scene photographers, confused and angry neighbors and an awful lot of questions. Occasionally a breeze would push into him, the air cool and flavored with the smell of cordite and human waste teasing his nose and making him nauseous while reminding him of desert warfare and asshole colonels.

Ten thousand miles and all the time of a decade couldn't erase the memories held in a sinus flex. Another lifetime ago, with all the pomp and circumstance of shitting alone in the woods, a frightened Marine lieutenant had gotten shot from the sky and had accidentally killed a lot of people. *At least it doesn't smell like pork*, Sax thought, *or I'd defiantly hurl*. He could see the headline: **Dumb-Ass Hero Vomits During War Flashback. Outstanding!**

Sax heard the sliding door open and close behind him and felt the redwood deck sway under the weight of the tap-tap-tap that cop shoes make. He continued to stare at the glass below him.

“Awful pretty day, Sax.” Detective Sgt. John Peterson spoke as he sat next to Sax.

“Prettier than yesterday, John.”

“How you doin', buddy?” Peterson asked.

“Better than yesterday.” Sax answered.

“I suppose you're right.” Peterson chuckled. “I want to ask you some questions.”

“Okay, but,” Sax turned to look at him, “are we out of school, John?”

“Until I say we’re not, we are.”

“Fair enough. Go ahead, then.”

“Where do you suppose Barnes got that little .25?”

Sax smiled and reached into his pocket for the cigarettes that were still on the dash in his truck. Peterson handed out one of his own and held the lighter for him.

“You remember Jose Sanchez?” Sax asked. “Tiny little fucker selling dope out of the zoo?”

“Barnes got the gun from Sanchez, did he?”

“In a roundabout way.” Sax laughed. “The little .25 was Jose’s ankle piece. Nobody noticed he had it when I pulled his leg out of the Polar Bear tank, so I palmed it.”

“Christ, Sax! What was that? Five years ago?”

“Yup.”

“That’s a long time to carry around a hot throw-down piece, isn’t it?”

“Just long enough, I suppose,” Sax smiled. “I never could find a reason to get rid of it. That’s all.”

Peterson nodded and looked at the sky. Sax followed his gaze and together they watched an airplane fly high overhead leaving wispy contrails behind the wings. They both thought, in their own way, about how quiet the city had become since the airport had moved halfway to Kansas. Neither mentioned this feeling because the bet was hedged with the knowledge that it took more than an hour to get to the new airport and the parking was more expensive. Such is life. Almost everyone in Denver had these thoughts when an airliner passed quietly overhead.

Both men sipped silently on their cigarettes and, after the plane had passed out of sight, studied the smoke.

“So,” Peterson asked, “you knew you were going to smoke him?”

“I had no idea, John.”

“Uh-huh,” Peterson grunted. “How’d you know to go next door?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Sax said. “Of course I thought it was him, for awhile anyway. I was on my way in to tell the parents that I’d come up dry. Then the window, obviously. But it was the footprints in her room, John, they were all wrong. They didn’t have a tread and they didn’t have toes. So; I figured slippers.”

“Nobody drives to a B and E and kidnapping wearing slippers.”

“Exactly.”

“Nice thinking, Sax.”

“Elementary, my dear Detective.”

Sax looked again at his friend. Peterson was in his forties; relatively good shape and his black skin gleamed in the Colorado sunlight. The suit he wore was pressed and neat, his shoes polished to an infinite shine. Sax felt like a freelance coin collector standing next to him.

“You look homeless in that get-up, Sax.” Peterson commented.

“I was just thinking that,” Sax said, nodding. “Can I go, or do you still need me around? I need sleep.”

“How long since you quit the force?” Peterson didn’t answer the question.

“About a year and three months, now.”

“I’m gonna need your gun, Sax. What are you carrying?”

“Colt Gold Cup, .45.” Sax pulled back his jacket and handed over the gun.

“Big gun.”

“I’m a big guy.”

“Pretty, too.” Peterson smiled.

“Fuck you, John.”

“Talk like that,” Peterson smiled, “I’m afraid you might try to kiss me.”

“It’d shut you up.”

“That’s true.” They regarded each other over the top of their smiles and laughed.

“A .45 at, what, six feet? You know there’s nothing left of the back of his head ‘cept a bad memory.”

“Pun intended?”

“Pun intended and funny too,” Peterson said. “You ever shoot anybody when you were in uniform?”

“Blue or green?”

“Oh, yeah, Marine Corps, right?”

“Yup.” Sax nodded.

“Either, then,” Peterson said, “or both.”

“Blue: no.” Sax answered. “Green: yes.”

“Seriously, how do you feel?”

“I feel fine, John. I did the right thing.”

“Sure you did, Sax.” Peterson patted him on the good shoulder. “You can take off if you want to. We’ll have you down to the shop tomorrow. Have a little chat. You have another gun or do you need a loaner?”

“I’ve got a couple in the safe at the loft - oh, shit,” Sax suddenly remembered, “I can’t leave.”

“Why not?”

“I’m out of gas and the battery’s dead.”

“You fell asleep watching the house?”

“Yup.”

“Hell, Sax,” Peterson laughed. “*That’s* funny.”

After receiving hugs from Mrs. Connor and a firm handshake from Mr. Connor, Sax borrowed two gallons of gas from a neighbor and got a jump from one of the prowler cars. He drove to a gas station on South Broadway, filled up, bought a lotto ticket and headed for the Denver General Hospital. Three hours later, with a space-aged looking sling on his arm, Sax was asleep on the couch in his office dreaming of sand and desert with his head twisted into the corner of the love seat.