

William Mitchell III sat enjoying the crisp air and feeling the warmth of the sun on his round cheeks. His au pair, Brigitte, had brought him to their usual spot in the park, a large area of grass that, except for paths leading in and out on either side, was almost completely encircled by a sidewalk and, just past the sidewalk, a thick hedge. William knew the rules; he was to stay on the grass, not cross the sidewalk. He was deep into his terrible threes so rules were sometimes things to be followed and other times challenges to be overcome.

But for now he was proud of himself; he was being very good. He surveyed the area through a pair of bright blue eyes that peered from beneath a great shock of red curls. He didn't understand how lucky he was or how his looks played into it; all he knew was that every adult he met smiled at him and treated him with kindness.

Brigitte was talking to her friend Simone. Natalie, the little girl who Simone watched, sat near their feet playing with her doll.

William did not like Natalie. She was mean. When she was mad about something she didn't use her words, she pinched. William always used his words, well at least most of the time, but sometimes words just weren't enough.

He had grown tired of playing with the trucks he had brought and he sure wasn't going to go near Natalie and her doll. He carefully stood. He had pretty good balance but you couldn't be too careful; every once in a while he would tip over. Standing there, back straight, belly out, deliberately brushing his hands together, he surveyed his surroundings.

Then he spotted it, stuck under one of the hedges: a blue ball. It looked kind of old and dirty, but William was a sucker for a ball. He found their attraction almost irresistible. One problem—the ball was stuck under the hedge on the other side of the sidewalk. He was not allowed to leave the grass or cross the sidewalk.

He looked carefully back at Brigitte. She was still sitting on the bench talking to Simone. William could hear their soothing female voices and musical laughter. Those sounds made him smile. They made him feel safe and warm. He almost went over to them; maybe he could join in the fun. But then he glanced back and saw the ball again and the fun it promised.

He walked deliberately across the grass to the edge of the sidewalk. There he stopped and looked back at Brigitte. She was still involved in her conversation and did not look his way. He continued to watch her as he slowly lifted one sneakered foot. The foot hesitated in the air for a moment and then he placed it firmly on the sidewalk. He expected Brigitte's head to snap around and her to change from happy, chatting Brigitte to mad, scolding, disappointed-in-him Brigitte.

But nothing happened. He took a step, then another step. He was no longer looking back at Brigitte; the magnetism of the ball had pulled his eyes to it. They were fixed on his prize. He walked carefully across the sidewalk, hands outstretched like some preschool zombie. He got to the grass on the other side and carefully squatted down, hands out, to grasp each side of the ball.

Suddenly there was a rustling sound. Two large, grey, gnarled hands shot through the branches of the hedge and grabbed William by the wrists. Before he could even register what was happening he was yanked

through the hedge, branches scratching those perfect cheeks. His clothes snagged for a second and he was stuck in the hedge. Then there was another violent yank and he burst through to the other side.

A hand rough as tree bark and smelling like dirt clamped over his mouth. An arm was wrapped around him, pinning his arms to his side.

His eyes, wide now with terror, stared up into a face that was very different than the warm, loving faces that had occupied his world up to this point. This face was grey, the skin tight and rough. The mouth was not a warm smile but a sneer, and the eyes were filled with hate.

The arm around his body let go but his head was still held in a viselike grip. Then he saw the free hand come up. It was holding a roll of that silver tape that his daddy used sometimes. The name always made him laugh—"duck tape". His captor grabbed the end of the tape with sharp strong teeth, pulled out a length, then quickly removing his hand slapped the tape over William's mouth. William could hear the ripping sound the tape made as it was wrapped around and around his head.

William was starting to fade now, his body's defenses kicking in. He became very still, his limbs getting rigid, eyes staring, almost catatonic. He barely noticed his assailant lifting old clothes and rags from a cart next to him, the kind of cart with a seat that William rode in when his mommy went food shopping.

He was lifted, placed in the bottom of the cart, and musty-smelling clothes were piled on top of him. It smelled but it felt warm, he felt hidden; he began to slip further away, deeper, safer.

Sounding muffled and very far away he could hear Brigitte's voice calling "William! Willie! Don't play games! Please!"