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The
Girl
in the
Halo
a novel

The Girl in the Halo

by Alan L. Nobler

SAMPLE

Prologue

Carol trembled, lying naked under the sheets, the way Bill wanted to find her whenever he stumbled home late at night. Despite her bared skin, Carol was not shivering from the unusually blustery cold of the early morning hour; rather, it was the chill of what she knew was about to happen to her. Five days until Valentine's Day and he was out drinking with "his boys" on a Saturday night.

The minutes ticked by. Her fears turned to dread. She cried quietly into her pillow to keep from disturbing 18-month-old Joey, asleep in the next room. She heard the front door click open, counted Bill's stumbling footsteps coming to their bedroom, listened to him kick off his shoes, unbuckle his belt, drop his pants, finish stripping and climb into bed beside her.

Carol anticipated he would be rough with her, as usual whenever he had been drinking, but she flinched at his unexpected movements behind her. With a swift jerk, he slipped his arms under hers, forcing her shoulders back, and gripped her skull with his hands behind her head in a full-Nelson headlock. He had demonstrated that position to her before, when he'd bragged about the indefensible hold he learned on his high-school wrestling team. But tonight it wasn't just for show. It was different. He continued increasing the pressure, forcing her head forward.

Helpless in his grasp, alarmed by his silent power, immediately her mind raced to how she could protect herself. Nothing. He'd never been this brutal before.

"Stop!" she screamed, no longer caring if she woke Joey. Bill shifted and instead angled her head forward even more. Carol heard the bones in her spine crunch. A stab of pain shot across her neck.

Sobbing, not daring to struggle against his grip, she begged Bill to release her so she could pee first and get some lubricant. Bill relaxed his hold with a grunt of reluctance and fell back against the pillows, arm across his eyes.

Carol scrambled from the bed and walked slowly into the hall. Suppressing a moan, she stumbled from the house and across the street to Jill's home. She pounded on the door, praying for it to open quickly.

"Carol, dammit, you come home, now!" Bill bellowed, his voice carrying in the hushed quiet, his bare feet smacking the front porch steps, charging after her.

Jill's door opened a crack, then all the way open. Jill stood with her bathrobe clutched in her fist, mouth agape. Looking over Carol's nude shoulder, Jill screamed and pulled Carol inside, locked the door, and called the police.

Chapter 2 - The Girl In The Halo

The mother and daughter were sitting across the desk from me.

The mother, who I judged to be in her late 50s or early 60s, was dressed in a camel-colored pantsuit, prim, proper, clenching her teeth, clearly stressed. She had on fashionable glasses and overly bright lipstick in a shade of red I couldn't name. My first impression was that she'd had some work done on her face.

Her daughter, late 20s, was introduced as Carol. She was wearing what I immediately recognized as a medical halo. Looking at the contraption, I thought of Rube Goldberg. The metal device encircled her head at the crown of her skull, just above her eyebrows, and connected with four rods anchored from the halo to a vest made of hard plastic with a fleece lining. Two in front, two in back. Four bolts had been drilled directly into her skull attaching the halo. I knew these would ultimately leave scars. Her neck was unnaturally straight.

Carol's long, dark brown hair contrasted starkly to her mother's short cut. I excused her Nike sweatsuit as a product of the difficulties she must have getting into and out of her clothes while wearing the halo. Her eyes were red—I assumed from crying—and she wore no makeup. Both were trim, but not necessarily athletic. There was obvious tension between them. I thought it might be because of the concern her mom had for her daughter's situation and the daughter's shame from having to depend on her mother to get her dressed, cared for, and driven to a lawyer's office.

At first, I assumed Carol was there to file an injury suit for whiplash, but looking down at the intake form I saw this was about a divorce and custody. Belatedly, I recalled Sue whispering that to me when she'd escorted the women into my office.

"This one will be interesting," Sue had said. "Your client is Carol, the young lady in the halo."

Sue Miller had been our first hire at Cramer & Gregory. Tall, slim, almost 40, she'd been my assistant at the old firm and a legal secretary almost 20 years. She knew what she was doing and kept the office running smoothly, with just the right combination of humor and drill sergeant. She was scrupulously thorough, too, and I was confident she had checked for any conflicts in representation, such as if we had been contacted by her husband first, before scheduling the appointment.

My office was pretty typical of many in the building, with light beige walls and a

carpet that wouldn't show how much coffee had been spilled on it. The wall behind my large overhang desk had all the ego stuff you expect from professionals: the diploma, certificates from the State Bar of California, the California Supreme Court, a second certificate from the State Bar announcing that I'd passed a test making me a "Family Law Specialist," and some awards from a few other organizations. The only photograph in the room was on my desk facing me, a family portrait of me with Sarah and the kids, Aaron and Mindy. It was there to remind me of what was really important in life. The client chairs were covered in cloth, not leather, which creaks when people squirm, and I chose wooden armrests: sweaty palms enhance wood, but not upholstery. The wall to my right was all window, with a view of the foothills on the east side of San Jose. Across from me hung a large print of Monet's water lilies.

"So, Carol," I asked, "what brings you here today?" She began by telling me the horrors of her February encounter with her husband that left her in the halo. Weeping, she informed me, "The surgeon said two of my neck vertebrae were crushed and I came within a few millimeters of being a quadriplegic. I'm lucky to even be able to sit here.

"Her mother, Arlene, butted in. "I want you to take that son of a bitch for everything he's worth, and then some! He needs to go to prison for what he did to Carol!" Arlene's anger failed to cause even a wrinkle on her brow.

Wow, I thought. And now it starts.

"How did you get my name?" I asked. Learning the source of a referral was sometimes a way to get an idea about the situation and an opportunity to send an acknowledgement to the referral source.

"My friend, Jill D'Souza, recommended you," Carol answered. "She said you have represented some people she knows. I didn't ask her who they were."

"Well, for my records, I'll put down 'former client.' This situation is as bad as any I've ever heard," I said. "There are a lot of options for us. Can you tell me what happened after the police were called?"

Arlene answered for her daughter. "Carol was inside, at Jill's, waiting for an ambulance. All we know is that the police came, talked to Carol for a few minutes, then went back to her house to talk with Bill when the ambulance came to take Carol to the hospital. Joey stayed with Jill, and Bill was arrested and taken downtown for

booking, or whatever.”

“Carol, do you know anything else about the criminal proceeding?” I looked at Carol directly, hoping her mother would take the hint. Carol wasn’t ready or able to assert herself and Arlene didn’t do subtle. She just sat there, shredding a tissue.

Once again, Arlene answered. “We know he has been charged with something and has an attorney, but we don’t know any of the other details.” “That’s OK, for now. I’ll have our investigator follow up on that. What happened to Joey?”

At that point, Carol began crying in earnest. I passed her a box of tissues I kept on the table behind me. She took another tissue, wiped her eyes, and began shredding that one, too.

Arlene gave Carol a look that seemed to me to be contemptuous of Carol’s having fallen apart. “Thomas and Mary, Bill’s parents, picked him up from Jill and have kept him and won’t let us see our grandson at all! Carol has been staying with me. I don’t want those bastards to have any time with Joey after the way they raised Bill!”

“I can see how you would feel that way,” I replied. “Grandparent custody and visitation is an emerging area in family law. Are you here for me to represent you or Carol?”

“Carol. Arnie and I want her to be with Joey and protected from that abusive son of a bitch.”