

# Chapter 1: Termination

A COLD, HEAVY AUTUMN descended on the lowlands of Northern California in October of 2022. Brisk winds had begun to whip down from the north and through the gray streets of Sacramento. Midday was dark, often as shadowed as twilight, the sky blotted by dense clouds that unleashed frigid rain on a terrain that was already near death with the onset of winter.

A father peered out through a barred window, waiting, breathing slowly to control his shivering.

He could do little more than study this change of seasons. The early onset of leaves changing from green to orange, then red to brown. The blackening of the sky.

Everywhere he went, the cold followed. It swirled around him in the exercise yard. It stole the warmth from his flavorless meals. It taunted him at night as he fought ghosts and phantoms and immense foes in his nightmares.

The father could do little more than wait, watching the cold close its grip on the world around him.

Then, on the 24th of October, someone came to visit.

A social worker. The specialist assigned to keep him connected with his daughter.

The guard arrived to fetch him for the visit. They swept him for contraband. Made him strip to inspect every possible hiding place. Had him open his mouth and stick out his tongue.

Then he waited. There's little else to do as an incarcerated individual. You wait, comply, and wait some more.

The door to the visitation room opened with an ear-splitting whine. The hinges were badly in need of lubrication.

The father remained seated as a woman entered, a file in her hand. She had short hair and a shiny nose piercing.

He'd never seen her before—not once in the last eighteen months.

She sat, her face masked by a permanent frown set into her face like a sculpture. The father folded his hands.

*My name is CJ Carver, the woman said, her sharp voice filled with antipathy. I'm a social worker with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families.*

She dropped a manila folder on the table and opened it. There was a single paper inside. She pushed it toward the father, and when she spoke, she spoke to the paper.

“This is a notice of impending termination of your parental rights,” she said. “A hearing has been scheduled for November for your relinquishment.”

The man heard the words, but it didn't feel like they were real. Like she was a person on a screen in a movie, talking about something he had foreseen in dreadful imaginings.

*They're really going to take my daughter from me?*

Under the table, he clenched his fists.

Above it, he showed no emotion. He couldn't. If he did, the cold would certainly break him.

*How could this happen? What happened to due process!?*

The woman sneered at the paper, then glanced at him as if he were a troublesome cockroach skittering across the other side of the room.

He stared at the document, perusing its contents in disbelief. He felt like prey watching a predator stalk him. His face remained a mask. No emotion. Not even a repressed glare or scowl.

A statue.

The cold had taught him well in the art of remaining completely still, even when your body is desperate to shiver.

*This is Constance's doing,* he thought.

The father drew a long breath through his nostrils but kept his face motionless.

*Constance... and who else? Is this social worker a part of it, too?*

Then as quickly as she'd arrived, the woman stood, egressed the room, and vanished.

The father released a heavy breath.

*How long has it been? he thought. How long since I've seen my little girl?*

He glanced at the termination paper again. It was so passionless. Unfeeling. Like a bullet piercing his flesh.

Who did they think he was?

Just because he was in jail...

Because he was Black...

*How could they think I don't care about my daughter!?*

The father's fingers twitched. More than anything he wanted to crush the paper into a ball and hurl it across the room. He ached to erupt from the table, break through the door, and chase the woman down and scream, *You'll have to kill me to take my daughter!*

But he couldn't.

Doing so might jeopardize his future freedom and his chance at holding his little girl again.

He had to play the long game. He was *always* playing the long game.

It was how you survived the cold.

Once again, the door opened with the shriek of metal grating against metal, and a guard stepped in and flicked his hand.

*Let's go.*

The father stood and allowed himself to be led back through the halls to his cell.

It was time to wait again.

Wait out a conspiracy he *knew* in his bones was in full motion.

Wait for a candle of hope that was probably never going to spark to life.

He'd have to keep waiting through the long, endless cold.