

Holiday Spectacular

Los Angeles

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NTED DESIGNER

How her darkest, most devastating secret is set loose by Sue Horton



purpose—setting up her showroom and meeting with customers.

It was February 26, 1992, and life was looking good. Courtney's son, Josh, was doing well. Flores, with his rock 'n' roll looks and sweet temperament, had become a permanent fixture in her life. And Erica Courtney Inc., the company she had built from nothing, was hot. Fred Segal, Bergdorf's, Faux Body Ornaments, Theodore and all the better, hipper stores on both coasts were carrying her pieces, and they were showing up on the covers of magazines like

Mirabella and *Seventeen* and on TV shows like *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Melrose Place*. Marlee Matlin liked what she wore on *Reasonable Doubts* so much that she later dropped by Courtney's offices to buy the pieces. It was hard to believe that nearly a decade had gone by since she'd left Louisiana with nothing but her four-year-old son.

Her business began almost as a fluke a few years later, when she was living in Dallas. One day, using some broken jewelry, she decorated two pairs of sunglasses with rhinestones and pearls. Her friends liked the results and asked her to make glasses for them. So she went to the Dallas Apparel Mart and bought eight pairs of sunglasses wholesale, as well as a few packages of rhinestones. Then she branched out into watches. Within a few months, she was purchasing rhinestones in \$10,000 batches—and she got her own spot in a Mart showroom.

Then in 1989, she met Flores, a guitarist with the rock band 151 Swing, and she decided to follow him to Los Angeles. At her downtown headquarters, she shifted into making pieces from silver and gold. She knew the change of direction was the right thing, and the new jewelry began selling immediately. Occasionally, she'd go to hear Flores play at the Whisky or at Coconut Teaszer, but mostly she worked.

Within a year, she had moved her business to an upstairs office on Melrose. Josh seemed happy—and by junior high, he was even designing for her company. Her line now had some half-dozen pieces he'd created, and they were being used in fashion shows and magazines—Twiggy herself had worn one of Josh's designs in a *Mirabella* spread. Overall, business was booming, with sales of an astonishing \$1 million per year.

But now, outside her room on the hotel's fourth floor, Courtney had a problem. Her key wasn't working. It was almost as if the lock had been changed. Something was very wrong.

She had felt this way only once before—eight years ago, while living on the west coast of Florida. That time the feeling had been triggered by police knocking at the door of a downstairs neighbor. Instinctively, she knew the officers were at the wrong apartment, that they had really come for her. When the police left, she had thrown a few things into a bag, picked up Josh from kindergarten and left Florida. Now, things were more complicated.

While Flores fiddled with the lock, Courtney prowled the halls hesitantly, even looking into stairwells. He finally opened the dou-

ble-locked door, but Courtney couldn't shake her feeling of dread.

As she was getting undressed, the phone rang. It was her best friend, who was babysitting Josh back home in Hollywood. "Erica," the friend said, sounding worried, "Josh hasn't come home. I've called all his friends. They say the FBI took him. They say he's with his father."

Courtney couldn't speak. Finally, she shouted into the phone, "No . . . that just can't be." She hung up and began calling her son's friends, hoping someone could give her more information. But even in Los Angeles, it was late. The boys were all asleep. Courtney began pacing. Flores heard a noise in the hall and moved to the peephole. "The FBI is here," he said calmly.

"That can't be," Courtney repeated. "What are you talking about?"

When the knock came, she called out, "Just a minute," pulled on her black spandex pants and opened the door. Three agents in bullet-proof vests, guns drawn, moved quickly into the room. They searched and then handcuffed Courtney and Flores.

"Are you Tasha Ingram?" one of the agents asked. It was a name Courtney had not been called for nearly nine years, a name that now seemed to belong to a different person.

"Yes," she said. The agents waited while she took off her rings, bracelets, necklaces and earrings. Then they left the hotel with their fugitive.

After spending the night chained to a chair in the FBI's Manhattan office, Tasha Ingram was flown to Baton Rouge, where she was arraigned on kidnapping charges. Joshua Ryan Cappel was returned to Baton Rouge and to Ronald Cappel, the father he hadn't seen in nearly a decade.

Fifteen miles outside Baton Rouge, where the Cappos live, city ills are almost unimaginable. The road to the house winds through the rich, emerald countryside—rivers and woods, ancient oaks draped with Spanish moss and an occasional restaurant advertising boiled crawfish.

The Cappel house is part of a small tract in the middle of what Louisianans call the boondocks. There are perhaps 50 homes, mostly custom-built, single-story brick houses on verdant acre-plus parcels. It is the kind of place where men ride their lawnmowers rather than push them and women proudly display antiabortion bumper stickers on their minivans. American flags



fly in front yards, and boats on trailers sit parked in driveways. Behind the houses runs a creek overflowing with crawfish. And beyond the land cleared for houses are woods as lush as any-place on earth.

It is to this life that Josh was returned—a life that revolves around church, family and home. Ann Cappel, Josh's stepmother, teaches her children at home, wary of the outside influences they might get in public school. On Wednesday nights, they hold Bible study meetings in their home, during which Cappel serves as lay pastor to a small group from their church. His cabinet shop is just off the house.

Ann and Ronnie say they are concerned about the life Josh lived in Los Angeles and would hate to see him returned to his mother. When Josh first came back to him, Ronnie says, he used foul language. A slim child, he chose size 38 jeans, with the explanation that he was dressing like a "houser," a style of L.A. teen that likes to go to clubs and dance. But to the Cappels, the attire reeked of gang influence. Until he rebelled at the idea, they were teaching Josh at home with the rest of their children.

Cappel cares deeply for his son, and he believes he and his wife are doing right by him.

When Tasha Ingram failed to return Josh to his father after a weekend visitation in September 1983, she became a statistic, one of the estimated 3,000 parents who abduct their own children each year. And like most of them, Ingram's story is tangled and difficult to unravel. Tasha Ingram and Ronald Cappel were in the middle of a bitter custody fight at the time she fled Louisiana with her son. She says she was fleeing a system that was clearly stacked against her. Cappel insists she left out of pure spite, to keep him from getting custody when it looked as though the courts would rule in his favor. But even as the former couple trades charges, certain things become clear.

Their story is one of two strong personalities who fell in love, married and had a child before their disparate expectations made living together impossible. It is the story of the South, of a world where women often feel helpless and powerless against a hierarchy controlled by men. It is the story of an impulsive woman who, in running from her past, found herself. And it is the story of a boy caught between the very different worlds of his parents.

Indeed, it was Ronnie Cappel's difference that first attracted

Tasha Ingram. In June 1974, when they wound up on the same Florida beach during class trips with their respective high schools, she was tall and thin, creative, impulsive, always ready to party—a sort of glam hippie who bought her faded jeans at Saks Fifth Avenue. He was serious, on the short side but powerfully built, an avid kickboxer who at 155 pounds could bench-press 400.

She was a wealthy belle from Lafayette who lived in a brick mansion. He was a solid, working-class good old boy from Baton Rouge. At 18, he not only held a steady job but had saved \$7,000 to buy himself a boat.

After Ingram moved to Baton Rouge to attend Louisiana State University, they began dating steadily. "They say poor little rich girls just love those working-class guys," she says in hindsight. "It was probably rebellion. It was something my parents dreaded, but I was going to show them that money meant nothing. I wanted to show them that love could conquer all."

Cappel wasn't exactly handsome, but his dark wavy hair, deep brown eyes, shy smile and muscled body made for an appealing package. Mostly, however, Ingram was attracted to his seeming stability. "He seemed so responsible, and I was so wild," she says.

Cappel and Ingram became engaged in 1975; they were married the following year.

The relationship soured almost immediately. Ingram had known that on her husband's meager salary as a rubber-factory worker, she wouldn't be able to live in the style of her childhood. But she had held high hopes for him. Her stepfather, after all, had made *his* millions through sheer hard work, building an international equipment-rental company.

She was wrong. Money became a constant issue. Just a year before they were married, Ingram now recalls, "I could go into any store in Lafayette and say, 'I'll take this rack of clothes,' then have them sent home, try them on and send back what I didn't want in a couple of days. I could tell them, 'Just put it on my mom's account,' and they did." Now, if she bought a pair of jeans that was too expensive, Cappel objected, and he refused to let her mother help them out.

When the couple had a baby in 1978, they finally had something in common—a boy they both loved. But even Joshua Ryan was not sufficient glue to keep the marriage together. In 1980, Ingram asked her husband to leave.

**"Everything
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THE FBI'S MOST WANTED DESIGNER

Ingram now says the biggest problem in her marriage was one she couldn't bring herself to talk about until she left. She says that starting back when they were still dating, Cappo physically abused her and that during their marriage, he beat her regularly, sometimes severely. He denies ever having laid a hand on his wife—except for one time, though he refuses to discuss the allegations in detail, since he will soon face his ex-wife in court. He will say categorically, "All of that is just false."

Whatever the truth, one thing is clear: The animosity between Cappo and Ingram became intense in the months after their divorce, and much of their bitterness revolved around custody of their smiling, round-faced baby boy.

From the day of their separation, Josh became a focal point of his parents' disagreements, the one piece of community property neither would relinquish. The divorce record shows numerous times when his father refused to return him after a weekend. And although the court on several occasions granted Ingram temporary or permanent custody, Cappo would not let the matter die, filing a series of petitions challenging the decisions.

In August 1981, after a lengthy battle, Ingram was awarded permanent care, custody and control of Josh, subject to visitation by Cappo as spelled out by the court. She thought the custody issue was resolved.

Then, less than a year later, Cappo made his next move. He says in the time his ex-wife had custody of Josh, he was very concerned that she was neglecting him. "I went through a period of watching Josh being left," he says. "Tasha's friends would call me up and say, 'I have a child here, and I don't know where Tasha is. Can you come get him?' Finally, I said, 'Tasha, this cannot go on anymore. This child needs a home.'" Ingram vehemently denies that she abandoned Josh or often left him with other people. She does, however, acknowledge one instance where she had left Josh in her mother's care. It turned out to be a fateful decision.

In the summer of 1982, Ingram was again living the style of life she had left behind for Cappo. Through her sister, she had met Michael Fonseca, a successful fur buyer and entrepreneur, and was living with him in a penthouse in the French Quarter of New Orleans. On one occasion, she accompanied Fonseca on a business trip to New York, leaving Josh in the care of her mother and

sister at her mother's home in Lafayette. Unfortunately, her mother was going through a bitter divorce from Ingram's stepfather at the time. While Josh was staying with his grandmother, the police were sent to evict her from her husband's home. She refused to leave and was arrested. Ingram's sister called Cappo to come get Josh.

It was all Cappo needed. Ingram returned home the next day to find that her husband had rushed into court with a petition for change of custody, alleging that Ingram was living in open adultery and that Josh was part of the household. He was granted temporary custody of Josh, pending a hearing. Sylvia Roberts,

a lawyer in Baton Rouge, says the court's decision was not unusual for the time: "We had this doctrine then, that if there were moral lapses on the part of the mother, that was it—she lost custody."

At a hearing the next month, Ingram was awarded visitation, but still things dragged on. She became increasingly depressed. "I felt like somebody had ripped my heart out," she says. "Josh was crying every time he had to go back after visitation weekends."

Ingram was also worried about new religious influences in Josh's life. Cappo had left the Roman Catholic Church and become a fundamentalist Baptist. "One time, I had picked up Josh and was taking him home,"

Ingram's mother, Helen, recalls, "and he put his head in his hands and said, 'My daddy says I have the devil in me.'"

In the spring of 1983, to negate charges that her living arrangement was immoral, Ingram married Fonseca. Cappo remarried as well. His new wife, Ann, who had a son Josh's age, was a widow active in the Baptist church. On August 19, Cappo, citing his marriage as evidence, filed an amended petition for custody, claiming that he was better able "to provide for the emotional, spiritual, educational and general welfare" of Josh.

On August 30, girded for battle, the couple went into court. Cappo's attorney proposed an arrangement that would have enabled Ingram to have her son more of the time. But there were conditions: Cappo would have to approve any move Ingram wanted to make, and he would have sole responsibility for Josh's religious upbringing. Ingram refused to sign, despite the urging of her attorney—she says she simply had no faith that the agreement would matter. Everything in her upbringing and experience had hammered home the same message: Women, at least in Louisiana,



have little power; men make the rules for their own benefit; divorce screwed women and left them helpless.

When it came right down to it, Ingram says, "I knew that even if I agreed to what he was proposing then, he would just go back into court the next month and file some more papers and we'd have to fight the whole thing all over again."

With the situation unresolved, Ingram took Josh home to New Orleans for his weekend visitation, while Cappo went off to a church revival meeting.

For most of the weekend, she acted as though nothing had happened. Then, on Sunday, she got up, did the laundry, tidied the house and stuffed a hair dryer and a pair of jeans into her bag. She put some clothes and two small teddy bears in a backpack for Josh. She told Fonseca she was taking her son down the street to buy a pie.

Then she took the boy by the hand, led him down the stairs and disappeared.

There are many things Ingram won't reveal about life on the lam. Ronald Cappo has sued her mother and sister, alleging they were part of an abduction conspiracy, and she is reluctant to hurt them inadvertently. She is facing a civil suit as well.

Though she won't say where she went first after leaving Fonseca, she admits that in the beginning, she was frequently depressed. "It was like everybody I ever knew died in one day," she recalls. "I left my husband, whom I loved, and a penthouse in the French Quarter. I couldn't even call anyone, because who knew whose phone was tapped and whose wasn't."

She had very little money, she says, and she and Josh often lived for days on hot dogs or macaroni and cheese.

Eventually, she took the name Erica Courtney from a soap-opera character as her own private joke about what her life had become. She then moved with her son to western Florida, where they began rebuilding a life. Josh was puzzled about why he had to use a new name and why they had moved. But he was adaptable and didn't seem particularly worried.

Soon, he started kindergarten, and Ingram began making friends and dating. But if Josh quickly relaxed, his mother did not. "If I saw police cars, I just knew they were coming for me," she says. "I was always looking over my shoulder." Then came the afternoon in Florida, when the police really did come looking for

Tasha Ingram, and she escaped just before they arrived.

Dallas was the next stop on Ingram's odyssey, and, needing to work, she had to confront the difficulty of not having proper identification. She managed—she won't say how—to get fake birth certificates for Josh and "Erica Courtney," then used hers to get a driver's license. But she still didn't have a Social Security number. In New Orleans, living with Fonseca, she had been about ready to open a stained-glass shop. In Dallas, she fell into something else: jewelry design.

But as fast as her business began booming—and maybe because of her sudden success—Ingram still could never completely let down her guard. Just when she would develop a circle of friends, a business and a life, something would spook her and she would be reminded yet again of her vulnerability.

There was the time one of her new friends, a neighbor, approached her shortly after Josh's eighth birthday. "I saw Josh's picture in the post office today," the woman said quizzically. "The poster said he was a missing child."

"It wasn't him," Ingram said immediately, trying her best to hide her terror.

"But he even had the same birthday as Josh," the woman said. Ingram continued to deny any connection, but she was badly shaken. So when she met Flores, who had been visiting Dallas from Los Angeles, she was ready for a change and moved west with him. They settled into an apartment just south of the Sunset Strip.

Ingram knew immediately that L.A. was her kind of place. She was working harder than she ever had before—so hard she barely had time for a life outside of Josh and Flores—but it was paying off. She now had five employees, and that was in addition to the contract employees who actually cast the pieces after she designed them. When she'd left Dallas, she was working mostly with crystals—now, she'd shifted to gold and silver, making what her psychic called "lucky charms," small pieces with an abundance of the hearts, crosses and crowns that were becoming her trademark. Josh seemed happy, too, now that she had managed to get him into Newbridge, a private elementary school near Beverly Hills that emphasized the arts.

Eventually, she started letting down her guard. "It just became so hard to lie to people I cared about," she says. "In the back of your mind, you start getting more comfortable with

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people, and then you slip and let out some detail.”

Before long, a dozen or more people knew her secret. And as her business grew, she found herself taking more risks. When *Women's Wear Daily* called about doing a profile, she was pleased. She never even thought about photographs until the reporter arrived with a photographer in tow—then it seemed too late to back out. Other photos in other publications followed. “The first time really killed me,” she says. “But after that, I decided if I was going to be a prisoner, I might as well go back and be Cappel's prisoner. I wasn't going to let him keep me from doing what I wanted to do.”

In the end, that new relaxed attitude was her downfall.

As Ingram was forging her new life, Cappel was frantic. In the first days after Josh's abduction, he called everyone—Ingram's mother, her friends, her husband—but no one could say where she was, only that she was missing.

He had a son with Ann, and the couple had adopted a baby girl. He built a custom-cabinet business and became deeply involved in fundamentalist Baptism. But he remained devastated by Josh's disappearance. He says life was tough for Ann's son, too. “That little boy had just lost a dad and then he lost a brother,” he says. “He lost all trust in everything.”

Cappel himself didn't know where to turn or whom to trust. “I had several private investigators come knocking at my door, asking for large fees and promising to find my son,” he says. In the end, he hired a detective he considered reputable—and he waited.

Repeatedly over the years that followed, Cappel's hopes were falsely raised. He heard that Josh and his ex-wife had been traced to Florida, only to discover that they had slipped through the FBI's fingers. The private investigator Cappel hired traced Ingram's mother to Santa Fe and set up headquarters there after hearing that Josh had been to visit her. Helen Ingram says the investigator followed her, spoke to her friends and neighbors and generally made her life miserable. But nothing came of the surveillance.

After years of dashed hopes, Cappel was skeptical last February when he received a call from a Colorado Springs detective saying Josh had been located in Los Angeles. Gil Abeyta, a nationally known locator of missing children, told Cappel he had recently appeared on *Donahue* to discuss his National Missing Children's Center; a few days afterward, he received an anonymous phone

call from a woman who said she knew where a missing child was. She described how Josh was living in Los Angeles with his mother and expressed concern for Josh's welfare. (Ingram believes the call was made by a disgruntled former employee whom she had told of the situation.) Abeyta called the FBI.

The feds suggested to Cappel that he wait in Baton Rouge until they picked up Josh, but he flew to California anyway. Neither the FBI nor the LAPD will talk about how Josh was actually

retrieved, but from documents and interviews, it appears that on February 25, while Cappel was en route to L.A., Agent Kathleen Carson of the FBI and Detective Rick Papke of the LAPD's Hollywood division went first to Bancroft Junior High, the public school Josh was now attending. When he wasn't there, they went to the apartment he shared with his mom, where they found him hanging out with friends. He told the officers it was the first time he had ditched school.

“He became very apprehensive that he would have to live with his father,” Papke wrote in his official report of the incident.

The boy was transported to McLaren Hall, the county's holding tank for children removed from their parents' care. That night, Ingram was arrested in New York, and a few days later, after officials had satisfied themselves that Cappel had rightful custody, Josh and his father were reunited.

Ronald and Ann Cappel insist Josh is happy and wants to stay. They say he does not want to live with his mother again. Ingram says that whenever she talks to Josh, even during the monitored phone calls—the only phone conversations she is allowed—Josh says he wants to return to her. She says the Cappels have also grossly overstated Josh's problems in Los Angeles, as well as the permissiveness of her household.

“Yes, he got in trouble sometimes,” Ingram says, “but there were also times when he was a perfect angel. These people think Hollywood is a Sodom or Gomorrah.” She says she maintained strict rules, supervised Josh's homework and household chores and required him to be home at 5:30 on school nights.

She also believes that the work she did was an enriching experience for Josh as well. The boy, she insists, became very involved in the process. “The jewelry he designed has been in magazines and on television. It's even been in a fashion

“It became hard to lie to people. In the back of your mind, you start getting comfortable with people, and then you slip and let out some detail.”

show—Donna Karan, no less. He has a head start in life.”

Names like Donna Karan mean little to the Cappos. They can't imagine how anyone would think a boy wasn't better off hunting and fishing in the Louisiana countryside than living in Hollywood. To them, it is almost enough to look at Ingram to know she isn't suited to motherhood. Indeed, over the years, Ingram has come to look the part of a big-city jewelry designer. Her jeans are tight, her leather jacket is hung with jewelry, her ears are pierced numerous times and she has tattoos—tasteful ones, she likes to think—on her arm, stomach and foot. It is hard for people like the Cappos to imagine that such a woman could be a good mother.

Those in a position to observe Ingram with Josh over the years say that she is an effective and loving parent. Fonseca, the husband Ingram left behind when she fled with Josh, says that although he hasn't seen his wife since she left, he remembers her as an excellent mother. “I have a daughter from a previous marriage, and she used to take care of her and Josh. She really put in the time with them.”

People who knew them in L.A. say Josh was an extremely nice boy and that he and his mother appeared to have a solid relationship. “He was concerned and protective of his mother, as she was of him—not in any smothering way, just in a nice way,” says Joanne Valli-Marrill, a designer for Retro Paris, which shares a showroom with Ingram at the California New Mart. “They had a normal, loving relationship, but there was no question who was in charge.”

The mother of one of Josh's best friends says Josh was a sweet and charming boy whom she was always delighted to have in her house. “He was maybe a little rebellious but never outside the bounds of normal,” she says. “He was never a discipline problem.” She also says she considered Ingram an excellent mother. “She was always doing for this child. She substantially made him the center of her life within the bounds of making a living as a single mother. She was very devoted, and they were close.”

Alan Taylor, a psychologist appointed by the court to assess the custody situation, seemed to have difficulty concluding definitively which parent would be better for Josh. After administering a number of psychological tests to both Ingram and Cappo, Taylor did, however, conclude that their marriage was “a very unfortunate choice.” In a deposition taken earlier this year in Baton Rouge, he said, “These two people are like vinegar

and soda. You put vinegar and soda together, and you get an eruption. It doesn't surprise me in the least that they would have had conflict, that it would have escalated to being emotional and perhaps physical.”

Fonseca is philosophical about Ingram's leaving, saying that she clearly just put her son first. He hasn't spoken to her, but he has thought about her son's situation: “When Josh is with his father, he is at the North Pole. When he's with his mother, he's at the South Pole. There's nothing in between.”

Ingram pleaded guilty in Louisiana to felony kidnapping and was sentenced to three years' probation. In the coming months, the court will review the circumstances surrounding Josh's kidnapping. And in the end, a judge will rule on which parent should have custody and to what extent the other parent should have visitation rights. The decision will not be easy.

Cappo worries every day about what is to come. He worries about the outcome of his pending civil case against Ingram and her sister and mother. He worries what will happen in family court. To him, the fighting is over more than Josh's physical well-being. He believes it is a battle for his soul. He says he heard from Abeyta, the man who received the tip about Josh, that the boy “was involved in gangs and fixing to get into some bad trouble.” He is quick to add, however, that Josh denies having been part of a gang.

For Courtney/Ingram, the stakes are equally high in the upcoming battles. To her, the possibility of losing the civil case is secondary to what happens to Josh: “He's my baby, and he wants to come home. Imagine knowing your son needs you and wants to be with you and there's nothing you can do.”

There is no question in her mind that she did the right thing by taking Josh. “No matter what happens, Josh had eight and a half years of peace. That's what he needed, and that's what I needed,” she says. “I needed to be with my son, and I needed to be able to raise him without him being jerked around by the court system and his father all the time.

“My greatest fear,” she says, “is that people will think this was a flippant decision. But I walked away from everything I had, both physically and emotionally. It was the most difficult, heartbreaking, devastating decision I have ever made. I did it because I felt I had to.” ■

“When WWD called about a profile, Courtney never thought about photographs until the reporter arrived with a photographer—by then it was too late.”